BACKGROUND

Few scholars have discussed the use of religion as a Russian political tool in Serbia. Therefore, I decided to explore how Russia is wielding Orthodoxy to exert its influence, and thus hypothesize that religion, as a political tool, will similarly be employed in other Orthodox states in the region.

Because of the historical tensions between Russia and the West, Russia has put its efforts into creating and extending a buffer zone to secure itself. Russia initially took interest in Ukraine, and its efforts looked promising, but the schism between the Ukrainian and Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) highlight where Russia’s foreign policy agenda was lacking – its attention on religion. Learning from Ukraine, Russia is using Orthodoxy in Serbia to widen the gap between mutual relationships among Western nations and Serbia.

My project analyzed how Russia has transformed the role of Orthodoxy in its foreign policy through a religious and political lens, taking into consideration that there is an overlap between the two.

FINDINGS

In analyzing the religious, political, and social spheres of the Serbia-Russia relationship, I found that Russia has used the Church to increase Putin’s favorability in Serbia and thus widen the division between Serbia and the West.

Russia has capitalized on its shared religious history with Serbia, a bond unique to the Eastern experience, using the Orthodox church as its prop. With this sense of shared religious values, Serbia no longer wavers between joining Western organizations or favoring Russia. The ROC and Russia’s politicians offer Serbia the support in its conflict with Kosovo that the West has not provided. While Serbia sees this as a gain in its own affairs, Russia is the true winner. Russia fears only for itself, and through its efforts in Serbia, it has increased its own security. Serbia has no plan to sign any agreements with NATO or the EU, meaning that Russia has won over another state in its buffer zone.

ORTHODOXY & ENDURANCE

How has Russia strengthened its religious ties for its own political purposes? Unlike ideology, religion endures.

The ROC has, in the past, taken on a political role, but given the outcome in Ukraine, Russia is now approaching political coercion from a religious angle. Serbian Orthodoxy, specifically, endures because of how intertwined religion and nationalism are in Serbia. As a result, we see that Russia is reconnecting with Serbia on a religious level by appealing to their shared spiritual connection at all levels of the Church – from the heads of church, to the congregations. Additionally, the two churches have connected on the basis of shared experiences: Ukraine is to Russia as Kosovo is to Serbia.

I explored how both the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) as well as lay Serbs view Russian Orthodoxy and Russia’s role in worldwide Orthodoxy. I found that more Serbs and especially the SOC are favoring the causes of the ROC, which thus extend to supporting Russia’s political agenda.

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RELEVANCE THROUGH A POLITICAL LENS

How have Putin and Russia’s political relationship with Serbia influenced the behavior and attitudes of Serbs towards Putin and Russian influence as a whole?

Putin has embraced becoming a symbol of Orthodoxy and thus has developed a Serbian following. Serbs see religious identity and nationality intertwined, with a kinship between Putin and Orthodox Serbs; I examined how Russia capitalizes on this relationship. As a result of this religious favoring, Russia has coaxed Serbian public opinion away from Western ideas and organizations – such as the EU and NATO – because they are perceived as threats to Orthodoxy and a sour reminder of the political glory Orthodoxy once held. My research paid close attention to role of international organizations and how Russian leadership has stepped up to defend Serbia in the case of Kosovo-Serbia, since the West has chosen to side with Kosovo. This caused a political indebtedness to Russia, and illustrates an act of Russian political exertion over the state.

COUNTERVAILING POSITIONS

What are the countervailing beliefs to my hypothesis?

Protests against President Vucic of Serbia call for free elections and free press. One might argue that this will weaken Russian influence in the nation, given that changes in Serbian leadership has led to varying opinions on the West. However, by channeling its influence through religious values, Russian influence bypasses leadership and appeals straight to the public. Whether or not the leader of the Serbian state favors Putin, the SOC has persevered through various leaders, given that Serbia has held grudgingly onto the past and their enemies, a leader who does not prioritize the SOC will not be looked upon favorably.

IMPLICATIONS

Russian influence in Serbia makes it very likely that the same technique will be employed within other Orthodox states. Consequently, the West needs to be aware of this when formulating its own political agenda if Russia continues to use religion to its political advantage. Armenia, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, and Romania are also Orthodox-majority nations; Russia’s success in Serbia might foreshadow its approach with these nations. In Russia’s attempt to deteriorate the liberal world order and secure itself, the political relations that are formed from shared religious beliefs – as seen in the case between Russia and Serbia – will become increasingly common, especially in the Balkan region.