Digital Orthodoxy and Political Populism in Eastern Europe: How Orthodox Media Facilitate Political Mobilization

Dmytro Garaschuk

Oleh Sokolovskyi

DIGITAL ORTHODOXY AND POLITICAL POPULISM IN EASTERN EUROPE: HOW ORTHODOX MEDIA FACILITATE POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

By Dmytro Garaschuk and Oleh Sokolovskyi

Dmytro Garaschuk, Ph.D student in Political Science at the Department of International Relations and Political Management of Zhytomyr Polytechnic State University in Zhytomyr, Ukraine.
E-mail: phd052233_gdv@student.ztu.edu.ua ORCID: 0009-0004-9878-4110

Oleh Sokolovskyi, Doctor of Sciences (Philosophy), Professor of the Department of Philosophy and Political Science of Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University in Zhytomyr, Ukraine.
E-mail: osokol_83@ukr.net ORCID: 0000-0003-2228-3040

Abstract

This article examines the intersection of Orthodox digital media and political populism in Eastern Europe, focusing on how religious institutions utilize digital platforms to facilitate political mobilization, reinforce nationalistic narratives, and undermine democratic institutions. Drawing on a comparative analysis of six countries–Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia, Georgia, and Montenegro–the study identifies a shared ideological matrix that fuses populist rhetoric with theological motifs. The research highlights the strategic use of digital media by Orthodox actors to construct moral binaries, sacralize political resistance, and disseminate disinformation framed in religious language. Particular attention is given to the role of the Russian Orthodox Church and the exportability of the "*Russkii Mir*" concept as a scalable model of religious-political influence. Through case-based exploration and analysis of media content, the article demonstrates how Orthodox populism employs symbolic authority and emotional engagement to create echo chambers, legitimize authoritarian tendencies, and reframe civic action as spiritual warfare. The study concludes that this fusion of religion, media, and populism constitutes not only a cultural trend but an operational framework capable of destabilizing democratic resilience across the region. By unpacking these dynamics, the article contributes to broader discussions on religious populism, digital authoritarianism, and democratic backsliding in Eastern Europe.
Keywords: Orthodox populism, digital religious mobilization, *Russkii Mir* ideology, democratic backsliding, political theology, democratic governance.

Introduction

In recent years, political populism in Eastern Europe has increasingly adopted religious frames, drawing legitimacy and emotional resonance from national Orthodox traditions. At the same time, Orthodox Churches, particularly the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), have embraced

digital media platforms to expand their reach, influence public opinion, and participate more directly in sociopolitical discourse. The convergence of digital religion and political populism represents a significant, underexplored phenomenon that has reshaped not only national political cultures but also transnational ideological flows across the region. Orthodox digital media ecosystems today serve not merely as spaces for theological engagement, but as tools for identity construction, political agitation, and societal polarization.

Eastern Europe offers a particularly fertile ground for this development. Orthodox Christianity holds a central place in the historical and cultural identity of numerous states across the region, including Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia, Georgia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, and North Macedonia. In these contexts, the Orthodox Church has often maintained close relations with political authorities, sometimes operating as a quasi-state institution with influence over education, media, and public morality. This institutional proximity has enabled clerical voices to enter political debates not only as moral commentators but as agents actively shaping national narratives. The digital transformation of Orthodox communication has only deepened this influence. From online liturgies and digitally streamed sermons to clerical YouTube channels and Telegram propaganda hubs, Orthodox actors have come to shape the public discourse in highly visible, emotionally resonant ways. These digital platforms amplify religious messaging while simultaneously reinforcing populist rhetoric that portrays the faithful nation as besieged by corrupt elites, foreign agents, or secular liberalism.

At the heart of this ideological expansion lies the concept of the "*Russkii Mir*" ("Russian World") – a civilizational and theological framework aggressively promoted by the Russian state and its affiliated religious institutions. The "*Russkii Mir*" posits Russia as the spiritual and cultural heir of ancient Rus', portraying its mission as the protection of a unified Orthodox civilization threatened by Western decadence and moral decay. As scholars such as Fylypovych and Horkusha argue, this worldview is not merely domestic propaganda, but an "exportable ideological model" designed to legitimate geopolitical aggression and cultural domination across Eastern Europe.[1] Russia's extensive media resources–both religious and state-sponsored–allow it to propagate

[1] Liudmyla Fylypovych and Oksana Horkusha, "'Ruskiy Mir' and 'Ukrainskyi Svit': Ontological and nthropological Antagonists," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 44, no. 5 (January 1, 2024), https://doi.org/10.55221/2693-2229.2518.

"*Russkii Mir*"-like narratives far beyond its borders, often adapting them to resonate with local traditions and discontents.[2]

While the Russian case is the most visible and studied, this paper takes a broader comparative approach. It examines how digital Orthodox media facilitate political populism not only in Russia, but also in Romania, Georgia, Serbia, Ukraine, and Montenegro. Each context exhibits unique institutional, political, and ecclesiastical dynamics, yet common mechanisms emerge: the sacralization of the nation, demonization of liberal elites, clerical endorsement of far-right actors, and framing of political struggle in spiritual-apocalyptic terms. These dynamics reflect broader populist logics defined by scholars such as Mudde, Canovan, and Laclau, who describe populism as a political style that constructs a moral binary between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," demands the restoration of popular sovereignty, and relies on emotional, often Manichean narratives.[3] These elements echo such logics but are infused with theological weight and moral absolutism specific to religious populism.[4]

Importantly, the influence of "*Russkii Mir*" is not simply imposed from Moscow but is often selectively adapted and localized in other Orthodox contexts. In several Eastern European countries, particularly where conservative Orthodox institutions hold public trust, similar ideological patterns emerge: glorification of national suffering, vilification of liberal elites, defense of "traditional values," and the moral framing of political life. In Romania, Serbia, and Georgia, Orthodox clergy and religious media actors have increasingly embraced narratives that align closely with Russia's messaging, albeit adapted to domestic political needs. These narratives, often delivered through emotionally charged media content, elevate the nation as sacred, depict politics as spiritual warfare, and position Orthodox identity in direct opposition to Western liberalism, multiculturalism, or LGBTQ rights.

[2] Vladyslav Fulmes, "International Theological Conference "Orthodoxy and the 'Russkii Mir' (Russian World): The Threat to Orthodox Ecclesiology and the Ideological Basis of Russian Neo-Imperialism," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 42, no. 5 (January 1, 2022), https://doi.org/10.55221/2693-2148.2365; Alar Kilp and Jerry G. Pankhurst, "Soft, Sharp, and Evil Power: The Russian Orthodox Church in the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 42, no. 5 (January 1, 2022), https://doi.org/10.55221/2693-2148.2361.

[3] Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (September 1, 2004): 541–63, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x; Margaret Canovan, *Populism*, First Edition (New York: Harcourt, 1981); Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (Verso, 2005).

[4] Katja Valaskivi and Johanna Sumiala, "Religious Populism: A Paradigmatic Mode of Address of the Hybrid Media Environment?" *Populism* 8, no. 1 (February 25, 2025): 161-71, https://doi.org/10.1163/25888072-bja10077.

