For God, Tsar and Fatherland?
The Church's Role in Modern Autocracy*

Ekaterina Travova† (CEBI, University of Copenhagen‡)

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Abstract

Using newly collected data on the contemporary density of Orthodox organization in Post-Soviet Russia and the historical spatial distribution of Orthodox monasteries before the Russian Revolution, I show that a denser Church presence is associated with a higher approval rating for the current president and a larger share of votes cast for the government candidate (ruling party) in elections. Today, the Church is less able to attract new churchgoers. However, it does affect the political preferences of those who, regardless of their faith in God, self-identify as Orthodox. The potential channel is the growing media presence of the Church.

JEL Classification: D83, N33, N34, P16, Z12, Z13

Keywords: Orthodoxy, Church, Approval, Election, National Identity, Media

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†E-mail: katia.travova@gmail.com. Address: Øster Farimagsgade 5, 1014 Copenhagen, Denmark.

‡Center for Economic Behavior and Inequality (CEBI), Department of Economics, University of Copenhagen. The activities at CEBI are financed by the Danish National Research Foundation, Grant DNRF134 (Rasmussen).

1 Introduction

How do politicians, especially autocrats, manage to gain wide public support and remain in power? Studies exploring this question have documented the political effects of various tools utilized by politicians to achieve this goal: reactivation of collective memories (Ochsner and Roesel 2024; Belmonte and Rochlitz 2019), violence and repression (Arce 2003), economic reforms and advertisement of economic achievements (Buendía 1996; Guriev and Treisman 2020), and censorship and propaganda (Durante and Knight 2012; Adena et al. 2015; Chen and Yang 2019). Religion and religious institutions represent another, yet relatively understudied, channel of political legitimation and mobilization (Andersen and Jensen 2019; Bazzi, Koehler-Derrick, and Marx 2020; Bentzen and Gokmen 2023)[1]. In the modern world characterized by declining religiosity (Inglehart 2020), an important question is whether churches, as organizationally dense and symbolically powerful institutions, continue to shape political preferences and attitudes.

This paper examines the political effects of a religious institution's organizational footprint as a potential channel for persuasion. It investigates whether the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), by re-establishing a dense network of physical organizations across post-Soviet Russia, has cultivated political support for the government. I identify the causal effect of this expanding institutional presence, measured by the regional density of Orthodox churches, monasteries, and affiliated entities, on presidential approval, election results, and protest activity.

The results suggest that a denser Church presence increases local presidential approval. The magnitude of the effect is substantial: in an average region, the expansion of the ROC over the past two decades led to an increase in presidential

[1] Andersen and Jensen (2019) show that after the extensive reforms developed and approved by the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (1962–1965), the Catholic Church played an important political role in steering authoritarian countries toward democracy. Bazzi, Koehler-Derrick, and Marx (2020) study the effect of the major Islamic institution waqf, inalienable charitable trusts in Islamic law, on religious politics in Indonesia. They find that citizens in regions exhibiting more prevalent waqf land demand a greater role for Islam in public affairs. Bentzen and Gokmen (2023) use data on 1,265 premodern societies and 176 countries and find that countries that relied more on divine legitimization are more autocratic today and their populations tend to be more religious.

approval by about 10 percentage points. I also document a positive effect on the share of votes for the government candidate (ruling party) in presidential and parliamentary elections. At the same time, I do not find evidence of any impact of the Church on trust in the president, on the political popularity of other branches and levels of government (regional governor, Government, and Duma), or on protest activity.

The Russian context provides an opportunity to exploit a natural experiment to identify causal relationships[2]. Combining newly collected data on the density of Orthodox religious organizations in post-Soviet Russia with the historical spatial distribution of Orthodox monasteries before the Russian Revolution, I construct an instrument. The instrument is based on a contemporary country-wide shock to the ROC network, measured by the yearly average density of Orthodox organizations outside each region. For each region, this shock is weighted by the historical regional density of monks and nuns housed in Orthodox monasteries in 1907.

The logic of this weighting rests on an infrastructural mechanism of persistence. The density of monks and nuns serves as a proxy for the scale and regional significance of a monastery's historical footprint, encompassing both its physical assets (land, churches) and its symbolic value as a spiritual and cultural landmark. Following the Soviet collapse, locations with this more substantial pre-existing legacy presented lower-cost, symbolically powerful focal points for the Church's revival, as they were more likely to retain durable ruins and a resonant identity that facilitated rebuilding. Therefore, this measure captures regional variation in the potential for institutional rebuilding after 1991. These historically prominent monastic centers thus defined the predisposition of each Russian region to the ROC's revival, providing a novel measure of historical exposure to the Church.

An obvious concern with my instrument is that the pre-revolutionary monastic distribution might correlate with contemporary regional characteristics and political preferences. However, I find no evidence of such correlations. This is likely due to

[2]See Zhuravskaya, Guriev, and Markevich (2024) for an overview of studies on the Russian economic history of the 19th and 20th centuries.

the following factors. First, many monasteries were established in peripheral areas during medieval times, reflecting the Orthodox tradition of ascetic retreat rather than economic or demographic considerations. Second, the Russian Revolution and the subsequent Soviet era reshaped Russia by redrawing regional borders, driving large-scale population movements, and fostering economic and cultural uniformity. Together, these factors substantially weakened any direct historical link between monastery and present-day development. Nevertheless, in the main specification I control for a range of individual demographics and regional development statistics.

The potential mechanisms behind the observed effects can be understood by integrating theories of social and religious influence. Murphy and Shleifer (2004) model the formation of networks organized around core beliefs that can be "rented out" to politicians in exchange for resources. This framework, however, assumes influence flows through within-network interactions. The Russian context presents a puzzle: the proportion of people identifying as Orthodox increased from around 30% in the early 1990s to nearly 80% in recent years, yet the share of those professing belief in God has never exceeded 40%, and only a small portion of the population regularly attends church (Zorkaya, Gudkov, and Mihaleva 2021).

This suggests the state is not leveraging the Church network for its internal social sanctioning power, but for its external, symbolic, and broadcast capacity. The state leverages the Church's organizational infrastructure as a platform to disseminate an ideology that fuses Orthodoxy with national identity, a link strongly supported by survey data, which shows that a majority of respondents (69% in 2012 (Gudkov 2012); 57% in 2017 (Pew Research Center 2017a)) consistently report that being Orthodox is an important part of being "truly Russian". This aligns with the channels of religious influence identified by McClendon and Beatty Riedl (2021), specifically clerical authority and organizational mobilization, but directed outward. Church leaders (clerical authority) endorse the state, and their message is amplified through the Church's media presence and pervasive physical network (organizational mobilization), thereby influencing political preferences among the large, culturally

Orthodox population. This interpretation provides a suggestive resolution to the puzzle of low attendance, proposing that the mechanism operates not by converting individuals or enforcing norms within churches, but by broadcasting a potent political identity to the public at large; further research is needed to test this proposed channel more directly.

This paper contributes to the rapidly growing literature on the role of religion and religious institutions in politics. Scholars have documented mixed effects of religion on labor supply (Berman 2000; Esteban, Levy, and Mayoral 2019), education (Becker and Woessmann 2009), health (Fletcher and Kumar 2014), pro-social behavior (Norenzayan 2013; Bottan and Perez-Truglia 2015), innovation (Bénabou, Ticchi, and Vindigni 2015), economic growth (Campante and Yanagizawa-Drott 2015; Bai and Kung 2015), crime (Moreno-Medina 2021), and other domains. Yet, as Iyer (2016) notes[3], systematic evidence on the relationship between religion and political outcomes remains scarce. Studies do show that church attendance and religious identification affect voter turnout (Jones-Correa and Leal 2001; Gerber, Gruber, and Hungerman 2016; Smith 2017), but the direction of political influence varies by denomination and context: Gerber, Gruber, and Hungerman (2016) find that repealing U.S. blue laws reduced turnout and Democratic vote share, especially among Catholics; Hong and Paik (2021) show that Protestants in South Korea strongly oppose the North Korean regime and thus support conservative parties; Spenkuch and Tillmann (2018) find that Catholics in Weimar Germany were less likely to vote for the NSDAP than Protestants.

In contrast to these contexts, this paper examines how a Church as an institution shapes political preferences when most of the population is not religious and does not regularly attend services. While much of the literature has focused on Catholicism, Protestantism, or Islam in the U.S., Western Europe, and developing countries, large parts of the world remain underexplored. As Becker, Rubin, and Woessmann (2021) emphasize, "we know relatively little about the role of the Orthodox Christian

[3]See also Aldashev and Platteau (2014).

