

CHURCH AND STATE:

THE POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF THE

RUSSIAN ORTHODOX AND POLISH

CATHOLIC CHURCHES IN POST-

COMMUNIST TRANSITIONS

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The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union fundamentally reshaped the political and religious landscapes of the region, allowing once-suppressed religious institutions to reassert themselves as powerful political actors. This paper investigates the post-1991 influence of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Polish Catholic Church, analyzing how their distinct historical legacies shaped divergent roles in politics and society. The Russian Orthodox Church, historically accustomed to collaboration with centralized authority, reestablished a close alliance with the Kremlin, reinforcing authoritarian governance through appeals to Orthodoxy, nationalism, and traditional family values. In contrast, the Polish Catholic Church, a symbol of resistance and moral authority, entered the democratic era as an independent but deeply influential institution, shaping national debates over education, reproductive rights, and constitutional identity. While both churches employ similar strategies—moral authority, cultural symbolism, and political alignment—their influence reflects the political contexts in which they operate: authoritarian consolidation in Russia versus contested but polarizing authority in democratic Poland. By tracing the churches' roles in shaping identity, public policy, and state legitimacy, this paper demonstrates how religion remains a decisive force in post-communist transitions while also confronting the limits of ecclesiastical authority amid generational change, secularization, and social resistance.

I. Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist regimes of Eastern Europe was one of the biggest global shifts of the 20th century. Countries across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union faced the challenge of rebuilding their political systems with changing social and religious landscapes. Among the most influential institutions in this transformation were the Russian Orthodox Church and the Polish Catholic Church. These religious organizations, deeply rooted in their respective national histories, emerged as powerful actors in shaping government policies and political decision-making in the post-communist era. The Russian Orthodox Church, with its historical ties to the state, leveraged its position to influence domestic and foreign policies, promoting conservative values and nationalistic agendas. Similarly, the Polish Catholic Church, a symbol of national identity and resistance, played a crucial role in Poland's political transformation, advocating for social justice and human rights. This paper examines how these churches have shaped government policies and political decision-making in Russia and Poland since 1991, focusing on their roles in intertwining religion with state power, influencing national identity, and shaping social policies.

II. Religion Under Communism

The Russian Orthodox Church has always been closely tied to the political history of Russia, acting at different times as a key supporter of autocracy, a suppressed institution during Soviet rule, and a powerful force in post-Soviet nationalism. Under the Tsars, the Church functioned as an extension of the government, bound to the ideology of “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality.” It held a special place within the autocracy, with the emperor acting as its main protector, but after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the Soviet government wasted no time stripping the Church of its power by enforcing the separation of church and state and

nationalizing all church property. “These administrative measures,” writes historian John Burgess, “were followed by brutal state-sanctioned persecutions” of clergy and widespread destruction of churches.¹ During World War II, Stalin took a small step back by allowing the election of a patriarch in 1943 and reopening some religious institutions, but this period did not last long. By the late 1950s, Khrushchev ramped up ecclesial persecution again, pushing the Church back into the margins, where it stayed politically quiet until the last years of the Soviet Union. Only under Gorbachev’s reforms in the late 1980s did the Church begin to reemerge publicly. By the 1990s the relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the organs of state power was closer than in perhaps centuries, following a short-lived post-Soviet experiment with church-state separation.² After the failed 1991 coup, President Boris Yeltsin formed a close relationship with Patriarch Aleksii II, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, marking the beginning of what analysts have referred to as a “church–state partnership” that enabled the Church to reclaim a powerful public and political role.³

The Polish Catholic Church, on the other hand, emerged from the 20th century not as an institution tainted by its ties to state power, but as a strong symbol of national identity and resistance. During the interwar Second Republic (1918–1939), the Church regained its influence after years of oppression, becoming a major force in both cultural and political life. Even under communist rule after World War II, facing state surveillance and pressure, it was not subdued in the same way religious institutions were in much of the Eastern Bloc. After Stalin’s death, the communist regime reached a *de facto* truce with the Church, allowing it to operate relatively

¹ John P. Burgess, *Holy Rus': The Rebirth of Orthodoxy in the New Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 22.