By focusing on the intersection of digital Orthodox media and political populism, this article aims to explore how religious institutions in Eastern Europe contribute to political mobilization through symbolic authority, narrative control, and digital outreach. It argues that Orthodox Churches–especially the ROC–are not only adapting to digital media environments but actively using them to sustain populist worldviews, mobilize followers, and erode democratic norms. Furthermore, the exportability of this model beyond Russia's borders, whether through ideological affinity or direct influence, suggests that the "*Russkii Mir*" functions as more than a geopolitical doctrine–it is a scalable religious-political matrix embedded in the regional digital landscape.

Digitalization of Orthodox Religious Communication

The transformation of religious communication through digital media has significantly altered the way Orthodox institutions engage with their followers, exert influence, and participate in public life. In Eastern Europe, where Orthodoxy plays a central cultural and often political role, the process of digitalization has enabled the Church to extend its presence beyond its walls and into the personalized, algorithmically curated spaces of the internet. What began as a pragmatic adaptation–livestreaming liturgies, uploading theological content, or managing ecclesiastical websites–has evolved into a dynamic strategy of influence. This strategy fuses religious tradition with modern media logic, allowing Orthodox actors to shape national narratives, address socio-political issues, and, increasingly, amplify populist messages.[5]

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) serves as a paradigmatic case of this transformation. Following its institutional revival in the early 2000s and especially after the 2011-2012 protest wave in Russia, the ROC began investing heavily in digital platforms as tools for outreach, mobilization, and legitimacy building.[6] This effort was not limited to enhancing internal communication – it was explicitly aimed at constructing a "religious public sphere" within a broader post-secular context. The ROC's online presence now spans multiple layers: official

[5] Victor Khroul, "Digitalization of Religion in Russia: Adjusting Preaching to New Formats, Channels and Platforms," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Digital Russia Studies*, ed. Daria Gritsenko, Mariëlle Wijermars, and Mikhail Kopotev (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 187–204, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-42855-6_11; Chad Houk, "Toward an Understanding of the Role of Digital Technology in Orthodox Life and Practice," *Journal of the International Society for Orthodox Music* 6, no. 1 (November 29, 2022): 167–76, https://doi.org/10.57050/jisocm.113100.

[6] Mikhail Suslov, "The Russian Orthodox Church Turns to the Global South: Recalibration of the Geopolitical Culture of the Church," *Religions* 15, no. 12 (December 11, 2024): 1517, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15121517.

websites, YouTube sermons, TikTok testimonies, digital prayer chains, and sophisticated media arms like Tsargrad TV. These platforms allow the Church to project a consistent ideological line, reinforce its image as the defender of "traditional values," and, in many cases, frame moral and political issues through a spiritual lens aligned with state interests.[7]

This pattern is not confined to Russia. In Romania, Georgia, Serbia, and Montenegro, Orthodox institutions have also embraced digital tools to varying degrees. The Romanian Orthodox Church, for instance, actively curates YouTube channels and Facebook pages that disseminate homilies, news, and social commentary from a religious-nationalist perspective. In Georgia, the Church has made extensive use of social media to mobilize support for anti-liberal causes, often partnering with far-right media outlets such as Alt-Info. Even in Ukraine, where the Orthodox landscape is fractured and highly politicized, digital media have become a key battlefield in the struggle for confessional legitimacy. Competing branches of the Church deploy online platforms not only to evangelize but also to justify their political alignments, discredit rivals, and rally public support.[8]

A crucial feature of Orthodox digital communication is its semi-hierarchical structure. Unlike the decentralized, charismatic model seen in some evangelical traditions, Orthodox digital content is often controlled or endorsed by clerical figures and ecclesiastical institutions. Yet, it is not entirely top-down. While this ecosystem frequently amplifies official Church narratives, particularly around moral conservatism and national identity, it can also introduce more radical, nationalist, or conspiratorial content that goes beyond, or even subtly diverges from, institutional messaging. This ambiguity serves as a highly effective tool: such actors benefit from the public perception that they represent the Church's authority and trustworthiness, given Orthodoxy's strong hierarchical tradition, yet they can deviate from official doctrine to advance political agendas or populist narratives. Responsibility for controversial statements often falls on these lay figures, while formal Church leadership can distance itself if backlash arises, issuing clarifications

[7] Maria Engström, Mikhail Suslov, and Greg Simons, *Digital Orthodoxy: Mediating Post-Secularity in Russia* (Digital Icons, 2015), https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:du-20989; Douglas C Youvan, "Guardians of Tradition: The Russian Orthodox Church, Family Values, and the Shaping of National Identity," 2024, https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.23374.23363.

[8] Ioann Stetsiak, "Features of the Functioning of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church During the Russian-Ukrainian War," *Sophia. Human and Religious Studies Bulletin* 22, no. 2 (2023): 38–43, https://doi.org/10.17721/sophia.2023.22.8; Tetiana Havryliuk, Yuriy Chornomorets, and Bogdan Gulyamov, "Inter-Orthodox Conflicts in Ukraine and the Movement to Unite Ukrainian Orthodox Churches in the 20th and 21st Century," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 44, no. 1 (January 1, 2024), https://doi.org/10.55221/2693-2229.2482.

or denials only after significant public resonance. This hybrid form of "religion online" thus preserves symbolic authority while offering flexibility and plausible deniability – a highly convenient and strategic instrument for political and social mobilization.[9]

Moreover, digitalization has altered the affective register of Orthodox messaging. The slow, contemplative rhythms of liturgical tradition are now supplemented by emotionally charged, shareable content: dramatic invocations of spiritual warfare, warnings against moral collapse, testimonies of miraculous healing, and denunciations of political elites as agents of Satanic corruption. These narratives gain traction not only because of their theological content but because they are structured to maximize engagement within digital attention economies. As Napolitano and Kormina and Tocheva observe, even visual storytelling–through Church-supported films and spatial-symbolic digital performances–becomes a form of political and spiritual persuasion.[10]

What emerges from this transformation is a new religious media ecosystem–one that preserves the theological authority of Orthodoxy while adapting its delivery to the formats and incentives of digital culture. It allows Orthodox actors to remain relevant in an era of institutional decline, enables strategic political messaging, and facilitates new modes of community-building that are no longer geographically bounded. In Eastern Europe, where Orthodoxy is often entwined with questions of national identity, memory, and sovereignty, the implications of this shift are far-reaching. The digital Church does not merely follow the faithful–it actively shapes their worldview.

Convergence of Orthodox Narratives and Populist Ideologies

One of the most consequential developments in the political culture of Eastern Europe has been the growing convergence between Orthodox religious discourse and populist ideology. This convergence is not accidental–it emerges from shared symbolic registers, mutually reinforcing narratives, and a common opposition to liberal, secular, and cosmopolitan values. Both Orthodox clerical actors and populist political leaders claim to speak on behalf of a "pure people" betrayed

[9] Houk, "Toward an Understanding of the Role of Digital Technology in Orthodox Life and Practice," Valaskivi and Sumiala, "Religious Populism."

[10] Marianna Napolitano, "The Promotion of Traditional Values through Films and Television Programmes: The Moscow Patriarchate and the Orthodox Encyclopaedia Project (2005–2022)," *Religions* 15, no. 2 (February 18, 2024): 247, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020247; Jeanne Kormina and Detelina Tocheva, "Introduction. Marking Space: The Russian Orthodox Politics of Self-Assertion," *Archives de Sciences Sociales Des Religions* 206 (2024): 9–22, https://doi.org/10.4000/12ark.

by corrupt elites, eroded traditions, and external threats. The rhetoric of Orthodox identity, when fused with the populist framework of victimhood and moral struggle, creates a powerful narrative that justifies political mobilization in religious terms and sacralizes authoritarian tendencies.