Church in the economic history of Eastern Europe" (Becker, Rubin, and Woessmann 2021, p. 629). This paper contributes to that gap, while also speaking more generally to the conditions under which religious institutions can reinforce regime support under autocracy.

Finally, the paper connects to the broader literature on social networks and political communication. Social networks have been shown to influence educational attainment (Calvó-Armengol, Patacchini, and Zenou 2009), health-care utilization (Deri 2005), investment and technology adoption (Li 2014; Bandiera and Rasul 2006), voting behavior (Cohen and Malloy 2014), and political party entry (Satyanath, Voigtländer, and Voth 2017). The paper also links to a large literature on the political effects of the media (for an overview of studies on traditional media, such as radio, newspapers, and TV, see DellaVigna and La Ferrara (2015); for an overview of studies on the Internet and social media, see Zhuravskaya, Petrova, and Enikolopov (2020)).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides historical background. Section 3 describes the data. Section 4 sets out the empirical strategy. Section 5 presents the results, and Section 6 concludes.

2 Historical Background

2.1 The Russian Orthodox Church and the State

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) emerged in the tenth century after the Christianization of Kievan Rus', the first forerunner of the modern Russian state. In 988, Rus' Prince Vladimir baptized himself and ordered his people to be converted to Orthodox Christianity. Until 1448, the Russian Church operated under the authority of the Constantinople Patriarch and was headed by the Metropolitans of Kiev who resided in Moscow after 1328. In 1448, Russian bishops elected the Metropolitan without recourse to Constantinople, and, finally, in 1589, the Metropolitanate of Moscow was promoted to the Patriarchate of Moscow (Marsh 2013). This was

an important milestone in the history of the ROC: Russia became home to the only Patriarchate whose ruler was Orthodox, and was thought of as the capital of the "Orthodox world". Though the Russian Church was no longer dependent upon Constantinople, it continued the Byzantine tradition of authorizing the state's participation in the Church's administrative affairs.

In 1721, the Church was put under the direct control of the state when Tsar Peter I (the Great) dissolved the Patriarchate of Moscow and replaced it with the Holy Governing Synod (Marsh 2013). Nevertheless, the religion and Church were still crucial components of society, especially, when there was a need for mobilization. In 1812, the slogan "For God *(or Faith)*, Tsar, and Fatherland" was created and used to bring people together to protect Russia from the French invasion. In 1833, this slogan was reformulated by the minister of education, Uvarov, as "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality", and then became a dominant ideological doctrine of Tsar Nicholas I (Gaida 2013). In the twenty first century, the triad was revived under Vladimir Putin's leadership, particularly after his return to the presidency in 2012 and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, as part of a broader conservative-nationalist agenda. This modern iteration framed Orthodoxy as a moral cornerstone, Autocracy as centralized authority (power verticals), and Nationality as ethnic-cultural exceptionalism opposed to Western liberalism (Cannady and Kubicek 2014).

In 1917, after the collapse of the Tsarist regime, the Patriarchate of Moscow and the pre-Petrine independent governance of the Church was re-established. However, the new Soviet government soon declared the separation of state and Church. It nationalized all Church lands, brutally repressed clerics, and destroyed churches or converted them to secular use (Marsh 2013). The Church was severely suppressed because it was considered to be a powerful ideological and political opponent, the last bastion of Tsarism.

The revival of the ROC began in the late 1980s and intensified after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Under the 1990's law on "Freedom of conscience and religious belief", the ROC was allowed to resume its activities as before the Soviet era, but now

it had to compete with other religious institutions. However, in 1997 after a personal meeting with Patriarch Aleksei II, president Yeltsin passed a law granting the ROC exclusive legal and financial privileges. The law made the ROC the only religious organization eligible for state funding to restore and maintain historical and cultural monuments. Beyond these material benefits, the legislation symbolically positioned Orthodox Christianity as central to Russia's national memory and heritage and made the Church a key institutional actor in cultural preservation (Marsh 2013). Since then, during the presidencies of Putin and Medvedev, the ROC has consistently received significant support from the state in the form of direct financial transfers and fiscal subsidies, as well as via laws, policies, and political privileges (Rosenthal 2019). This facilitated the relatively quick revival of the Russian Orthodox Church after the fall of the Soviet Union. In 1988, the ROC had 6,893 parishes[4] across the whole Soviet Union (Metropolitan Kirill 2009)[5] but by 2019 this number had grown to 38,649 (Patriarchia.ru 2019). This is still fewer than half of the pre-Revolution number of almost 78,000 (Patriarchia.ru 2005).

2.2 Monasticism in Russia

Monasticism arrived in Russia together with the Christianization of Kievan Rus' in the tenth century. During the Turco-Mongol rule (1237-1480), most Orthodox monasteries were destroyed, as they were primarily located in or near cities, which bore the brunt of the destruction of this period. The waning of monastic tradition was also influenced by a spiritual decline within Russian society, which was suffering from economic and political decline (Sinicyna 2002).

A revival of monasticism occurred around the end of the fourteenth century and was associated with the personality of Sergiy Radonezhsky, a spiritual leader and monastic reformer who placed a strong emphasis on asceticism. Large numbers of monasteries were founded in distant and obscure locations all across medieval Russia.

[4]According to the ROC, a parish is a community of Orthodox Christians, consisting of clergy and laity, united around the parish church.

[5]Today, Kirill is Patriarch.

Later, these small settlements expanded into larger centers, making monasticism one of the bases of social and economic life (Sinicyna 2002).

In 1917, after the Revolution, monasteries were among the first religious institutions abolished. In 1907, the ROC had 1,105[6] monasteries (Denisov 1908), but by the 1930s almost all of them had been dissolved. Nowadays, the Church has almost restored its pre-Revolution number of monasteries: at the beginning of 2019, there were 972 monasteries (Patriarchia.ru 2019), with 536 currently functioning and located in Russia. Around 60% of these monasteries have been built before the Revolution and restored after the fall of the Soviet Union (Hramy Rossii nd).

3 Data

In this section, I describe my main variables and the data I use in their construction. The summary statistics and sample periods are presented in Appendix B, Table B1.

3.1 Political Popularity

Individual-level information on approval, trust, electoral preferences, and core demographics is taken from the nationally representative opinion poll "Courier"[7], conducted by the Levada Center[8]. The main advantage of this survey is that it includes an identifier for regions[9], which is necessary for merging the individual-level data with the density of religious organizations measured at the regional level.

I collect data for the 1997-2019 period. This period was chosen for several reasons: 1997 is the first year for which data on religious organizations became

[6]This number also includes 4 monasteries in China and 3 monasteries in the US.

[7]I acknowledge that the Levada "Courier" survey is designed to be nationally representative and that its data may not perfectly capture regional public opinion. However, if the sampling error is random, it does not bias the estimates of the regional-level treatment effects — it primarily affects statistical precision. To mitigate this issue further, I include a comprehensive set of individual and regional controls in all models based on these data, as well as region and year fixed effects.

[8]While two other major polling agencies in Russia, FOM and VTsIOM, are known to have close ties with the Kremlin, the Levada Center is widely seen as independent and has a strong reputation for professionalism (Treisman 2014), which might explain why it has come under pressure by the Putin administration and has been listed as foreign agent in 2016.

[9]Regions are the smallest administrative units for which "Courier" has identifiers.

systematically available following the 1997 Federal Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations"; the period spans multiple presidencies (Yeltsin 1997-2000, Putin 2000-2008, Medvedev 2008-2012, and Putin 2012-2019), allowing for comparisons across different leaders; and the data collection ends in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, events that significantly altered survey response patterns[10]. For some measures of political popularity, these data are only available with gaps (Appendix B, Table B1).

In 1997-2019, the number of Russian regions varied between 83 and 89[11]. The survey was not conducted in areas of military conflict (Chechen Republic, the Republics of Ingushetia, Dagestan and North Ossetia) as well as in the hard-to-reach sparsely populated areas of the Far North (Nenets Autonomous Okrug, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, Taimyr Autonomous District, Evenki Autonomous Okrug, Kamchatka, Chukotka, and Sakhalin oblast). Only about 5% of the adult population of Russia lives in the excluded areas. I also exclude two regions, the Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol, which were added to Russian regions after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. For all years in the 1997-2019 period, I retrospectively convert the regions' codes to those used in the 2019 administrative division of Russia.