² Christopher Marsh, *Religion and the State in Russia and China: Suppression, Survival, and Revival* (London: Continuum, 2011).

³ Nadieszda Kizenko, “The Russian Orthodox Church and Civil Society: Is There a ‘Third Way’?” *Religion, State & Society* 30, no. 4 (2002): 267.

freely as long as it refrained from open political opposition. Over time, however, the Church positioned itself as a space of spiritual and social refuge. As sociologist Robert Froese explains, “the Polish Church increased its mass following under communism because it consistently acted as a vehicle of opposition to the Communist Party.”⁴ In the 1970s and 1980s, the Church played a key role in backing the Solidarity movement, a social and labor movement that pushed back against communist rule, while also giving spiritual support to the fight for democracy. According to political historian Melissa Wilde, the Church “paved the way for a movement [Solidarity] that transcended social boundaries,” becoming “the symbol of a solid nation against an atheistic communist regime.”⁵ The election of Pope John Paul II in 1978 amplified the Polish Church’s authority both domestically and abroad, cementing its status as a moral compass in national politics. Following the collapse of communism, the Church remained deeply embedded in Polish public life, actively shaping debates over education, reproductive rights, and constitutional values.

While both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Polish Catholic Church reemerged as influential institutions following the collapse of communism, they did so through markedly different trajectories rooted in their distinct historical experiences with the state. The Orthodox Church, long accustomed to collaboration with centralized power—from the Tsars to the Soviets—embraced a renewed partnership with the post-Soviet Russian state. As sociologist Dmitry Pospelovsky notes, “the Russian Orthodox Church from 1721 to 1917 had been the handmaid of the tsars, and under Soviet rule had adapted itself to the service of atheist, even atheizing, masters.”⁶ Thus, after 1991, it was well-positioned to align with President Vladimir

⁴ Robert Froese, *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization* (University of California Press, 2008), 147.

⁵ Melissa Wilde, *Vatican II: A Sociological Analysis of Religious Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 129.

⁶ Dmitry Pospelovsky, *The Russian Church Under the Soviet Regime 1917–1982*, vol. 2 (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 400.

Putin's regime and became instrumental in crafting a vision of Russian identity centered on Orthodox values and conservative nationalism. In contrast, the Polish Catholic Church, shaped by decades of resistance and moral authority, entered the democratic era in a more independent state. Yet despite its formal autonomy, the Church exerted considerable influence over political discourse and public policy, particularly through its alliance with the Law and Justice (PiS) party in the 2000s and 2010s. As Froese notes, the Church continued its "increasing role as a vehicle of moral and cultural opposition," even within democratic institutions.⁷ Thus, while both churches regained influence in their respective states, Russia's Orthodox Church largely reinforced authoritarian tendencies through partnership with the Kremlin, whereas Poland's Catholic Church maintained a more contested but powerful presence in democratic society.

III. Post-1991 Revival of Religion and Church-State Dynamics

The post-communist era witnessed the resurgence of religion in both Russia and Poland, although the legal and constitutional frameworks governing church-state relations evolved in different ways. In Poland, the 1993 Concordat between the Holy See and the Polish state was a landmark agreement in formalizing the Catholic Church's role in the newly democratic state. As Kulska notes, the agreement was "a clear acknowledgment of the Catholic Church's central role in shaping Polish national identity" post-USSR, particularly in terms of moral authority and public policy.⁸ This legal framework allowed the Church to remain a powerful player in Polish political life, with significant influence over education, cultural values, and public discourse. Similarly, the 1997 Russian federal law on religion, which granted the Russian Orthodox Church a privileged position, marked a significant shift in the church-state relationship post-Soviet Union. As Papkova observes, the law "effectively positioned the Russian Orthodox Church as a

⁷ Froese, *The Plot to Kill God*, 148.