At the heart of this fusion is a specific narrative structure: the nation as sacred, the enemy as profane, and the people as chosen or martyred. Orthodox teachings on spiritual warfare, suffering as redemptive, and divine mission easily blend with populist constructions of identity. Populism, as Laclau theorized, functions by articulating chains of equivalence–linking disparate grievances into a unifying antagonism between the "people" and the "elite."[11] When the Orthodox Church frames the nation as a divinely ordained community and portrays secular governance as morally compromised or even satanic, it mirrors and amplifies this populist logic.

This symbiosis is visible across the region. In Russia, the ROC has increasingly defined itself not just as a religious institution but as the moral guardian of the nation, aligning with state narratives that present Russia as a spiritual counter-civilization to the West. This ideological stance is most clearly articulated through the concept of the "*Russkii Mir*" – a civilizational doctrine that combines Orthodox theology, Russian nationalism, and historical revisionism into a unified worldview.[12] As Fylypovych and Horkusha emphasize, this narrative is ontological in nature: it does not merely justify Russian influence abroad, but claims spiritual superiority, casting Russia as the final bastion of Christian truth against global moral decline.[13]

Such narratives are not confined to Russia. In Serbia, Romania, and Georgia, Orthodox clergy and affiliated media actors often promote similar themes: resistance to Western liberalism, defense of the "traditional family," suspicion toward globalization and multiculturalism, and the moral demonization of perceived internal enemies such as LGBTQ communities or pro-European elites. While the theological content may vary, the structure of the message remains consistent with populist communication strategies: it simplifies complex political realities into emotionally resonant moral binaries and delivers them through symbolic, often religious language.[14]

[11] Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 70–72.
[12] Ioannis Kaminis, "The Russian World: A Version of Aggressive Ethnophyletism," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 44, no. 5 (June 28, 2024), https://doi.org/10.55221/2693-2229.2525.
[13] Fylypovych and Horkusha, "'Ruskiy Mir' and 'Ukrainskyi Svit,'" 25–27.
[14] Claudia Doiciara and Remus Creţana, "Pandemic Populism: COVID-19 and the Rise of the Nationalist AUR Party in Romania," *Geographica Pannonica* 25, no. 4 (2021): 243–59, https://doi.org/10.5937/gp25-33782; Lucian N. Leustean, "Orthodox Conservatism and the Refugee Crisis in Bulgaria and Moldova," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 54, no. 1–2 (June 1, 2021): 83–101, https://doi.org/10.1525/j.postcomstud.2021.54.1-2.83.

A key factor that facilitates this convergence is the Orthodox tradition's historical understanding of suffering. In contrast to the Western emphasis on prosperity, dignity, or civil progress, Orthodox narratives often sacralize hardship as spiritually purifying. In Russia and Serbia, for example, collective suffering is mythologized in national memory as "a sign of closeness" rather than misfortune. As such, the perception of geopolitical marginalization, economic stagnation, or political repression is not necessarily demobilizing–it becomes a point of pride, moral superiority, or divine testing. This theology of suffering fits seamlessly into populist narratives that frame a morally superior people as unfairly oppressed by alien elites.

Another critical convergence occurs around the concept of civilizational struggle. Both populist ideologues and Orthodox hierarchs increasingly refer to political conflict in quasi-apocalyptic terms: a spiritual war for the soul of the nation or even of humanity. In this framework, Western liberalism is not just politically misguided–it is spiritually corrupt and existentially dangerous. The fusion of religious and political discourse creates what Hovorun calls "political Orthodoxy"–a distortion of theological principles that subordinates ecclesiastical independence to ideological utility.[15] In this configuration, populist leaders receive not only political endorsements from the clergy but are often portrayed as providential figures sent to defend faith and homeland.

Media play a central role in this convergence. As Kormina and Tocheva demonstrate, Orthodox actors increasingly use digital platforms not just for liturgical or pastoral purposes, but to mark symbolic space–to claim moral and territorial authority in contested ideological landscapes.[16] Religious rhetoric frames the struggle not as one between parties or policy options, but between sacred truth and blasphemous lies. In doing so, it contributes to the moral polarization of society, delegitimizes pluralism, and reinforces the populist conviction that compromise is betrayal.

At the emotional level, Orthodox populism draws strength from a shared affective language. Both domains rely heavily on fear, nostalgia, indignation, and sacrificial pride. These emotions are not just side effects of the message–they are central to its transmission and reception, especially in digital formats. As Valaskivi and Sumiala argue, religious populism succeeds when

[15] Cyril Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies: The Unorthodoxies of the Church Coerced*, ed. Ashley John Moyse and Scott A. Kirkland (1517 Media, 2018), 75, 147, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv14h4jt.
[16] Kormina and Tocheva, "Introduction. Marking Space."

it engages users affectively through hybrid media that allow for ritualistic participation–likes, shares, comments, donations–that mimic devotional practice.[17]

Taken together, these dynamics reveal that the convergence between Orthodox discourse and populist ideology is neither superficial nor opportunistic. It is a structurally compatible alignment of values, narratives, emotional codes, and communicative forms. It allows Orthodox institutions to maintain cultural authority in rapidly changing societies and provides populist movements with sacred legitimacy in their rejection of liberal democracy. In the Eastern European context–where state, nation, and church have historically been deeply intertwined–this convergence represents not only a rhetorical alliance but a profound reshaping of political culture itself.

Political Mobilization through Orthodox Digital Media

The evolution of Orthodox digital media from liturgical communication platforms into political mobilization tools represents a fundamental shift in the Church's societal role in Eastern Europe. Once confined to the domains of moral instruction, spiritual guidance, and ritual preservation, Orthodox communication now frequently overlaps with political action, civic agitation, and ideological polarization. Digital channels such as YouTube, Telegram, and Facebook have become arenas where religious messages are weaponized for political purposes. The overlap between sacred symbolism and populist rhetoric renders these media powerful instruments for orchestrating mass mobilization – whether through direct protest, electoral engagement, or cultural confrontation.

This phenomenon is perhaps most vividly illustrated in Montenegro, where the Serbian Orthodox Church played a central role in organizing mass protests against the 2019-2020 Law on Religious Freedoms. Framed as a state attack on sacred heritage, the Church's campaign, known as the "*litije*" (from the Serbian term for religious processions, often involving icons and chanting, historically used to invoke divine protection or protest perceived injustices), mobilized thousands of people in weekly processions that combined religious ritual with nationalist resistance. The protests were organized, streamed, and amplified online, with clerics posting videos, issuing calls

[17] Valaskivi and Sumiala, "Religious Populism," 3–10.

to action, and coordinating local participation through Telegram groups and Facebook pages.[18] Here, the line between religious devotion and political performance was deliberately blurred: the Church offered not only spiritual framing, but organizational infrastructure and symbolic legitimacy.

In Georgia, the digital Orthodox network centered around the Alt-Info platform similarly enabled the fusion of religious rhetoric with far-right mobilization. Alt-Info, originally a media project, has evolved into both a political movement and an online echo chamber for clerical-nationalist narratives. It played a key role in mobilizing attacks on LGBTQ+ events, such as the violent disruption of the 2021 Tbilisi Pride festival. Religious leaders actively legitimized the violence through sermons and online commentary, portraying LGBTQ activists as existential threats to Georgian Orthodoxy and national sovereignty.[19] The digital infrastructure facilitated not only communication and fundraising, but the emotional coordination of outrage, solidarity, and moral panic.