Using "Courier" opinion poll, I construct several measures of political popularity. First, individual approval of the current president is captured by a dummy taking the value of 1 if a respondent answers "approve" to the following question: "In general, do you approve or disapprove of the actions of the president of Russia?" Approval ratings for the regional governor, Government, and Duma are determined in the same fashion. Second, trust in the president is measured by the question:

[10]For broader discussions of conducting surveys and using polling data in the Russian autocratic context, see (Frye et al. 2017; Rosenfeld 2023; La Lova 2023; Reisinger, Zaloznaya, and Woo 2023). The literature suggests that Russian survey data during the pre-invasion period is generally reliable, with major methodological concerns about response rates and preference falsification emerging primarily after the February 2022 invasion and associated intensification of repression.

[11]From 1993, the Russian Federation comprised 89 regions. In 2005-2008, several mergers took place that decreased the number of regions to 83. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the number of regions increased to 85.

"Name the 5-6 politicians you trust the most."[12] Based on this question, I construct a dummy equal to 1 if the current president is named. Third, electoral preferences for the government candidate are represented by a dummy equal to 1 if the respondent chooses this candidate in answer to the question: "If the presidential election were held this Sunday, which candidate would you be most likely to vote for?" Electoral preferences for the ruling party are determined in the same way.

I also construct several measures of the political popularity of Vladimir Putin. I create a dummy for trust equal to 1 if the respondent names Putin as a politician s/he trusts, and a dummy for readiness to vote for Putin equal to 1 if the respondent chooses Putin from the list of politicians even if he does not (could not) run for office.

Data on actual election results are taken from the website of the Central Election Commission. They are presented in terms of the regional shares of votes for communist, liberal democratic, and government candidates in presidential elections (in 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2018) and for communist, liberal democratic, and ruling parties in parliamentary elections (in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2016). To validate my instrument, I also collect data on the first Russian presidential election held in 1991 (Kireyev 2009) and on the 1917 Constituent Assembly election, the only universal election in the Russian Empire held at the beginning of the twentieth century before the establishment of the Soviet Union (Protasov 2014).

Finally, I use data on protests in Russia in 2007-2016 collected by Lankina (2018). This dataset is based on the reports about street protest events posted on the opposition website namarsh.ru. I aggregate the data by region and year and construct the following proxies for "active" anti-popularity of the current authority and its decisions: the maximum number of protesters per 1,000 population registered during the year, the total number of protests, and the numbers of protests by type - political, economic, and civic. The last group includes events that were categorized as social, cultural, legal, or environmental[13].

[12] In contrast to other questions, the question on trust is open-ended, which could affect the results. I discuss this in more detail in Section 5.

[13] More detail on the dataset is in Lankina (2015).

3.2 Religious Organizations

According to a Russian law from 1997, any grouping of people formed for the purpose of joint worship and propagation of faith is called a religious organization and should be registered as a non-profit organization in the Unified State Register of Legal Entities. To be registered, a group must have at least 10 members, a physical address, and a name that includes its denomination. In this paper, data on religious organizations are collected from the Spark database, which contains rich information on all for-profit and non-profit organizations registered in Russia. It provides the name, address, and dates of establishment and dissolution of each religious organization, which allows me to calculate the current number of organizations by denomination, year, and region.

During the 1997-2019 period, around 20,000 Orthodox religious organizations were registered in the Spark. 92% of them are entered into the database as "church parish", "parish" or "church"; 2% as "community"; 3% as "monastery"; and 3% as various organizations administrated by the ROC, such as, for example, a shelter, school, publishing house, etc.

To construct my measure of the Church presence, I divide the annual number of Orthodox organizations in a region by the regional population and obtain the regional density of these organizations. In the remainder of the paper, I refer to this measure simply as "Orthodox density". The distribution of Orthodox organizations (per 1,000 population) across Russian regions in 2019, the final year of the baseline sample, is shown on the map in Figure A1, Appendix A.

3.3 Historical Monastery Data

To construct the historical instrumental variable, I manually collect novel data on the number of monks and nuns in each Russian region prior to the Russian Revolution. The primary source is the handbook "The Orthodox Monasteries of the Russian

Empire" (in Russian) compiled by Denisov (1908)[14]. Because the administrative divisions of the Russian Empire differ from those of contemporary Russia, I assign each monastery to the borders of present-day regions. To do this, I use a range of online resources[15] to determine the exact location of monasteries and map them onto current regional boundaries. This approach ensures that my data on monks and nuns can be consistently merged with contemporary survey data from the Levada Center.

I use the regional numbers of monks and nuns (rather than monastery counts) as it better captures the scale of religious activity and human capital in each region. Larger monasteries with more clergy likely had greater societal influence and institutional capacity, making their locations more susceptible to post-Soviet religious revival. This measure naturally weights regions by their historical religious importance rather than treating all monasteries equally. I normalize the number of monks and nuns by the 1997 regional population rather than the historical population for two reasons. First, it accounts for demographic changes during the Soviet period that radically altered regional population distributions. Second, it ensures that the measure reflects the potential exposure of the contemporary population to historical religious infrastructure. The variation in monastic density across contemporary Russian regions is shown on the map in Figure A2, Appendix A.

According to Denisov (1908), on December 1, 1907, there were 1,098 monasteries and 90,403 monks and nuns in the Russian Empire. 829 monasteries were located within contemporary Russian borders. This number includes 475 men's monasteries and 354 women's monasteries. Meanwhile, there were considerably fewer monks than nuns: 16,482 monks to 57,892 nuns.

[14] Although a more widely known handbook was compiled by Zverinskij (1890), I rely on Denisov (1908) because it provides the detailed counts of monks and nuns in each monastery required for my analysis. Denisov frequently cites and builds upon Zverinskij's foundational work, and the two sources appear broadly consistent in their basic records.

[15] For example, I use the website http://temples.ru, which documents Orthodox churches for the project "Churches of Russia." I also consult Wikipedia, Google, and Yandex maps.

3.4 Media

To construct the media measure, I explore the number of mentions of traditional family values[16] and the ROC in all Russian media outlets covered by Integrum, a comprehensive media database[17]. These outlets include federal and regional television channels, radio stations, newspapers, and magazines with an internet presence, along with various other online sources. A publication is considered to contain information about traditional values and the Orthodox Church if it includes any two phrases from the following sets: "traditional values", "traditional family values", "family values" and "Orthodox Church", "Russian Orthodox Church", "ROC" (Russian Orthodox Church).

For each region and year, I collect both the total number of relevant publications and the subset from regional sources. Following Belmonte and Rochlitz (2019), I adjust these counts by dividing them by the total number of weather reports published in all outlets that year. This helps account for differences in media output across regions and time while preserving the relative prominence of traditional values and ROC-related content.

3.5 Other Data

All contemporary regional-level data including population size, GDP per capita, unemployment rate, the urban population share, the number of NGOs and 1990 regional characteristics come from the Federal State Statistic Service (Rosstat). This source also provides information on the regional shares of the population with access to analog and digital TV, and the number of published newspapers per 1,000 inhabitants. I use these media measures to construct their first principal component to proxy for the average media coverage by region and year.

Additionally, I use data on the socioeconomic characteristics of historical districts (uezd) of the Russian Empire from the 1897 census, as compiled by Lankina

[16] See Subsection 5.3 for more detail.

[17] Integrum is an extensive archive of more than 40,000 Russian media outlets over the past 30 years. Access is available at http://www.integrum.ru.

and Libman (2021). This dataset also includes an approximated share of the lower-middle-class meshchane in Imperial Russia and literacy rates, mapped to contemporary regional administrative divisions. I use these two indicators as proxies for pre-revolutionary social structure and human capital.

4 Empirical Strategy

To examine the link between the density of Orthodox religious organizations and political attitudes, I begin with the simplest specification and gradually add individual-level and then regional-level controls:

$$\begin{aligned} Approval_{ijt}^{IV} = \beta_1 OrthodoxDensity_{jt} + \mu_j + \delta_t + \\ + Ind.Controls_{ijt} + Reg.Controls_{jt} + \epsilon_{ijt}, \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

where $Approval_{ijt}$ is a dummy equal to 1 if respondent i in region j approves of the current president in year t, $Ind.Controls_{ijt}$ is the set of individual-level controls (gender, age, age squared, education, employment status, and indicator for living in a rural area), $Reg.Controls_{jt}$ is the set of regional-level controls (the logarithm of real GDP per capita, unemployment rate, and the urban population share), μ_j and δ_t are region and year fixed effects. The variable of interest is $OrthodoxDensity_{jt}$, the average density of Orthodox religious organizations (the number of organizations per 1,000 inhabitants).