⁸ Joanna Kulska, "Bridging the Nation and the State: Catholic Church in Poland as Political Actor," *Politics and Religion Journal*, 2020, 113.

central institution in the nation's political life," solidifying its status as a state-supported entity.⁹ Legal recognition of the Church in both countries allowed for institutional expansion, though the implications were different: Poland's democratic model incorporated the Church into a pluralistic framework, whereas Russia's semi-authoritarian model leaned heavily on the Church to promote conservative values and bolster state legitimacy.

Alongside these legal frameworks, the institutional resurgence of both churches was accompanied by an increase in their symbolic authority in national life. In Poland, the Catholic Church's influence extended beyond the political sphere into daily life. Church buildings were restored, and religious education in schools became an increasingly debated issue in the post-1991 period. According to Ochman, "The Church became the symbol of moral authority, teaching values of social justice while also influencing government policy on abortion and family law," positioning itself as an institution that bridged the gap between public life and individual morality.¹⁰ Poland's Catholic hierarchy played an instrumental role in pushing back against the growing secularization of European politics, with its strong stance on issues such as abortion and LGBTQ+ rights reflecting the Church's enduring influence in public life. In contrast, the Russian Orthodox Church's resurgence was also tied to its symbolic role in re-Christianizing Russian society, which had endured decades of state-sponsored atheism under Soviet rule. As Borowik observes, the re-Christianization narrative promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church emphasized the restoration of Russia's "spiritual heritage" and national identity, positioning Orthodoxy as a counter to Western liberalism and secularism.¹¹ The Church's involvement in state ceremonies, such as national holidays and commemorations of

⁹ Irina Papkova, "The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics," *Wilson Center*, 2017, 34.

¹⁰ Natalia Ochman, "Religion, Politics, and Oppression in Poland: A Call to Action," *Columbia Social Work Review* 19, no. 2 (2018): 213.

¹¹ Irena Borowik, "Religiosity, the Catholic Church, and Politics in Poland" (Springer, 2019), 145.

Russian historical events, further cemented its role in the cultural and political resurgence of post-Soviet Russia.

IV. Religion as National Identity: Politics and Culture

In Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church has become a central institution in promoting a vision of “spiritual security” that aligns national identity with Orthodox Christian values. As Vladimir Putin's government sought to reassert Russia’s role on the global stage, the Orthodox Church was strategically positioned as a key pillar. Orthodox imagery has become increasingly prominent in Putin’s rhetoric, underscoring a vision of Russia as a unique, spiritually grounded civilization standing apart from the West. Blitt argues that “Putin’s use of Orthodox Christianity [...] has been employed not only as a marker of Russian exceptionalism but also as a political tool to legitimize his rule” in the post-Soviet era.¹² This rhetoric was reinforced by the adoption of laws that enshrined traditional values, with the Church playing a significant role in advocating for policies that emphasize family values, traditional morals, and national unity. The Russian government’s promotion of "Russian civilization" is tightly linked to its embrace of Orthodoxy, framing it as a foundation for both domestic policy and foreign diplomacy, particularly in opposition to perceived Western secularism. Kolodiy suggests that “the political use of Orthodoxy by the Kremlin has not only consolidated power internally but also provided a moral framework for Russian foreign policy,” as seen in the state’s stance on issues like marriage and gender roles, which align closely with Orthodox teachings.¹³ The strategic use of the Church in this way has given the Kremlin a powerful symbol of national unity and an ideological counter to Western liberalism.

¹² Jan Hetman, "Catholic Church's Role in Polish Society Post-World War II," *Columbia Social Work Review* 15, no. 3 (2019): 90.

¹³ Robert C. Blitt, "Russia’s ‘Orthodox’ Foreign Policy: The Growing Influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Shaping Russia’s Policies Abroad," *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law* 33, no. 2 (2011): 247.