In Romania, the rise of the far-right AUR (Alliance for the Union of Romanians) provides another compelling example. While formally unaffiliated with the Romanian Orthodox Church, AUR has relied heavily on religious symbolism, endorsements from conservative clerics, and content circulated through Orthodox media influencers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the party linked vaccine mandates to spiritual corruption and claimed to defend the "Christian soul" of Romania. YouTube channels and Facebook groups associated with Orthodox lay activists played a significant role in disseminating AUR's message and elevating its visibility among religiously conservative voters.[20] The mobilization was not simply ideological, but affective--structured through narratives of betrayal, redemption, and divine mission.

What unites these diverse cases is the ritualized and symbolic nature of digital political participation. Orthodox digital mobilization does not mirror secular activism–it is often couched in ritual metaphors, spiritual struggle, and appeals to divine justice. In this framework, civic

[18] Vanja Ćalović Marković, "The Struggle Against Authoritarian Influence in the Western Balkans: Montenegro as a Test Case" (International Forum For Democratic Studies, August 2024).
[19] Sopo Gelava, "Inauthentic Network Promoted Far-Right Georgian Political Party on Facebook," *DFRLab* (blog), December 1, 2021, https://dfrlab.org/2021/12/01/inauthentic-network-promoted-far-right-georgian-political-party-on-facebook/; Robin Fabbro, "Tbilisi Pride Festival Cancelled after Police Fail to Confront Extremists," OC Media, July 8, 2023, https://oc-media.org/tbilisi-pride-festival-cancelled-after-police-fail-to-confront-extremists/.
[20] Sergiu Gherghina, "How Religion Helped the Radical Right Take the Lead in Romania's Now-Cancelled Election," The Conversation, December 17, 2024, http://theconversation.com/how-religion-helped-the-radical-right-take-the-lead-in-romanias-now-cancelled-election-245514.

engagement becomes a form of sacramental participation. This rhetorical transformation gives political actions–voting, protesting, even violence–a moral legitimacy that transcends legality or constitutionality.

Moreover, Orthodox media ecosystems often amplify the voices of charismatic clerics and influencers who function as mediators between traditional religious authority and contemporary political discourse. Figures such as Metropolitan Amfilohije in Montenegro or self-proclaimed Orthodox YouTubers in Romania and Bulgaria provide interpretations of current events that merge theology with nationalism, prophecy with propaganda. As Valaskivi and Sumiala note, religious populism in the digital era relies not only on traditional hierarchies but on affective performance --the ability to mobilize emotion, community, and urgency through mediated presence.[21]

At a structural level, the effectiveness of Orthodox digital mobilization is further enhanced by weak civic institutions, high levels of public trust in the Church, and the enduring perception that Orthodoxy safeguards national identity. In many Eastern European states, the Church remains one of the few institutions perceived as "untainted" by foreign influence or corruption. This legitimacy allows clerical actors to intervene in public debates with rhetorical authority and emotional weight, even when formal church-state boundaries are preserved on paper.

Finally, Orthodox mobilization is often reactive and emotionally polarizing. It tends to emerge in response to perceived threats: LGBT rights, secular education reforms, international treaties, or restrictions on religious ceremonies. This reactive logic mirrors the populist tendency to define politics through crisis, grievance, and identity defense. As such, Orthodox digital media do not only call the faithful to action–they construct the very reality in which action becomes necessary, urgent, and divinely sanctioned.

In sum, the politicization of Orthodox digital media in Eastern Europe illustrates how religious communication has evolved into a full-spectrum mobilization apparatus. It blends theology, emotion, populist frames, and digital strategy to shape public behavior and legitimize political engagement. This evolution redefines the Church not just as a cultural anchor or moral authority, but as a central actor in the political mobilization of Orthodox-majority societies.

Disinformation and Conspiracies in the Orthodox Digital Sphere

[21] Valaskivi and Sumiala, "Religious Populism," 3.

In Eastern Europe, the Orthodox digital ecosystem has become a prominent vector for disinformation, conspiracy theories, and epistemic manipulation. This phenomenon is not merely the result of ideological convergence between clerical elites and populist actors, but the product of a deeper structural and emotional compatibility between religious rhetoric and digital populism. In the Orthodox sphere, disinformation is not always disseminated through fabricated news or falsified statistics–it is often embedded in the language of prophecy, sacred conflict, and moral inversion. These narratives do not seek to convince in a rational sense, but to mobilize, alarm, and polarize through emotionally resonant myths. As Moskalenko and Romanova have shown, conspiracy theories in post-Soviet media frequently adopt religious motifs, framing political struggles as battles between divine truth and demonic deception.[22]

Several mechanisms facilitate this convergence. First, Orthodox digital actors frequently recycle civilizational disinformation tropes: the idea that the West is in moral collapse, that international organizations seek to destroy Christian identity, or that global elites–whether George Soros, NATO, or pharmaceutical companies–are conspiring against faith and tradition. These narratives are delivered not through analytical argument, but through spiritually charged terms such as "Antichrist," or stressing the importance of "vigilance in prayers" and "frequent participation in worship," even as ecclesiastical authorities often fail to issue public condemnations, disciplinary measures, or official clarifications against prominent clerics who promote anti-vaccine conspiracy theories.[23] The blending of political disinformation with theological language grants these claims a moral absolutism that defies standard fact-checking techniques.

A second mechanism is the platform logic of digital communication. Algorithms reward emotionally charged, engagement-maximizing content–precisely the kind of content produced by populist clerics, religious influencers, and culture war entrepreneurs.[24] On platforms like YouTube, Facebook and Telegram, Orthodox-themed videos warning of satanic world governments, vaccine

[22] Sophia Moskalenko and Ekaterina Romanova, "Deadly Disinformation: Viral Conspiracy Theories as a Radicalization Mechanism," *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare* 5, no. 2 (November 24, 2022): 129–53, https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v5i2.5032.
[23] Vasileios Issaris, Georgios Kalogerakos, and Gerasimos Panagiotis Milas, "Vaccination Hesitancy Among Greek Orthodox Christians: Is There a Conflict Between Religion and Science?," *Journal of Religion and Health* 62, no. 2 (April 2023): 1375, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-023-01759-x; Dmytro Garaschuk and Viacheslav Serhieiev, "Infodemics and Populism in the Digital Age: Threats to Political Stability and Security Challenges," *Society and Security*, no. 2(8) (May 13, 2025): 61–71, https://doi.org/10.26642/sas-2025-2(8)-61-71.
[24] Garaschuk and Serhieiev, "Infodemics and Populism in the Digital Age."

conspiracies, or secret liberal coups attract large audiences.[25] As Suslov describes, the ROC's digital rhetoric often embeds "spiritual, moral and ideological meanings into new hybrid formats of post-secular publicity," making it possible to convey nationalistic or anti-Western messages through religious idioms without direct political statements.[26] This layered narrative style–linking geopolitical ambition to theological narratives–enables a form of strategic ambiguity that allows radical interpretations without requiring formal endorsement from Church hierarchy.