While controls help mitigate potential omitted variable bias, endogeneity concerns may still arise. To establish causal identification, I employ an instrumental variable strategy based on a shift-share design, initially developed by Bartik (1991)). The instrument combines two components:

$$Instrument_{jt} = OrthodoxDensity_{-jt} \cdot HistoricalExposure_j. \tag{2}$$

where $OrthodoxDensity_{-jt}$ is the overall density of Orthodox religious organizations

in the country outside the region j in year t, $HistoricalExposure_j$ is the number of monks and nuns in region j in 1907 divided by the regional population in 1997, the first year of my sample. While this single-share, single-shock design may yield a somewhat weaker first stage compared to multi-shock instruments, it offers greater transparency and avoids potential overfitting from constructing multiple shock measures. In essence, the instrument captures each region's historical religious endowment, scaled by the evolving intensity of the national Orthodox revival, generating both cross-sectional and temporal variation.

The validity of this instrument hinges on the exogeneity of shares, $HistoricalExposure_j$. The key assumption that regions with high vs. low monastic densities would have followed parallel political trajectories in the absence of Orthodox revival (Borusyak, Hull, and Jaravel 2025). As further noted by Borusyak, Hull, and Jaravel (2025), the plausibility of share exogeneity is strengthened by using shares specifically designed to mediate only the shocks to the treatment of interest, rather than a broader set of shocks that could influence the outcome.

To assess the exogeneity assumption, I conduct a historical analysis across two temporal dimensions. First, examining pre-revolutionary patterns, I estimate a series of separate cross-sectional regressions of 1907 monastic density (monks and nuns per 1897 population) on individual district characteristics measured in 1897. The results presented in Table B2 demonstrate that while monastic distribution correlated with certain aspects of social structure, it showed no systematic relationship with economic development indicators after accounting for province fixed effects. The analysis then evaluates the Soviet-era disruption of historical patterns by testing relationships between 1907 monastic density (measured as monks and nuns per 1990 population) and 1990 regional characteristics.[18] Table B3 in Appendix B shows that, after controlling for economic district[19] fixed effects,

[18]This comparison is particularly important given existing research finding mixed yet significant effects of monastic presence and dissolution on economic growth in other contexts (England: Andersen et al. (2017), Heldring, Robinson, and Vollmer (2021); Germany: Cantoni, Dittmar, and Yuchtman (2018)).

[19]In some exercises in the main analysis, I use federal unit fixed effects. However, the division by federal unit was only introduced in 2000. Therefore, in the models in Table B3, Appendix B, I turn

the socio-economic conditions of Russian regions in the final year before the collapse of the Soviet Union were largely independent of the spatial distribution of monks and nuns in the Russian Empire.

Additionally, Table B3 suggests that, at the regional level, historical monastic density no longer correlates with proxies for historical social structure and human capital, such as the share of meshchane and literacy rate[20], when using the new administrative divisions. At the same time, the historical density of monks and nuns remains highly correlated with the contemporary density of Orthodox religious organizations in 1997, the first year after the fall of the Soviet Union for which such data are available.

I also check whether the distribution of monks and nuns could drive political preferences in Russia in the early twentieth century and whether the effect persisted (or was even amplified) through the Soviet era, which would violate the exclusion restriction. As Panel A of Table B4 in Appendix B suggests, there might be a weak positive correlation between the regional density of monks and nuns and the share of votes for Cadets (the party that promoted Western-style constitutional monarchy) in the 1917 Russian Constituent Assembly election. This result becomes insignificant after controlling for geo-historical region fixed effects. In Panel B, I turn to the first presidential election in Russian history, which was held in 1991, half a year before the official dissolution of the Soviet Union. The estimates suggest that the election results are independent of the historical distribution of monks and nuns.

Thus, the analysis suggests a systematic decoupling of religious geography from both pre-revolutionary social structure and Soviet-era socio-economic conditions, which could be explained by two factors. First, many monasteries that existed in 1907 were originally established in peripheral areas during medieval times, reflecting

to the Soviet Union division by economic district. The composition of these economic districts is similar to that of contemporary federal units.

[20]The meshchane were a pre-revolutionary urban estate in Imperial Russia, comprising petty bourgeois townspeople and forming the second-largest social group after peasants. Lankina and Libman (2021) find that the historical presence of meshchane has a lasting effect on post-Soviet democratic competitiveness and media independence through the persistence of human capital and entrepreneurial legacies.

the Orthodox tradition of ascetic retreat rather than economic considerations. Second, the Russian Revolution and over 70 years of Soviet rule fundamentally reshaped Russia by altering regional borders, driving internal migration, and unifying society both economically and culturally. One of the main objectives of the Soviet government was rapid industrialization. This began with the development of domestic natural resources which were mainly located in remote and underdeveloped regions in Siberia, the North, the Far East, and Central Asia. The construction of new plants, hydroelectric stations, road networks, and cities near these natural resources required substantial human resources, which in the Russian Empire were mainly concentrated in the Western part of the country. Therefore, the Soviet government initiated large-scale voluntary migration campaigns while also establishing an extensive system of forced-labor camps (GULAGs) and settlements for deported populations, including so-called 'anti-Soviet' citizens and entire ethnic groups. In some cases, these deportations created ethnically cleansed territories, which the state then sought to repopulate with migrants, including those relocated for labor needs. These efforts redistributed human resources across the country, shifting population centers away from their historical patterns.

The extended temporal gap between the historical exposure measure and the study period presents a trade-off between relevance and exogeneity. While this lag may weaken the first-stage relationship, it serves a crucial theoretical purpose. The 90-year separation, which includes seven decades of systematic Soviet secularization, ensures that the instrument primarily captures variation in the most durable forms of historical religious capital: physical infrastructure and its attendant symbolic value. The historical density of monks and nuns serves as a proxy for the scale and regional significance of this persistent legacy; larger monastic communities were not only more substantial physical complexes but also more prominent spiritual and cultural landmarks. These locations were thus more likely to retain a powerful symbolic charge and provide tangible ruins that facilitated post-Soviet rebuilding. By focusing on this physical and symbolic legacy, the case for the exclusion restriction is

strengthened: it is unlikely that the scale of a monastic community in 1907 affects contemporary political preferences except by influencing where the modern Church could most effectively re-establish a substantial network after 1991.

While the shock component, $OrthodoxDensity_{-jt}$, requires no exogeneity assumption, I nevertheless address potential endogeneity by excluding own-region density. Figure 1 shows that this national variation is unrelated to macroeconomic or political cycles. At the regional level, the responsiveness of local church density to the nationwide Orthodox revival varies substantially.[21] Importantly, this variation does not appear to be driven by prior political preferences. A regression of annual regional Orthodox density on the lagged presidential approval rate yields an insignificant coefficient of 0.012 (s.e. = 0.010),[22] suggesting that regions with higher approval in the previous year did not experience systematically faster church expansion.

5 Results

5.1 Main Effects

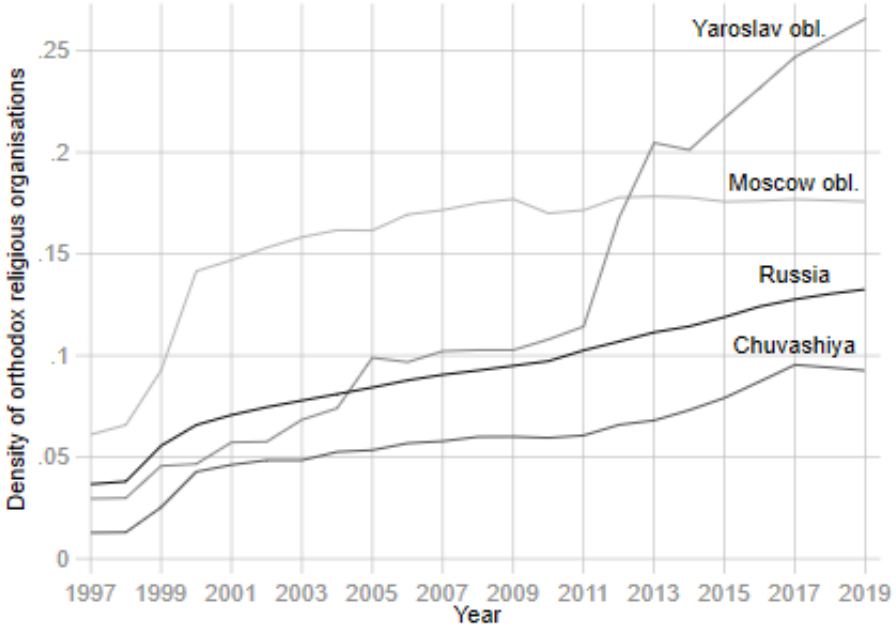
Table 1 presents the results of OLS (columns (1)-(3)) and 2SLS (column (4)) analyses[23]. They suggest that a denser Orthodox Church presence increases the approval rating of the president. This effect is significant and holds across different specifications. However, the OLS estimates are likely to be downward biased due to omitted variables. For example, OLS models do not account for the presence of opposition members who could negatively affect the overall presidential approval in regions but, at the same time, support the Orthodox Church. In the first stage of the 2SLS analysis, the cluster-robust Kleibergen-Paap F statistic is above 10.