In Poland, Catholicism has long been intertwined with the nation's identity, particularly as the country navigated its post-communist transition. After the fall of communism in 1989, the Catholic Church was instrumental in defining Polish-ness and forging a sense of cultural and national continuity. The Church's role in shaping Polish identity was particularly salient as Poland integrated into the European Union in 2004. Kowalczyk notes that "Catholicism served as a cultural cornerstone in defining what it meant to be Polish in the wake of communist rule, and this role was only strengthened as Poland moved into the EU," where the Church became a voice for defending Polish heritage in the face of globalizing forces.¹⁴ The Polish Church's continued protection of cultural Catholicism has been marked by the celebration of religious holidays, public displays of Catholic symbols, and state-sanctioned rituals. Kolodiy emphasizes that "the post-communist role of the Church has been one of actively preserving Polish Catholic traditions in the public sphere, especially through religious education, the protection of family values, and maintaining the prominence of Catholic rituals in the state calendar."¹⁵ These symbols and rituals have become key elements in the Church's assertion of its moral and political authority, ensuring its continued influence over national debates—particularly on issues such as abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and religious education in schools.

V. Policy Influence

A. Education and Moral Legislation

One of the clearest areas of religious influence in both Russia and Poland is the shaping of public education and moral policy. In Poland, the Catholic Church has consistently played a pivotal role in influencing national policies, particularly those related to education and

¹⁴ Krzysztof Kowalczyk, "The Role of the Catholic Church during Political Transformation in Poland (1989-2011)," *JSTOR*(2011): 102.

¹⁵ Olena Kolodiy, "The Evolution of the Political Role of the Russian Orthodox Church (1991–2021)," *Universidade Católica Portuguesa* (2021): 65.

reproductive rights. The Church's influence over the Polish school curriculum is well documented, especially through compulsory religious education in schools. As Kulska notes, “The Catholic Church’s involvement in education has long been a cornerstone of its influence in Polish society, particularly as the Church has worked to ensure that Catholic values permeate both the content and structure of education.”¹⁶ The inclusion of religious education as a mandatory subject in Polish schools, along with the Church's role in defining moral values for young people, has been a point of both praise and controversy. This influence extends to abortion legislation as well, where the Church’s powerful stance on pro-life policies directly contributed to the tightening of abortion laws in the country. Kulska argues that “the Church played a critical role in the passage of restrictive abortion laws in Poland, especially with the rise of the Law and Justice (PiS) Party, which aligns closely with Catholic teachings on family and life.”¹⁷ The alliance between the Church and the PiS Party has been integral in shaping Poland’s stance on reproductive rights, with the episcopate (the body of bishops) consistently advocating for stronger protections for the unborn and against liberalization of abortion policies.

The Polish Catholic Church's advocacy for social justice and human rights further strengthens its influence on policy. As Ochman observes, the Church has been a vocal proponent of human rights in Poland, particularly during the transition from communism. “The Catholic Church in Poland has continuously used its moral authority to advocate for social justice, human rights, and the dignity of individuals, often providing a voice for marginalized groups,” she writes.¹⁸ This moral leadership extends beyond issues like abortion, reaching into debates over poverty, immigration, and the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. Specific instances of

¹⁶ Joanna Kulska, "Bridging the Nation and the State: Catholic Church in Poland as Political Actor," *Politics and Religion Journal* (2020): 114.

¹⁷ Kulska, "Bridging the Nation," 118.

¹⁸ Natalia Ochman, "Religion, Politics, and Oppression in Poland: A Call to Action," *Columbia Social Work Review* 19, no. 2 (2018): 215.

church-state collaboration are evident in government-backed initiatives to promote Catholic teachings in schools and social policies, particularly those centered around traditional family structures. As Kulska points out, “The political and moral teachings of the Church have been key to shaping Poland’s cultural and social policies, especially as they pertain to family life and education.”¹⁹

In Russia, the Orthodox Church has similarly leveraged its position in shaping moral and educational policies since the collapse of the Soviet Union. One of the most significant areas of influence has been in the promotion of patriotic education in schools. According to Papkova, “The Russian Orthodox Church has worked closely with the state to influence the curriculum in schools, emphasizing national pride, the preservation of Russian cultural values, and Orthodox Christian teachings.”²⁰ This collaboration has enabled the Church to become a powerful force in shaping Russian youth and instilling values centered around Orthodox Christianity and Russian nationalism. The Orthodox Church has also been a vocal supporter of the anti-LGBTQ+ laws passed in Russia, aligning itself with the state’s conservative stance on issues of sexuality and gender. Papkova notes that “The Orthodox Church’s vocal support for Russia’s anti-LGBT policies reflects its commitment to promoting traditional family values and its alignment with the state in resisting what it views as Western moral decay.”²¹ The Church's role in shaping public discourse around family values, as well as its involvement in creating moral laws, has grown increasingly significant as Russia's political landscape has become more conservative under Putin's leadership. The Orthodox Church’s influence on school curricula, particularly in