Examples of this pattern can be found across the region. In Romania, narratives about globalist control, Western spiritual decline, and the "poisoning" of national traditions are regularly circulated by Orthodox nationalist influencers and far-right media aligned with religious rhetoric. These narratives escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when vaccine skepticism merged with eschatological warnings and anti-EU sentiment.[27] In Greece, some Orthodox priests publicly denounced vaccines as part of a satanic plot, mobilizing thousands of followers through church sermons and social media channels.[28] In Serbia and Georgia, anti-LGBTQ conspiracies framed liberal reforms as orchestrated attacks on Orthodoxy and traditional gender roles, fueling digital and physical violence against minority communities.[29]

In Russia, the disinformation apparatus is both more centralized and more ideologically cohesive. Outlets like Tsargrad TV function as Orthodox-nationalist equivalents of Western hyper-partisan media, disseminating Kremlin-aligned narratives wrapped in religious aesthetics. As Khroul and Napolitano show, the Church-backed media complex routinely propagates messages of anti-liberalism, historical revisionism, and victimized exceptionalism.[30] The "*Russkii Mir*" narrative, in particular, is sustained by a mythology of sacred mission and historical betrayal –

[25] Anastasiia Alieksiienko, "The Church Against Vaccines: How the Russian Orthodox Church Opposes Vaccination in Ukraine," accessed May 19, 2025, https://ukraineworld.org/en/articles/infowatch/church-against-vaccines.
[26] Suslov, "The Russian Orthodox Church Turns to the Global South," 11-12.
[27] Doiciara and Creţana, "Pandemic Populism."
[28] Issaris, Kalogerakos, and Milas, "Vaccination Hesitancy Among Greek Orthodox Christians"; Nektaria Stamouli, "Science vs. Religion as Greek Priests Lead the Anti-Vax Movement," POLITICO, July 20, 2021, https://www.politico.eu/article/science-vs-religion-greece-priests-anti-vaccine-coronavirus-movement/.
[29] Givi Gigitashvili, "Georgian Far-Right Groups Embrace Anti-LGBTQ Narratives Pushed by Russian Media," *DFRLab* (blog), July 27, 2021, https://medium.com/dfrlab/georgian-far-right-groups-embrace-anti-lgbtq-narratives-pushed-by-pro-russian-media-36f9e99a2561; Gelava, "Inauthentic Network Promoted Far-Right Georgian Political Party on Facebook."
[30] Khroul, "Digitalization of Religion in Russia"; Napolitano, "The Promotion of Traditional Values through Films and Television Programmes."

positioning Russia as the protector of a spiritual order under siege from NATO, the EU, and secularism.[31]

The unique danger of Orthodox disinformation lies in its resistance to epistemic correction. Unlike secular fake news, which can often be disproven by evidence or journalistic rebuttal, religious disinformation functions in a different epistemological mode. It appeals to sacred authority, doctrinal inerrancy, or mystical insight. Attempts to counter these claims with empirical data are often perceived as spiritual attacks or further proof of elite conspiracy. As Garaschuk notes in his analysis of digital populism and post-truth environments, Orthodox populist discourse increasingly operates in "semi-enclosed epistemic spaces" where emotional resonance and ideological commitment override traditional verification.[32] In such contexts, truth becomes less a function of evidence and more an affirmation of group identity, often underpinned by theological or civilizational claims. This dynamic fosters what may be termed "epistemic closure"–not through dogma alone, but through digitally mediated affective reinforcement that immunizes users against alternative views.

Additionally, Orthodox digital disinformation often delegitimizes democratic institutions. Governments that promote inclusivity, transparency, or secular values are portrayed as apostate regimes – agents of decay or anti-Christian persecution. In Ukraine, for example, efforts to curtail the influence of ROC-linked structures are regularly reframed as religious repression by pro-Russian media, thereby reinforcing international propaganda lines.[33] In Serbia and Montenegro, church-affiliated disinformation campaigns have depicted liberal politicians as enemies of the Church and Westernized traitors. These tropes undermine institutional trust and intensify political radicalization.[34]

Importantly, disinformation is not only top-down–it is also grassroots and participatory. Lay believers, digital monks, and anonymous social platforms administrators contribute to a shared information environment where spiritual warfare becomes the default lens through which news is

[31] Vladyslav Fulmes, "'War in Ukraine: Religious, Geopolitical and Cultural Dimensions of Value-Worldview Clashes at the Beginning of the 21st Century': International Theological Conference," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 43, no. 6 (January 1, 2023), https://doi.org/10.55221/2693-2148.2438.
[32] d. V. Garaschuk, "'Truth Decay' and Populism: Eroding Democracy in the 21st Century," *International and Political Studies*, no. 37 (2024): 65–78, https://doi.org/10.32782/2707-5206.2024.37.6.
[33] Ksenia Luchenko, "Why the Russian Orthodox Church Supports the War in Ukraine," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 31, 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/01/why-the-russian-orthodox-church-supports-the-war-in-ukraine?lang=en.
[34] Ćalović Marković, "The Struggle Against Authoritarian Influence in the Western Balkans: Montenegro as a Test Case."

interpreted. This phenomenon mirrors what Valaskivi and Sumiala call a "paradigmatic mode of address," in which populist religion is experienced less through formal teaching than through emotional, aesthetic, and community-driven engagement.[35] Disinformation spreads not just because it is persuasive, but because it allows believers to affirm identity, express outrage, and participate in a collective ritual of resistance.

In conclusion, Orthodox digital disinformation in Eastern Europe must be understood as part of a larger ecosystem of ideological control, cultural anxiety, and populist mobilization. It draws on theological authority, populist emotion, and digital amplification to construct alternate realities that delegitimize liberal democracy, demonize pluralism, and embolden authoritarian narratives. Addressing it requires more than fact-checking–it demands a structural understanding of how digital religious spaces shape belief, identity, and political behavior in the post-truth era.

Undermining Democracy and Social Cohesion

The fusion of Orthodox religious identity and political populism in Eastern Europe has profound implications for the resilience of democratic institutions and the cohesion of pluralistic societies. This alliance, articulated through digital media and symbolically charged narratives, does not merely represent a cultural reaction to liberal modernity. It constitutes a strategic mode of governance that undermines democratic norms, delegitimizes political opposition, and fosters authoritarian consolidation. At its most sophisticated, this phenomenon is neither spontaneous nor chaotic–it often unfolds through well-structured processes that mirror algorithmic or managerial logic, where political mobilization and disinformation campaigns are orchestrated as repeatable, scalable protest machines.

Populism's anti-institutional logic inherently challenges liberal democracy, but its religious articulation further intensifies this dynamic. As Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser emphasize, populism tends to erode democratic pluralism by reducing politics to a moral binary.[36] When combined with Orthodox narratives, this binary is not merely political–it becomes theological. The "pure people" are reframed as the "faithful nation," while the "corrupt elite" becomes the spiritually

[35] Valaskivi and Sumiala, "Religious Populism."
[36] Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, eds., *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2012), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139152365.

deviant or apostate regime. This theological moralization of politics elevates populist leaders as divinely sanctioned actors and delegitimizes opponents as enemies of both God and country.