[21] This heterogeneity partly reflects that a considerable share of churches in Russia are financed through parishioner donations, including large contributions from businessmen and oligarchs, as well as revenues generated by local dioceses themselves (Vasiljev 2015; Aleshkina et al. 2016).

[22] The regression includes baseline regional characteristics, year and region fixed effects, and clusters standard errors at the federal-unit level.

[23] See Table B5 in Appendix B for the full output, which includes all coefficients for both individual-level and regional controls.

Figure 1: Density of Orthodox religious organizations



Note: The graph presents time trends in the density of Orthodox religious organizations in Russia and three Russian regions.

Nevertheless, I also report weak-instrument-robust Anderson-Rubin 90% confidence interval for the effect of the Orthodox Church, which shows that the estimate is significant.

The magnitude of the effect of the expansion of the Orthodox Church on presidential approval is substantial. The average increase in the regional density of Orthodox religious organizations during the sample period (between 1997 and 2019) is 0.12[24]. Together with the 2SLS estimate from Table 1, this implies that in an average region, the expansion of the Orthodox Church in the past two decades led to an increase in the approval rating of the president by 10 percentage points (0.12 x 0.860 x 100).

To investigate whether there is a similar effect for other branches and levels of authority, I use the approval of the regional governor, the Government, and the Duma as dependent variables. Table B6 in Appendix B shows that the only significant estimate is for the approval rating of the Duma. Note, however, that the

[24]While in 1997 there were around 4 Orthodox religious organizations per 100,000 population, by 2019, their number had increased to 16 per 100,000 population on average.

Table 1: The density of Orthodox religious organizations and approval of the president

	Approval of president			
	(1) OLS	(2) OLS	(3) OLS	(4) 2SLS
Orthodox density	0.599***	0.593***	0.576***	0.866**
	(0.218)	(0.216)	(0.208)	(0.352)
Individual controls		✓	✓	✓
Regional controls			✓	✓
Region FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
1st stage coef.				0.797***
				(0.242)
Reduced-f. coef.				0.690**
				(0.297)
R^2	0.276	0.281	0.281	0.007
Kleibergen-Paap F				10.826
Anderson-Rubin 95% CI				[0.208, 1.869]
N	35,395	35,341	35,341	35,341

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: Columns (1)-(3) present the results of OLS analysis. Column (4) shows the results of 2SLS analysis (specification (1)). Individual controls include gender, age, age squared, education, employment status, and an indicator for living in a rural area. Regional controls include the logarithm of real GDP per capita, unemployment rate, and the urban population share. The years of the outcome variable are 1997-2019. Standard errors in parentheses are clustered by region.

sample with responses to the question about the Duma is much shorter, only starting in 2011. These results could be partly driven by the commonly held belief in Russia that the government consists of "a good Tsar and bad boyars[25]". That is, ordinary Russians tend to view whoever sits at the top of the ruling hierarchy as a just and benevolent leader and to attribute all failures to other bureaucrats[26]. Therefore,

[25]Boyars are members of the ruling feudal nobility in Russia and some other countries in Eastern Europe.

[26]For example, as Lazarev et al. (2014) demonstrate in their study of the 2010 wildfires, Russia's ruling elite — led de facto by prime minister Putin despite president Medvedev's formal office — strategically localized blame on regional officials ("bad boyars") while amplifying Putin's image as a decisive leader through hands-on disaster response (e.g., piloting firefighting planes) and state media coverage. This performance-based legitimacy, observed even among those who did not directly benefit from aid, underscores how the "good Tsar" narrative operated under Putin's informal leadership. The dynamic contrasts with Yeltsin's rule (Colton 2008), where blame accrued to the president directly, reflecting the absence of such coordinated blame-shifting mechanisms.

the Church propagating pro-government sentiments can positively influence the presidential rating while not affecting the rating of the officials lower down the bureaucratic ladder.

Two other measures that are also used to define political popularity are trust and readiness to vote for the government candidate in presidential elections (the ruling party in Duma elections). In contrast to the approval of the president, I do not find any effect of the Church on trust: the coefficient is unexpectedly negative and insignificant (column (1) in Table B7, Appendix B). This could be explained by several factors. As noted in 2020 by Lev Gudkov, sociologist and the director of the Levada Center, approval is a respondent's evaluation of a politician's plans and promises, his or her political line, especially in the area of foreign policy and protection of the country from external "enemies" such as Western culture. In contrast, trust is more about whether respondents perceive the politician as telling the truth (about the situation in the country, about his or her income and taxes paid, etc.) and being able to implement what s/he promised, especially in terms of domestic policies (Lipskiy 2020). The former can be more easily influenced by state propaganda potentially also transmitted by the Church. Another factor that might affect the results is a difference in the types of questions used to measure trust and approval. An open-ended question is used to measure trust: the respondent needs to remember and name 5-6 politicians s/he trusts. For approval, the respondent is asked directly whether s/he approves of the actions of the current president (with the name of the current president closing the question).

Table B7 in Appendix B presents the results for electoral preferences. The estimates of the effect of the Church on readiness to vote for the government candidate (columns (2)) or ruling party (column (3)) are also imprecise. However, when I shift to analyzing actual election results by region, rather than individual electoral preferences, I find some support for the positive but statistically insignificant effects observed in the individual-level regressions. Columns (1)-(3) of Table B8 in Appendix B show the positive (but still insignificant) estimates of

the effect of the Church on the share of votes in presidential and Duma elections, which, however, become significant when I interact Orthodox density with year dummies (column (5)). Since Kleibergen-Paap F is low for the year-by-year model, I provide an Anderson-Rubin test of joint significance for the interacted model, which remains valid under weak instruments (separate AR confidence intervals for each interaction would be computationally intensive given the specification). Additionally, I present OLS estimates (column (4)) alongside the 2SLS results to provide additional context. However, I emphasize that these cannot be interpreted as causal due to potential endogeneity bias. The OLS results do not always align with the 2SLS estimates, which reinforces why instrumental variable approaches remain theoretically important despite the weak first stage.

Table B9 in Appendix B present the results for the two (usually) leading challengers: communist candidate (party) and liberal democratic candidate (party). While there is no effect of the Church on the share of votes for the liberal democratic candidate (party), the communist candidate (party) is persistently less popular in the regions with the higher Orthodox density.

Of the 1997-2019 period studied in this paper, Putin was president for almost 16 years. This raises two questions: (i) could the estimated effect on approval be fully attributed to Putin himself? and (ii) will the effect on trust and electoral preferences become significant if I define these two measures of political popularity specifically for Putin? Table B10 in Appendix B shows that the estimate for the effect of the Church on approval ratings during Yeltsin's presidency (1997-1999) is insignificant (column (1)), while the coefficients for Medvedev's (2008-2012) and Putin's (2000-2008, 2012-2019) periods are significant and not statistically different from each other. Columns (2) and (3) present insignificant estimates for the effect of the Church on trust in and readiness to vote for Putin. Thus, there is not enough evidence to argue that the observed effect on political popularity is fully driven by Putin's personality.

Finally, I check whether the Church is able to affect protest activity in Russian

regions, the proxy for the anti-popularity of the current authority and its decisions. Table B11 in Appendix B presents the results of 2SLS analysis for the following indicators at the regional level in the 2007-2016 period: the maximum number of protesters per 1,000 population registered during the year, the total number of protests, and the numbers of protests by type - political, economic, civic. As the estimates suggest, there is no consistent evidence of the influence of the Church on protest activity. This result together with the significant positive effect of the Church on approval ratings and election results could be partly explained by the composition of the group of Putin's supporters. For most of Putin's presidency, a significant share of his supporters were (and still are) ordinary Russian citizens who claim that they are not interested in politics and know nothing about it, who value stability the most and prefer to be loyal to the current authority out of fear of change. They are passive, inertial, and are also more susceptible to the influence of state propaganda that might be spread by the Church too (Gudkov 2011; Krasheninnikov 2022).