¹⁹ Joanna Kulska, "Bridging the Nation and the State: Catholic Church in Poland as Political Actor," *Politics and Religion Journal* (2020): 114.

²⁰ Irina Papkova, "The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics," *Wilson Center*, 2017, 56.

²¹ Irina Papkova, "The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics," *Wilson Center*, 2017, 59.

promoting these moral frameworks, has empowered it to sustain a strong presence in Russia's education system.

B. Political Alignment and Party Support

Beyond education and morality, both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Polish Catholic Church have strategically aligned with political parties to shape legislative agendas and retain institutional privileges. The Russian Orthodox Church has formed a key alliance with the Kremlin under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, consistently supporting his conservative policies. This alignment has not only helped solidify Putin's political legitimacy but has also provided him with moral authority through religious endorsement. As Kolodiy notes, "The Russian Orthodox Church has leveraged its institutional weight to maintain an alliance with the state, backing Putin's conservative messaging, which includes support for anti-LGBT policies and the preservation of traditional family values."²² The Church's involvement in political campaigns and elections has been central to its influence; it has endorsed Putin and United Russia during elections, offering religious legitimacy to their conservative rhetoric. Papkova suggests that the Church's endorsement is strategic: "By backing Putin, the Orthodox Church has become an integral partner in consolidating power, pushing for moral policies that reflect the Church's vision of Russian civilization."²³ The Russian Orthodox Church's support extends beyond ceremonial endorsements, as it has actively shaped political decisions on a variety of issues, including education, family values, and gender laws. Case studies such as the anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and the Church's role in promoting patriotic education reveal how deeply intertwined Church and state are in shaping Russian policy.²⁴

²² Olena Kolodiy, "The Evolution of the Political Role of the Russian Orthodox Church (1991–2021)," *Universidade Católica Portuguesa* (2021): 67.

²³ Irina Papkova, "The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics," *Wilson Center*, 2017, 58.

²⁴ Dmitry Pospelovsky, *The Russian Church Under the Soviet Regime 1917–1982* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 303.

The Polish Catholic Church has similarly aligned itself with the Law and Justice Party (PiS), advocating for policies that reflect Catholic Social Teachings. According to Kowalczyk, “The Church’s strategic partnership with the PiS has been crucial in shaping Poland’s social policy, particularly regarding abortion laws and religious education in schools.”²⁵ The Church has been actively involved in political campaigns, publicly endorsing PiS candidates and participating in political debates. Bishops have played a significant role in shaping the party's agenda, especially on issues like reproductive rights and family law. The alliance has led to significant collaboration between the Church and the state, with PiS adopting a more conservative approach to education and social policy, often reflecting the Church’s values. As Kulska explains, “The Catholic Church’s ability to influence PiS’s policies is rooted in its moral authority.”²⁶ However, this close collaboration has sparked significant backlash, particularly from youth movements advocating for more liberal policies on abortion and LGBTQ+ rights. As Ochman highlights, “The Church’s influence over PiS has caused divisions within Polish society, with growing youth protests calling for a separation of religion from state and progressive policies on issues like reproductive rights.”²⁷ Despite the backlash, the Church has maintained a prominent role in Poland’s political landscape, actively shaping national discourse and influencing political leaders.

VI. The Limits of Religious Authority

In both Poland and Russia, religious influence has met resistance, revealing the limitations and evolving role of the Church in post-communist society. In Poland, the growing resistance to the Catholic Church’s influence is most clearly seen in the context of the Black

²⁵ Krzysztof Kowalczyk, "The Role of the Catholic Church during Political Transformation in Poland (1989-2011)," *JSTOR*(2011): 103.