In such contexts, democratic institutions are systematically portrayed as corrupt, foreign-influenced, or spiritually bankrupt. Courts, parliaments, and media are framed as tools of external powers–Brussels, Washington, Soros, or the LGBT "lobby"–rather than as neutral or constitutional actors. This framing is visible in the rhetoric of Orthodox-aligned parties and clerics in Romania, Serbia, and Georgia. The Romanian AUR movement frequently describes the European Union as a "civilizational threat" that seeks to erase Romania's Christian identity.[37] In Serbia, the Serbian Orthodox Church, aligning with Russian Orthodox counterparts, increasingly portrays liberal and pro-European political movements as threats to national and religious identity, framing Western integration efforts as betrayals of Serbia's Orthodox heritage.[38]

These narratives are not only rhetorical–they are deployed through coordinated mobilization strategies that function algorithmically. The protests organized by the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro during 2019-2020 serve as a paradigmatic case. Ostensibly directed against a new religious law, the protests were in fact an orchestrated challenge to the ruling pro-Western government. The process combined traditional religious rituals with digitally coordinated mass mobilization, using Telegram channels, Facebook pages, and livestreamed liturgies to build support, recruit activists, and frame the government as an existential enemy of Orthodoxy.[39] The movement was not a spontaneous outpouring of faith–it operated like a disciplined information campaign, with symbolic milestones, affective language cycles, and localized ritualization of resistance.

This same pattern is now visible in Georgia, where Alt-Info functions as both a far-right digital platform and a para mobilization structure. It uses Orthodox symbolism to call for public actions against LGBTQ events, liberal politicians, and Western NGOs, portraying them as "invaders" threatening Georgian identity. The protests themselves are framed as spiritual defense

[37] Doiciara and Creţana, "Pandemic Populism"; Gherghina, "How Religion Helped the Radical Right Take the Lead in Romania's Now-Cancelled Election."
[38] Ivana Stradner and Marina Chernin, "Serbian and Russian Orthodox Churches Unite Against West," *FDD* (blog), May 4, 2025, https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op_eds/2025/05/04/serbian-and-russian-orthodox-churches-unite-against-west/.
[39] Ćalović Marković, "The Struggle Against Authoritarian Influence in the Western Balkans: Montenegro as a Test Case."

campaigns, often supported by clerical figures, and follow a clear strategic cycle: provocation, emotional incitement, digital amplification, offline confrontation, and post-fact justification.[40]

The impact of these campaigns on democracy is twofold. First, they undermine institutional trust. When parliaments are framed as godless, when judges are cast as agents of spiritual betrayal, and when the media is labeled as morally perverse, the public begins to view the entire democratic system as illegitimate. Second, they radicalize the public sphere. By placing political discourse in a sacred-profane binary, these narratives make compromise impossible. To negotiate with the "other" is no longer political error – it becomes heresy.

The model of "*Russkii Mir*" exemplifies this erosion of democracy on an even broader scale. This civilizational narrative does not merely resist liberal values–it seeks to replace them with a parallel moral-political order in which state authority, religious identity, and geopolitical domination are fused. This model has already been exported in symbolic form to other Orthodox countries through Russian-backed media and ecclesiastical diplomacy, where it fuels democratic skepticism, anti-Western sentiment, and ethno-religious exceptionalism.[41]

Crucially, this strategy is scalable. As Arribas et al. observe, the ROC has adopted a transnational model of influence that adapts to local contexts while preserving the core message of sacred resistance.[42] The underlying mechanisms – spiritual framing, symbolic protest, emotional saturation, and digital virality–are not improvised. They are reproducible. Much like efficient business processes, these movements are designed for ideological scalability: they can be deployed in Montenegro today, adapted in Georgia tomorrow, and replicated in Romania next election season.

In digital terms, these campaigns create feedback loops. Clerical pronouncements are echoed by influencers, amplified by alternative media, internalized by believers, and reenacted in the streets. The result is a systemic corrosion of democratic culture: truth becomes contested, legitimacy becomes divine rather than constitutional, and violence becomes morally defensible.

[40] Gelava, "Inauthentic Network Promoted Far-Right Georgian Political Party on Facebook," Gigitashvili, "Georgian Far-Right Groups Embrace Anti-LGBTQ Narratives Pushed by Russian Media."
[41] Lesia Bidochko, "Instrumentalization of Religion in a Secular State: The Manipulation of Believers' Sentiments by Russian Propaganda," May 1, 2023, https://en.detector.media/post/instrumentalization-of-religion-in-a-secular-state-the-manipulation-of-believers-sentiments-by-russian-propaganda.
[42] Cristina M. Arribas et al., "Information Manipulation and Historical Revisionism: Russian Disinformation and Foreign Interference through Manipulated History-Based Narratives," *Open Research Europe* 3 (July 27, 2023): 121, https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.16087.1.

In sum, Orthodox populism in the digital age has moved beyond reactive protest. It has become a strategic tool for democratic regression–a hybrid of spiritual authority, populist antagonism, and algorithmic mobilization. It does not simply challenge democracy from the outside–it corrodes it from within, replacing civic pluralism with sacred hierarchy, and public reason with prophetic emotion.

Comparative Case Synthesis

The entanglement of Orthodox religious institutions with populist political projects across Eastern Europe reveals a set of converging patterns–yet the specific configurations vary by context, shaped by national histories, state-church relations, and geopolitical alignment. This section compares the cases of Russia, Montenegro, Georgia, Romania, Serbia, and Ukraine to distill the structural logics, tactical similarities, and democratic implications of Orthodox digital populism. It draws on both academic analyses and primary web-based articles previously collected to demonstrate how these movements operate, scale, and destabilize democratic governance.

Russia stands at the epicenter of Orthodox political theology in the digital age. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) functions as both an ideological arm of the state and a producer of digital media that sanctifies geopolitical ambition. The concept of the "*Russkii Mir*" justifies expansionist policies and war by framing them as spiritual missions.[43] Platforms such as Tsargrad TV serve as Orthodox-nationalist media engines that produce content blending theological language with a nationalist propaganda. As Suslov notes, ROC's digital communication often leverages ambiguity, allowing it to float radical implications without direct accountability.[44] The Church becomes not only a vehicle for disinformation but a source of moral absolutism, in which "truth" is determined by loyalty to a sacralized state rather than democratic procedure.

In Montenegro, the Serbian Orthodox Church played a decisive political role in opposing the 2019-2020 Law on Freedom of Religion. The "*litije*"–mass religious processions–functioned as hybrid spiritual-political protests, coordinated online through clerical Telegram channels and livestreamed services. Ćalović Marković demonstrates that these protests were methodically organized and emotionally scripted, using sacred space and ritual as tools for civil resistance.[45]

[43] Kaminis, "The Russian World"; Fulmes, ""War in Ukraine."
[44] Suslov, "The Russian Orthodox Church Turns to the Global South."
[45] Ćalović Marković, "The Struggle Against Authoritarian Influence in the Western Balkans: Montenegro as a Test Case."

The Church positioned itself as the last defender of national authenticity against foreign liberalization, which led to the political fall of the pro-Western Democratic Party of Socialists. As reported by AP News, the Church's installation of a new patriarch was met with further mass demonstrations, underscoring its capacity to mobilize at scale and exert soft authoritarian influence over state politics.[46]

Georgia provides another critical case where Orthodox digital populism has been weaponized against democratic pluralism. The far-right media project Alt-Info, operating in tandem with clerical actors, has played a central role in organizing attacks on LGBTQ+ events and promoting conspiracy theories. As detailed by Eurasianet and DFRLab, these efforts were digitally choreographed and framed in spiritual language–depicting cultural liberalism as a foreign, Satanic force threatening national purity.[47] Orthodox clergy offered moral justification for street violence, which was later amplified by Alt-Info's online ecosystem. Here, the digital sphere functions both as a planning infrastructure and a theological echo chamber.