To reduce the risk of false discovery, I calculate Romano-Wolf p-values corrected for multiple hypothesis testing. This method controls the family-wise error rate and uses bootstrap resampling to allow for dependence across outcomes. The corrected p-values presented in Appendix B, Table B12 reconfirm the insights from my main findings.

5.2 Robustness

To ensure that the results obtained for the approval rating of the current president can be interpreted as causal, I rerun the analysis modifying the baseline specification, as described further in this section, and present the estimates in Appendix B, Tables B13 and B14.

First, there could be a concern that the results are driven by differential region-level dynamics correlated with the instrument. To address this, I start with controlling for the distance from each region's centroid to Moscow, interacted with

year dummies. Distance to Moscow is commonly used in empirical studies as a proxy for historical and contemporary economic development, state capacity, and political centralization, all of which could confound the relationship of interest. Next, I introduce interactions of year dummies with proxies for historical social structure and human capital - namely, the share of meshchane and literacy rate, both of which have been shown to have a persistent effect on post-Soviet democratic competitiveness and media independence (Lankina and Libman 2021). While these historical factors no longer show a systematic correlation with the share component of the instrument - pre-revolutionary monastic density (Table B3, Appendix B) - this check ensures that any residual effects do not bias the results. Finally, a more demanding approach would be to include year x region fixed effects to absorb all time-varying regional shocks. However, since both my variable of interest and my instrumental variable are measured at the regional level, such a specification would be too restrictive. Instead, in the next robustness check, I include region fixed effects while allowing year fixed effects to vary by federal unit[27]. The estimates are presented in columns (2)–(5) of Table B13. Even after absorbing substantial regional variation, the Orthodox Church remains an important factor influencing presidential approval. In column (6), I also check whether the results hold if I control for the larger federal units instead of small regions as I did in the analysis of the correlations between the historical density of monks and nuns and socio-economic characteristics of Russian regions in Table B3, Appendix B. The coefficient is of a lower magnitude but remains positive and significant.

Column (2) of Table B14 presents the results of a robustness check assessing whether the findings are sensitive to alternative scaling of the instrument's historical component. Specifically, I normalize the number of Orthodox monks and nuns by the population in 1990 (the last year of the Soviet Union) rather than the 1997 population used in the baseline specification. Reassuringly, the estimated coefficient

[27]The federal unit division was introduced in 2000 and was largely similar to the Soviet Union's division by economic districts. Since their introduction, federal units have undergone changes in both total number (from 7 to 8) and composition. For consistency, I use the original 2000 federal districts for the 1997–1999 period.

remains practically the same in magnitude and significant at the 5% level, supporting the robustness of the main results to this alternative normalization.

Further evidence that spatial outliers do not drive the results is presented in Columns (3) and (4), where I exclude Moscow and St. Petersburg—the two largest and most economically distinctive cities in Russia. The point estimates remain similar in magnitude to those in the baseline specification and continue to be statistically significant at the 5% level, suggesting that the main findings are not driven by these influential urban centers. Column (5) reports estimates obtained after excluding regions with fewer respondents than the 5th percentile. This exercise provides additional reassurance that the main results are not driven by undersampled regions in the survey, which is nationally representative.

In Column (6), I present the local-to-zero "plausibly exogenous" IV estimation developed by Conley, Hansen, and Rossi (2012). Following the approach of Van Kippersluis and Rietveld (2018), I first estimate the distribution parameters by regressing the outcome variable on the instrument, together with the full set of controls and fixed effects, for the sample of North Caucasus regions that were predominantly Muslim at the end of the Russian Empire. I then apply the IV estimator proposed by Van Kippersluis and Rietveld (2018). The estimated coefficient remains positive and statistically significant, lending further support to the conclusions from the baseline specification.

Finally, I assess the robustness of the results to an alternative assumption regarding the correlation structure of the error terms. Specifically, I re-estimate the baseline specification (1) while clustering standard errors by year $\times$ federal unit, in addition to region. As shown in Column (7), the resulting standard errors are only slightly larger than those in the baseline specification, and the coefficient remains statistically significant at the 5% level. Moreover, I implement the sensitivity analysis proposed by Lal et al. (2024) and present the results in Figure A3. Across various inferential approaches, including bootstrap-t, bootstrap-c, Anderson–Rubin, and VtF (a refinement of tF by Lee et al. (2023)), the baseline coefficient remains

statistically significant at the 5% level.

5.3 Mechanisms

In line with Murphy and Shleifer (2004), the Russian Orthodox Church can be seen as a network originally organized around religious beliefs that has become increasingly "rented out" to the state in exchange for resources. Since the early 2000s, the ROC has steadily gained financial support, fiscal subsidies, and legal or political privileges that have given it clear advantages over other religious institutions (Rosenthal 2019). Yet unlike Murphy's model, which emphasizes influence through within-network interactions and sanctioning, the Russian case presents a puzzle: religiosity and church attendance remain low, but Orthodoxy has become a dominant identity marker, and the Church still exerts significant political influence.

The ROC's value to the state, then, lies less in mobilizing active parishioners than in its symbolic and broadcast capacity. In exchange for material and political resources, Church leaders endorse secular authority and amplify pro-government narratives through their extensive organizational infrastructure. These channels parallel those identified by McClendon and Beatty Riedl (2021), clerical authority and organizational mobilization, but are directed outward to culturally Orthodox citizens[28] rather than inward toward active congregations.

To contextualize these theoretical expectations and address whether the Russian Orthodox Church functions as an independent actor or as part of the state apparatus, I first examine qualitative evidence of church-state coordination during the study period. This evidence suggests a symbiotic relationship: the state provides resources and privileges to the Church, while church leaders actively endorse secular authority and amplify state narratives through their institutional platform.

The material basis of this relationship is well-documented. Following the 1997

[28]Throughout this paper, I use two terms to refer to the same population: "self-identified as Orthodox" when discussing the survey measure and empirical findings, and "culturally Orthodox" when discussing the broader conceptual phenomenon. Both refer to individuals who self-identify as Orthodox regardless of their belief in God or church attendance.

law that granted the ROC exclusive legal and financial privileges, the Church received substantial state support throughout the 2000s and 2010s. Rosenthal (2019) constructs a composite index showing consistent growth in institutional, fiscal, and political support for the ROC between 2002 and 2018, including direct budget transfers for "cultural monument" restoration, tax exemptions, and preferential access to state media. This state investment in church infrastructure created the organizational capacity for the Church to serve as a broadcast platform. Notably, many newly constructed or restored churches received funding from federal rather than solely regional or diocesan sources, suggesting coordination beyond local initiative.

The Church's reciprocal political endorsements became increasingly explicit after Putin's return to the presidency in 2012. This period coincided with the state's promotion of "traditional values" as a central ideological pillar, a campaign in which the ROC played a prominent role. The 2012 Pussy Riot prosecution exemplified this alignment: church leaders not only condemned the protest but Patriarch Kirill explicitly framed the case as an attack on Russia itself, linking Orthodox faith to Russian national identity. The Church's response transformed what could have been treated as vandalism into a civilizational clash between traditional Orthodox Russia and Western liberal values (Stoeckl 2016). Similarly, the ROC has consistently supported legislation restricting LGBTQ+ rights and abortion access under the banner of protecting "traditional family values", with church representatives testifying before the Duma and Patriarch Kirill meeting regularly with Putin to discuss moral legislation (Wilkinson 2014; Kolstø 2023). These activities position the Church as a co-author, not merely a passive channel, of conservative state ideology.

However, the relationship shows evidence of church agency rather than complete subordination. The 2014-2015 period provides the most revealing example. When Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014, Patriarch Kirill conspicuously absented himself from the Kremlin ceremony celebrating the annexation, a striking omission

given his regular presence at state events. His caution reflected institutional calculations: endorsing the annexation would align church and state borders in Crimea but jeopardize the ROC's authority over Orthodox parishes throughout Ukraine, a historically crucial jurisdiction for the Moscow Patriarchate (Gorevoy 2019; Financial Times 2019).[29] Church statements during this period carefully praised "Russian unity" and "protection of Orthodox believers" without explicitly endorsing territorial seizure. This selective restraint (precisely when nationalist mobilization peaked) demonstrates that the Church weighs its own institutional interests and does not simply echo every state position.