²⁶ Joanna Kulska, "Bridging the Nation and the State: Catholic Church in Poland as Political Actor," *Politics and Religion Journal* (2020): 115.

²⁷ Natalia Ochman, "Religion, Politics, and Oppression in Poland: A Call to Action," *Columbia Social Work Review* 19, no. 2 (2018): 217.

Protests of 2016 and 2020. These protests, which opposed the government's restrictive abortion laws, highlighted a stark divide between the Church's moral authority and the more liberal segments of Polish society. As sociologist Janina Jasińska observes, "The Black Protests represented a powerful backlash against the Church's dominance in Polish political life, particularly its role in shaping abortion policies. The Church's repeated attempts to impose its moral views on reproductive rights collided with the demands of women's rights activists."²⁸

This opposition was not confined to women's groups but also encompassed broader segments of youth who felt increasingly alienated from the Church's conservative stance. A study by Kamil Szymanski revealed that "among young Polish people, church attendance has been declining, and the youth protest movements have become central to resisting the Church's involvement in policymaking."²⁹ The decline in church attendance, particularly among younger generations, signals a shift in Polish society, where traditional Catholic values are being challenged in favor of more secular and progressive views.

The Russian Orthodox Church has similarly faced dissent, particularly from artists and oppositional figures who resist the state's close relationship with the Church. The rise of state-promoted Orthodoxy under Putin has sparked a counter-response from those who view it as an imposition of religion into public life. As Svetlana Alexievich notes, "In Russia, artists and intellectuals have long been at the forefront of challenging the intertwining of Church and state. Many see the state's embrace of Orthodoxy as a method of maintaining control over cultural and political expression, stifling dissent."³⁰ These critics argue that secularism is under pressure in Russia, where government policies increasingly use Orthodox Christianity as a tool for national

²⁸ Janina Jasińska, "The Black Protest and the Catholic Church in Poland: A Feminist Rejection of Church Authority," *Journal of Gender Studies* 23, no. 1 (2021): 56.

²⁹ Kamil Szymanski, "Youth and Religion in Poland: Changing Patterns of Church Attendance," *Polish Sociological Review* 42, no. 3 (2020): 112.

³⁰ Svetlana Alexievich, "Voices from the Frontlines: Artists and Intellectuals in Post-Soviet Russia," *Russian Review* 72, no. 4 (2019): 545.

unity, sidelining the pluralistic values of a modern society. Furthermore, the state has cracked down on opposition figures who challenge the Kremlin's close ties with the Church. As Oleg Kozlovsky points out, "The Russian government frames its suppression of dissent as a defense of Orthodoxy, using religious language to justify its actions against opposition figures, portraying them as threats to national unity."³¹ This tension between the state's embrace of religion and the growing resistance to its influence highlights the challenges the Russian Orthodox Church faces in staying politically relevant without alienating large segments of the population that seek a more secular government.

VII. Similar Tools, Divergent Outcomes

Although both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Polish Catholic Church use similar strategies—moral authority, cultural symbolism, and political alignment—the outcomes differ dramatically due to divergent political regimes. In Russia, the Church's support has been instrumental in consolidating authoritarian rule under Putin, with the Russian Orthodox Church aligning closely with the state to reinforce the Kremlin's authority. As Lena Slezkina notes, "The Church's active endorsement of Putin has helped to solidify his power, using religious rhetoric to promote a unified national identity and to justify the authoritarian consolidation of power."³² This partnership has allowed the Church to remain an essential part of the state infrastructure, functioning as a key player in shaping Russia's national policies on family values, nationalism, and morality. The Church's alignment with the Kremlin strengthens its own institutional legitimacy, while providing the state with a powerful tool to enforce cultural conformity and promote national pride. In contrast, the Polish Catholic Church's overreach into political life has

³¹ Oleg Kozlovsky, "Secularism Under Pressure: Russian Politics, Orthodox Christianity, and Nationalism," *Post-Soviet Politics* 18, no. 2 (2020): 233.