In Romania, Orthodox populism has taken on a more electoral form. The rise of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), supported by clerical figures and lay influencers, illustrates how digital Orthodox narratives can be translated into parliamentary power. AUR's campaign during the COVID-19 pandemic blended anti-vaccine rhetoric with religious identity politics, accusing the liberal state of betraying Romania's Christian soul. According to Politico and FEPS, this messaging–often distributed via YouTube preachers and pro-Orthodox TikTok influencers–helped AUR tap into disaffected conservative voters, particularly in rural and diasporic communities.[48] Religious language became an electoral algorithm: simple, moralistic, emotional, and viral.

[46] Predrag Milic, "Police Clash with Opponents of Serbian Church in Montenegro," AP News, September 3, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/europe-religion-serbia-montenegro-6fb81571becf0a9abbb10d1e890702c5?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

[47] Nini Gabritchidze, "Rise of Georgian Alt-Right Group Sparks Fear of Unrest," Eurasianet, March 23, 2022, https://eurasianet.org/rise-of-georgian-alt-right-group-sparks-fear-of-unrest; Gelava, "Inauthentic Network Promoted Far-Right Georgian Political Party on Facebook."

[48] Tim Ross, Victor Jack, and Petre Andrei, "Who Is Călin Georgescu, the Far-Right TikTok Star Leading the Romanian Election Race?" POLITICO, November 25, 2024, https://www.politico.eu/article/calin-georgescu-romania-elections-far-right-tiktok-nato-skeptic-russia-ukraine-exports/; Ban Cornel, "Romania's Far-Right Surge," *Foundation for European Progressive Studies* (blog), December 13, 2024, https://feps-europe.eu/romanias-far-right-surge/.

Serbia offers a model where the Orthodox Church is fully embedded in the political system.[49] The Church plays a gatekeeping role in defining national legitimacy. Clerical leaders regularly appear in state functions, bless political campaigns, and support anti-EU narratives. While less reliant on spontaneous mobilization, Serbia's Orthodox media complex, including nationalist YouTube channels and clerical blogs, continuously delegitimizes liberal actors as Westernized traitors–linking political dissent to spiritual disloyalty. This slow-burning ideological saturation corrodes the distinction between civic opposition and heretical threat.

Ukraine presents a distinct case of fragmentation and contestation within Orthodoxy itself. The post-2014 formation of the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) challenged the ROC's dominance, turning the digital sphere into a battlefield for religious legitimacy. As Havryliuk et al. and Stetsiak explain, the ROC-affiliated Ukrainian Orthodox Church maintained ties to Moscow through online channels, spiritual rhetoric, and coordinated resistance to Ukrainian reforms.[50] In August 2024, Ukraine enacted the "Law on the Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Field of Activities of Religious Organizations," effectively banning religious organizations affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church, including the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, as threats to national security.[51] Here, the logic of Orthodox digital populism is inverted–used not to reinforce the state, but to undermine it from within by sowing confusion and symbolic allegiance to an adversarial power.

Despite institutional and political differences among the six countries examined, Orthodox digital populism displays a set of recurring structural patterns that reflect how populist strategies are adapted and amplified through religious and digital channels:

1.Construction of Moral Binaries

Across contexts, Orthodox populist actors consistently reduce political complexity to sacred versus profane dichotomies. This aligns with populism's classic antagonistic structure–the "pure people"

[49] Vesko Garčević, "The Serbian Orthodox Church and Extreme-Right Groups: A Marriage of Convenience or Organic Partnership?" *Berkley Forum* (blog), July 14, 2023, https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/the-serbian-orthodox-church-and-extreme-right-groups-a-marriage-of-convenience-or-organic-partnership.

[50] Havryliuk, Chornomorets, and Gulyamov, "Inter-Orthodox Conflicts in Ukraine and the Movement to Unite Ukrainian Orthodox Churches in the 20th and 21st Century"; Stetsiak, "FEATURES OF THE FUNCTIONING OF THE UKRAINIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH DURING THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR."

[51] "Law of Ukraine 'On the Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Field of Activities of Religious Organizations,'" in *Wikipedia*, April 23, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Law_of_Ukraine_%22On_the_Protection_of_the_Constitutional_Order_in_the_Field_of_Activities_of_Religious_Organizations%22&oldid=1286959128.

versus the "corrupt elite"–but reframed through religious semantics: the “faithful nation” against the secularized liberal state, or Orthodoxy against globalist apostasy.[52] These binaries are not just rhetorical devices; they are foundational cognitive frames through which populist politics acquires spiritual legitimacy and emotional urgency. In this way, religious populism sacralizes political identity, eliminating the space for neutral or pluralistic discourse.

2.Digital Platforms as Engines of Mobilization and Identity Reinforcement

Just as populist movements thrive on performative and personalized media environments, Orthodox digital populism adapts clerical authority to the digital attention economy.[53] YouTube sermons, Telegram channels, and Facebook livestreams become interactive arenas for ideological consolidation, delivering emotionally charged content that fuses nationalism with spiritual purity. These platforms reproduce populism’s preference for direct, unmediated communication, bypassing institutional checks and elite gatekeeping.[54] They also reinforce identity boundaries through echo chambers and algorithmically elevated moral outrage.

3.Delegitimization of Democratic Institutions through Theological Framing

Populism's suspicion of representative institutions is amplified by religious authority, wherein courts, parliaments, and civil rights frameworks are not merely labeled as corrupt or ineffective but are portrayed as theologically compromised, foreign-controlled, or agents of moral decay. In Georgia, Romania, and Russia, Orthodox influencers depict democratic institutions as threats to divine order and national salvation. This reframing provides moral justification for rejecting liberal democracy and replacing it with authoritarian paternalism, often endorsed in the name of God.[55]

[52] Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” 543–44; Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 70–72.

[53] Zaza Tsotniashvili and Elisabed Abuladze, “Media Strategies of Orthodox Church Television Networks: A Comparative Analysis of Romania, Serbia, Greece, Russia, and Georgia,” *Journal of Digital Sociohumanities* 2 (April 30, 2025): 59–69, https://doi.org/10.22303/jds.2.1.2009.25.

[54] D. V. Garaschuk, “Digital Echo Chambers: Amplifying Populist Rhetoric in the Age of Social Media,” *Current Problems of Philosophy and Sociology*, no. 46 (2024): 152–57, https://doi.org/10.32782/apfs.v046.2024.26.

[55] Archil Gegeshidze and Mikheil Miziashvili, “The Orthodox Church in Georgia’s Changing Society,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 23, 2021, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/07/the-orthodox-church-in-georgias-changing-society?lang=en; Lucian Turcescu, “Orthodoxy and Democracy in Romanian Theology,” in *Politics, Society and Culture in Orthodox Theology in a Global Age*, 2022, 78–89, https://doi.org/10.30965/9783657793792_007; Gaziza Shakhanova and Petr Kratochvíl, “The Patriotic Turn in Russia: Political Convergence of the Russian Orthodox Church and the State?,” *Politics and Religion* 15, no. 1 (March 2022): 114–41, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048320000620.