This evidence suggests the Church functions neither as a fully independent actor accidentally aligned with the state nor as a mere administrative extension of the Kremlin. Instead, it operates as a strategic partner that exchanges its symbolic and organizational resources for material support and policy influence. The Church's value to the state lies in its unique capacity to frame political authority in terms of Orthodox tradition and Russian identity, thereby reaching the large population of culturally Orthodox citizens who form a receptive audience for such messaging even without regular religious practice. When this partnership operates smoothly, as it did before 2014 and after 2016, the Church's expanding institutional presence translates into measurable political effects. Having established this qualitative foundation, I now turn to quantitative tests of the proposed mechanism.

To test this, I begin by examining the general resilience of this church-state influence. The 2014-2015 Crimea annexation period, discussed qualitatively above, provides an ideal test case: if the Church's political influence requires active coordination rather than operating as a passive arm of state apparatus, we should observe a disruption in effects precisely when institutional interests diverged. To examine this relationship, I conduct an IV analysis where I interact $OrthodoxDensity_{jt}$ with two sets of time indicators: first with yearly dummies,

[29] On June 7, 2022, the Synod of the ROC accepted the Crimean dioceses under the direct subordination of the Moscow Patriarchate because of "the practical impossibility of regular communication between these dioceses and the Kyiv Metropolis" (The Moscow Patriarchate 2022) after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

then with aggregated period dummies (1997-2013, 2014-2015, and 2016-2019). These interactions are instrumented using my primary instrument interacted with the same dummy variables. My analysis particularly focuses on the 2014-2015 period, which coincides with a dramatic surge in President Putin's approval ratings following the Crimea annexation. As shown in Appendix A, Figure A4, this political euphoria was relatively short-lived, lasting approximately two years.

Table 2 reports the 2SLS estimation results (column (2)). Since the Kleibergen-Paap F-statistic is significantly lower than 10, I also present OLS estimates that yield similar qualitative patterns (column (1)).[30] The results reveal a notable temporal variation in the Orthodox Church's influence on presidential approval ratings. Specifically, during the peak of the "Crimea effect" in 2014-2015, the Church's role in shaping public support for the president appears diminished relative to earlier (1997-2013) and later (2016-2019) periods.

The temporary disruption of the church's political influence during 2014-2015 (precisely when church-state alignment fractured over Crimea) provides evidence against the church being merely a passive arm of state propaganda. If the church were simply another state media outlet, we would expect its effects to persist or even strengthen during this period of nationalist mobilization. Instead, the null result suggests the mechanism requires active church-state coordination rather than automatic transmission of regime messages. This pattern is consistent with the qualitative evidence of the Church's cautious stance during the Crimea annexation, when Patriarch Kirill notably absented himself from the Kremlin ceremony. However, this effect appears to be temporary: as the "Crimea effect" faded and church-state coordination resumed, the Church's influence returned to its previous levels in 2016-2019.

When the Church channel is not disrupted, there are at least two ways state-supporting ideas can be spread by the Church. First, through local communities of regular churchgoers. Second, a larger Church presence attracts more resources,

[30] Table B15 shows the OLS and 2SLS results for the effect by year.

Table 2: The annexation of Crimea and impact of church network on approval of president

	Approval of president	
	(1)	(2)
	OLS	2SLS
Orthodox density, 1997-2013:	0.740***	1.086**
	(0.258)	(0.464)
Orthodox density, 2014-2015:	0.333	0.707
	(0.308)	(0.458)
Orthodox density, 2016-2019:	0.616***	1.032***
	(0.202)	(0.357)
Individual controls	✓	✓
Regional controls	✓	✓
Region FEs	✓	✓
Year FEs	✓	✓
Kleibergen-Paap F		2.525
Anderson-Rubin 95% CI		[0.334, 2.967]
		[-0.034, 2.561]
		[0.453, 2.477]
N	35,341	35,341

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: The table presents the results of the OLS (column (1)) and 2SLS (column (2)) analyses where the density of churches is interacted with period dummies. Individual controls include gender, age, age squared, education, employment status, and an indicator for living in a rural area. Regional controls include the logarithm of real GDP per capita, unemployment rate, and the urban population share. The years of the outcome variable are 1997-2019. Standard errors in parentheses are clustered by region.

enabling it to promote the Russian Orthodox Church's support for the state beyond church buildings, reaching those who identify as Orthodox but do not attend services regularly. The latter may occur, for example, via clerics who speak on the radio and TV, give newspaper interviews, and actively post on the Internet.

To explore these mechanisms, firstly, I check whether the wider Church presence increases the number of those who self-identify as Orthodox. Column (1) in Table 3 presents the results of IV estimation with a dummy for Orthodox respondents as the dependent variable. They suggest that the density of Orthodox churches does not correlate with self-identification. Moreover, column (2) shows that the impact of the ROC on the approval of the president is above and beyond its expected effect

on self-identification. Even after controlling for being Orthodox, the effect of the Church on presidential approval is positive and still significant at the 10% level.

Table 3: Religious self-identification and approval of the president

	Orthodox	Approval of president		
	(1)	(2)	(3) Orthodox	(4) Others
Orthodox density	-0.852	2.136*	2.958**	0.122
	(1.864)	(1.128)	(1.383)	(1.389)
Orthodox		0.072***		
		(0.016)		
Other denominations		0.039*		
		(0.022)		
Individual controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Regional controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Region FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kleibergen-Paap F	20.918	20.866	19.537	17.672
Anderson-Rubin 95% CI	[-4.326, 3.353]	[0.033, 4.681]	[0.653, 6.347]	[-3.275, 2.704]
N	8,531	8,422	6,030	2,389

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: The table presents the results of 2SLS analysis with the dummy for respondents who self-identify as orthodox (column (1)) and the approval of the current president (columns (2)-(4)) as dependent variables. Columns (1) and (2) report estimates for the full sample in rounds, when the religion-related question was asked. Columns (3) and (4) report estimates for the subsamples of respondents who self-identify as orthodox and all other respondents. Individual controls include gender, age, age squared, education, employment status, and an indicator for living in a rural area. Regional controls include the logarithm of real GDP per capita, unemployment rate, and the urban population share. The years of the outcome variables are 2003, 2007, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2018. Standard errors in parentheses are clustered by region.

This may be partially attributed to the fact that, for many people in Russia who self-identify as Orthodox, Orthodoxy is an expression of "Russiannes" which has little to do with actual faith and religious practice. According to the Levada Center (Appendix A, Figure A5), the share of "Orthodox" Russians rose from 31% in 1991 to 77% in 2019. However, not all of them choose "I believe in the existence of God without any doubts" when asked about their faith, and only 10-15% of respondents claim that they attend church once a month or more often. At the same time, a majority of respondents (69% in 2012 (Gudkov 2012) and 57% in 2017 (Pew Research Center 2017a)) consistently report that being Orthodox is an important

aspect of being "truly Russian". For my sample, individual-level data on belief in God and church attendance are only available for one and three years, respectively, which makes a rigorous analysis infeasible. However, I find suggestive evidence (columns (3) and (4)) that while being unable to attract new "churched" believers or even significantly increase the number of those who only self-identify as Orthodox, the ROC plays an important role in strengthening the political preferences for the government candidate in the broad group of culturally Orthodox citizens. As expected, the ROC has no effect on those who do not identify as Orthodox.

Another channel for transmitting the ROC's support for the state and its ideology, potentially more relevant than direct exposure in church, is the growing number of Church-controlled organizations that can provide additional people and resources to spread state-supporting ideas beyond church buildings. To study this aspect, first of all, I check whether the denser Church presence increases the number of mentions of "Orthodox church" and "traditional values" in various media outlets. These "values" have been used in state propaganda since 2012, mainly to promote traditional families and oppose same-sex marriage. Since then, this concept has been heavily exploited by Russian authorities to gain the support of conservative citizens, and the Orthodox Church has played a significant role in spreading these ideas. I run the baseline IV specification at the regional level for the total number of mentions and for the number of mentions in regional media outlets separately[31]. To control for the difference in media coverage between regions and over time, I add the first principal component of the shares of the population who have access to analog and digital TV, and the number of published newspapers per capita. Next, I investigate whether controlling for this specific media presence of the Church in the main model disturbs the effect of the Church on the approval of the president that was established in Table 1.