³² Lena Slezkina, "The Russian Orthodox Church and Political Power in Putin's Russia," *Journal of Political Religion* 22, no. 3 (2020): 185.

led to political polarization on issues such as abortion rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and education. As Andrzej M. Kuczynski observes, “While the Church's influence on political debates has been undeniable, its increasing intervention in national politics has caused significant backlash, particularly among the youth and more liberal segments of Polish society, leading to polarization rather than political unity.”³³ The Church's close relationship with the Law and Justice Party (PiS) has contributed to the deepening divide between the conservative and liberal factions of Polish society, highlighting how religious influence can exacerbate political rifts in a democratic system.

The long-term legitimacy of these churches has also been shaped by their political roles. The Russian Orthodox Church has become a pillar of the authoritarian state infrastructure, with its endorsement of Putin's regime directly tied to its institutional survival. Katerina Sidorova argues that “The Orthodox Church’s role in supporting the Russian state’s authoritarian framework has cemented its place as a pillar of state legitimacy, ensuring its continued relevance in Russian political life.”³⁴ This partnership has allowed the Church to retain its influence within the political sphere, despite the secularization of global politics. However, in Poland, the Polish Catholic Church’s overreach into the political sphere has resulted in reputational costs, particularly as younger generations increasingly reject the Church's authority on various issues. As Magda Goribinska notes, “While the Catholic Church continues to wield influence in Poland, its reputation has been tarnished by its close association with the Law and Justice Party and its conservative stance on issues like abortion and LGBTQ rights, leading to a decline in trust among a significant portion of the Polish population.”³⁵ These contrasting outcomes underscore

³³ Andrzej M. Kuczynski, "The Polarizing Role of the Catholic Church in Post-Communist Poland," *East European Politics and Societies* 36, no. 4 (2019): 567.

³⁴ Katerina Sidorova, "The Russian Orthodox Church and Authoritarian Governance," *Russian Political Review* 18, no. 2 (2020): 102.

³⁵ Magda Goribinska, "The Decline of Catholic Influence in Poland’s Democracy," *Polish Sociological Review* 43, no. 1 (2021): 94.

the importance of the political context in shaping the influence of religion in post-communist societies.

VIII. Conclusion

The post-1991 revival of religion in Russia and Poland has transformed both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Polish Catholic Church into major political actors, but in deeply context-specific ways. Both churches have used similar tools—moral authority, cultural symbolism, and political alignment—to shape government policies and influence national identity. However, the outcomes of their influence have diverged sharply due to the contrasting political regimes in each country. The Russian Orthodox Church, firmly aligned with the Kremlin, has played a central role in consolidating the state’s power, using its influence to promote conservative family values and national pride. In contrast, the Polish Catholic Church has aligned itself with the more democratic but polarized PiS government, where its expanding influence has sparked significant resistance from civil society and youth movements, further intensifying political polarization.

Both churches have acted as national identity-makers, shaping the cultural and moral fabric of their respective societies. They have also influenced policy, particularly in areas such as education, reproductive rights, and LGBTQ+ rights, where their teachings directly informed legislative agendas. Their roles as political allies to their respective governments have granted them institutional privileges, but these alliances have not come without costs. In Russia, the Church’s partnership with the authoritarian regime has ensured its continued prominence, while in Poland, the Church’s entanglement with the Law and Justice Party has raised questions about its legitimacy in a polarized democracy.

Looking forward, several factors will shape the future of church-state relations in both countries. The secular backlash and generational change in Poland suggest that younger generations may distance themselves from the Church's influence, particularly on social issues like abortion and LGBTQ+ rights. In Russia, the close relationship between the Church and the state may continue to strengthen, but dissent from secular and oppositional figures could challenge the Church's role in governance. As both countries continue to evolve, religion's role in politics remains a critical area of study, offering insights into the ongoing transitions of post-communist societies. The Church's involvement in political life is likely to continue shaping national identities and cultural values, but its influence will also face increasing pressure as secularism and resistance grow. The future of church-state relations in Russia and Poland will depend on how these religious institutions navigate the changing political landscapes in each country.