4.Sacralization of Protest and Ritualization of Resistance

Orthodox populism excels at transforming political dissent into ritual performance. Protest marches become processions; political defiance becomes acts of faith. These practices mirror populism's tendency to mobilize through emotional resonance rather than rational critique but add a layer of symbolic authority through liturgical structure and spiritual choreography. The "*litije*" in Montenegro and clerically blessed rallies in Georgia and Serbia illustrate how religious ritual is repurposed to serve populist agitation–legitimizing confrontation as a sacred duty.

At the same time, significant divergences emerge from differing institutional, geopolitical, and ecclesiastical conditions. These variations affect how populism is mediated, scaled, and sustained through Orthodox structures:

- *Russia and Serbia: Institutionalized Church-State Fusion*

In these contexts, populist religiosity is state-integrated. The Church acts as a symbolic arm of the regime, offering spiritual legitimacy to policy, war, and civilizational narratives. This model strengthens top-down ideological control and stabilizes long-term populist rule – a form of "managed populism" embedded within authoritarian political culture.[56] Populism here adopts the mantle of divine order, not insurgency.

- *Montenegro and Georgia: Clerical-Led Digital Insurgencies*

In contrast, populist religion in Montenegro and Georgia is semi-autonomous, often in tension with the state. Here, Orthodox populism operates through networked clerics and alternative media, positioning itself as the protector of the nation from liberal encroachment. These movements resemble anti-system populist insurgencies, where the Church is not aligned with the regime but challenges it through mass mobilization and spiritual rhetoric.

- *Romania: Electoral Populism with Orthodox Emotional Coding*

Romania's case illustrates how Orthodox discourse supports party-driven populism. AUR uses Orthodox values not for direct clerical mobilization, but for narrative coding – framing its anti-elite, anti-EU stance in sacred-nationalist tones that resonate with rural and diasporic audiences. Digital populism in Romania uses moral language as an algorithmic filter, emotionalizing policy debates and collapsing cultural identity into political loyalty.

[56] Ihsan Yilmaz, "The Nexus of Digital Authoritarianism and Religious Populism," *Religions* 14, no. 6 (June 5, 2023): 747, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060747.

- *Ukraine: Religious Fragmentation as a Site of Populist Contestation*

Ukraine stands apart for its confessional fragmentation and its status as a religious battleground. Here, Orthodox populism is not monolithic – it splits between the Moscow-linked UOC and the independent OCU. The ROC-aligned faction uses digital platforms to delegitimize the Ukrainian state, while OCU-affiliated actors frame national identity in both religious and civic terms. Populism in Ukraine is weaponized through religious alignment, complicating national cohesion and public trust.[57]

Together, these patterns and divergences show that Orthodox digital populism is not a derivative phenomenon but a coherent regional strategy of political legitimation, identity construction, and democratic destabilization. It borrows populism's core tools – emotional narrative, elite vilification, digital immediacy – and amplifies them through the sacral vocabulary and symbolic infrastructure of Orthodoxy. This hybrid form is not just adaptable; it is strategically scalable, replicable across national contexts with minor variations in tone, structure, and institutional depth.

Conclusion

The intersection of Orthodox religious discourse, digital communication, and populist political mobilization in Eastern Europe reveals the emergence of a distinctive ideological and operational phenomenon. Far from a coincidental overlap, this alliance reflects a structured convergence of symbolic authority, narrative strategy, and technological adaptation. It is not merely a reactive response to social change or geopolitical tension–it is an active and scalable system of political influence that challenges the foundations of democratic pluralism.

Orthodox religious institutions have adapted rapidly to the digital age, extending their influence far beyond the traditional spaces of liturgy and theology. Through YouTube, Telegram, Facebook, and alternative news platforms, clerical voices now engage in real-time political commentary, frame public events in spiritual terms, and construct emotionally resonant moral binaries. This transformation has enabled the Church, in many contexts, to function not only as a cultural pillar but as a political actor, using digital media to cultivate identity, loyalty, and mobilization.

[57] Havryliuk, Chornomorets, and Gulyamov, "Inter-Orthodox Conflicts in Ukraine and the Movement to Unite Ukrainian Orthodox Churches in the 20th and 21st Century."

What makes this convergence particularly potent is its structural compatibility with populist logic. Both rely on a dichotomous worldview–casting the faithful or "pure" people against corrupt elites and foreign invaders. Orthodox teachings on suffering, purity, and divine mission lend themselves easily to populist narratives of betrayal, moral decay, and redemption. Religious symbols, rituals, and metaphors are repurposed to legitimize political positions, turning ideological alignment into a matter of faith.

Digital platforms provide the infrastructure through which these ideas are amplified and enacted. From livestreamed prayer rallies to viral conspiracy videos, Orthodox populist communication mimics the emotional intensity and scale-maximizing design of populist social media campaigns. These platforms enable clerical figures and lay influencers to bypass traditional gatekeepers, reinforce echo chambers, and incite collective action. Religious engagement becomes fused with political identity, while protest movements are ritualized and choreographed as spiritual events.

Disinformation and conspiracy theories play a central role in this ecosystem. Religious populist actors deploy theological language to frame political developments as cosmic battles between good and evil. Opponents of populist or church-aligned regimes are depicted not as rivals, but as apostates, traitors, or agents of Satanic influence. These narratives undermine the possibility of democratic debate by denying the legitimacy of disagreement. Truth becomes defined by allegiance to the sacred order, not by verification or public reason.

The consequences for democracy are profound. Orthodox populist movements do not merely critique democratic institutions–they seek to delegitimize and spiritually disqualify them. Parliaments are condemned as morally bankrupt, courts as anti-Christian, and civil society actors as foreign infiltrators. In several countries, organized protests supported by clerical figures follow a familiar sequence: emotionally charged messaging, coordinated digital calls to action, street-level disruption, and retrospective spiritual justification. These are not accidental patterns; they resemble algorithmic processes – repeatable, adaptive, and designed for ideological scalability.

A comparative view across Eastern Europe illustrates both the coherence and variability of this phenomenon. In some contexts, such as Russia and Serbia, church-state alignment creates a system where Orthodoxy serves as ideological reinforcement for state populism and authoritarian governance. In others, like Montenegro and Georgia, Orthodox populism emerges in opposition to liberal-leaning governments, generating decentralized but highly effective digital insurgencies.

Romania offers a case of electoral Orthodox populism, where sacred identity is leveraged for political gain within the framework of formal democracy. Ukraine, by contrast, reveals the geopolitical implications of confessional fragmentation and the weaponization of religious legitimacy in the context of war and national security.

Despite these variations, the shared logic remains consistent: Orthodox populism creates closed moral systems, mobilizes mass identity through digital ritual, and legitimizes political exclusion as spiritual defense. It collapses the distinction between belief and citizenship, governance and redemption, dissent and heresy. As a political technology, it is both adaptable and durable–capable of shifting form while preserving its core function: the erosion of liberal democratic norms under the banner of sacred tradition.

This phenomenon signals a new stage in the evolution of religious influence in politics. The Orthodox Church, in its digital populist mode, is no longer only a guardian of faith–it is an actor in a broader ideological project that merges theology with populist communication strategy. Understanding this transformation is critical not only for scholars of religion or politics, but for all those concerned with democratic stability, civil peace, and the defense of pluralistic public life in Eastern Europe and beyond.

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