The results of the analysis are presented in Table 4. Columns (1) and (2) suggest

[31]Following Belmonte and Rochlitz (2019), I divide all numbers of mentions by the total number of weather reports to account for the differences in the salience of a particular topic studied in the media by region and year.

that the denser Church presence increases the overall propaganda in the media, but not through regional outlets. This is an expected effect, because the ROC receives financial support primarily from the federal budget, and the Internet, if available, is a more easily reachable platform for newly established religious organizations than regional media outlets. At the same time, as columns (3) and (4) present, promoting traditional family values in either of these media outlets does not mediate or reduce the effect of the Church. This result suggests that propaganda promoting traditional values in the media is not the primary channel through which the Church influences political preferences. Meanwhile, column (4) shows that, in contrast to the Internet and federal media, regional outlets are able to shift the approval rating. However, this is apparently not exploited by the Church (column (2)).

Table 4: The density of orthodox religious organizations and media coverage

	Mentions, scaled		Approval of president	
	(1) total	(2) regional	(3) with total mentions	(4) with regional mentions
Orthodox density	6.748*	-0.312	0.898**	0.901**
	(3.532)	(0.349)	(0.347)	(0.348)
Total mentions, scl			-0.001	
			(0.001)	
Regional mentions, scl				0.006**
				(0.003)
Media coverage	✓	✓	✓	✓
Individual controls			✓	✓
Regional controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Region FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kleibergen-Paap F	30.040	30.040	11.131	11.097
Anderson-Rubin 95% CI	[0.193, 13.993]	[-1.097, 0.268]	[0.252, 1.960]	[0.318, 1.956]
N	1,820	1,820	35,334	35,334

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: The table presents the results of 2SLS analysis with the scaled number of mentions (columns (1) and (2)) and the dummy for the approval of the president (columns (3) and (4)) as a dependent variable. Individual controls include gender, age, age squared, education, employment status, and an indicator for living in a rural area. Regional controls include the logarithm of real GDP per capita, unemployment rate, and the urban population share. All models include the regional media coverage index in addition to the baseline controls. The years of the outcome variable are 1997-2019. Standard errors in parentheses are clustered by region.

My findings do not rule out the media as a channel; rather, the results are inconclusive on this point, making this an important area for future research. The

challenge in identifying media as a precise causal channel reflects both measurement limitations (the Integrum database captures explicit mentions but may miss subtle messaging) and the inherent difficulty of ruling out omitted variable bias in mediation analyzes. Even with the IV strategy addressing concerns about reverse causality in the main effect, the mediation pathways themselves may be jointly determined by unobserved regional factors. Two directions could be particularly promising for future work: first, examining other forms of propaganda or the transmission of state narratives beyond the specific focus on traditional values; and second, conducting a deeper textual analysis of statements made directly by the Church, rather than relying on broader media discourse.

6 Conclusion

This paper examines how the institutional presence of the Russian Orthodox Church shapes political preferences in a largely secular, post-Soviet context. By constructing a novel instrument that combines the historical distribution of monasticism with the post-Soviet national expansion of the Church, I identify a substantial causal effect: a denser Orthodox Church network increases local presidential approval by approximately 10 percentage points and boosts the share of votes for government candidates and the ruling party. This influence operates not through traditional religious engagement — there is no evidence the Church increases the number of devout believers or regular churchgoers — but through its role in reinforcing a national identity that equates Orthodoxy with "Russianness." The Church strengthens the political preferences of this large group of cultural Orthodox identifiers, primarily through its institutional and broadcast capacity rather than through in-person social sanctioning within parishes.

These findings suggest that the political influence of a religious institution in a modern autocracy does not require a deeply religious populace. Instead, it hinges on the institution's ability to leverage its organizational resources and its

symbolic connection to national identity. This implies specific scope conditions for where similar mechanisms of religious-political influence are likely to operate. The effect first requires a historical fusion of religious and national identity, where belonging to the faith is a marker of ethnic or civic belonging. This condition exists in other historically Orthodox countries like Belarus, Serbia, and Georgia (Pew Research Center 2017b), but is less pronounced in religiously diverse states like Kazakhstan (Sharipova 2020). Second, a strategic alignment between the autocratic state and the religious hierarchy appears crucial. The Russian state's material and legal support of the ROC was exchanged for the Church's political endorsement. A comparative case is Ukraine before 2018, where the state-aligned Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) played a similar role. The subsequent creation of the independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in 2019, which fractured this church-state alliance, provides a natural experiment that underscores the critical importance of this condition.

This study thus contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how autocrats secure support, demonstrating that even in an era of declining religiosity, traditional religious institutions can be repurposed as potent tools for political mobilization. The findings highlight that it is not faith, but the fusion of faith with national identity and the strategic deployment of the Church's institutional platform, that enables this form of persuasion. Future research could productively test these scope conditions through systematic comparison across other national contexts where religious and national identities are deeply intertwined.

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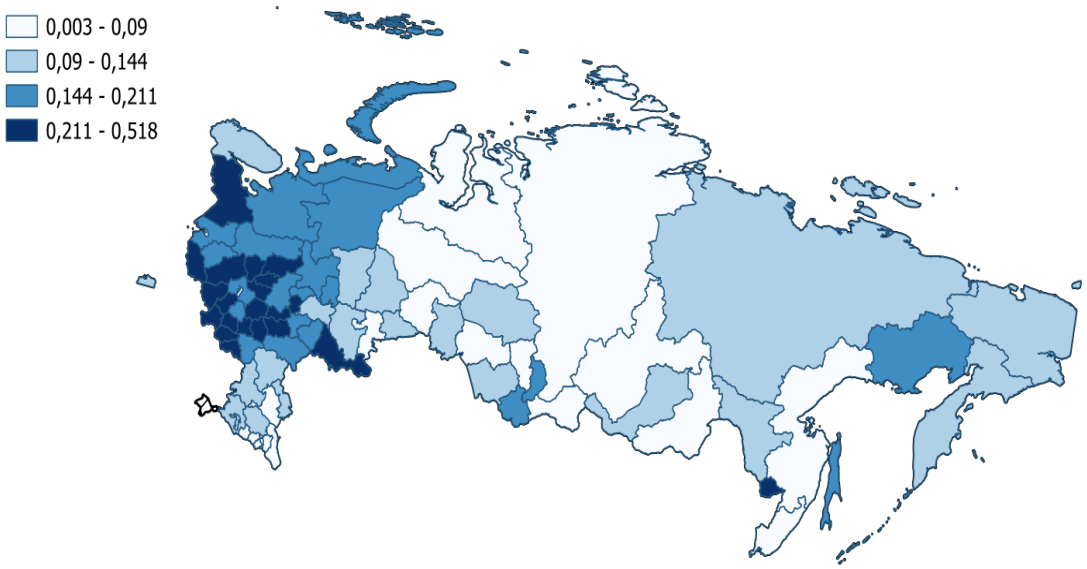
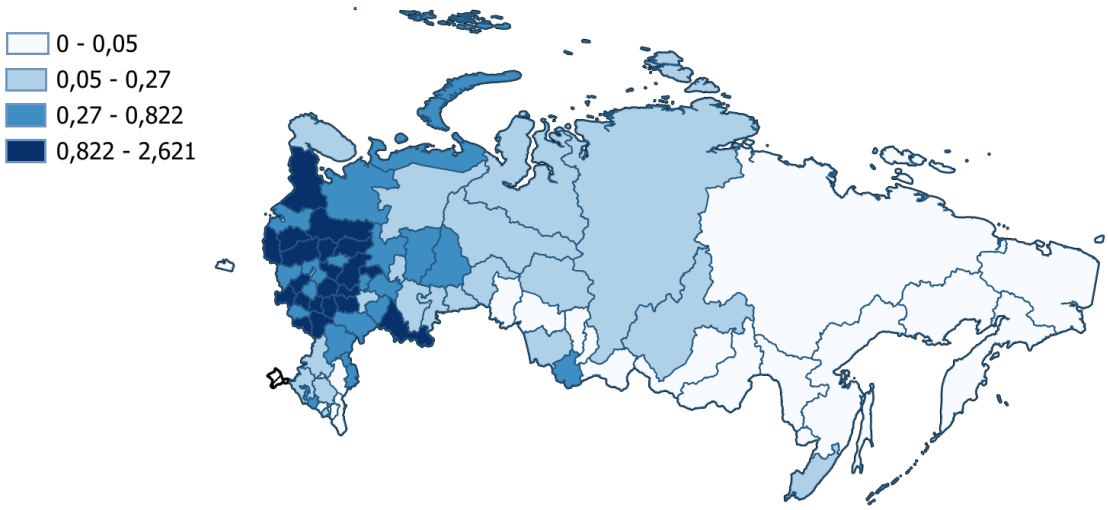
A Appendix: Supplemental Figures

Figure A1: Contemporary density of Orthodox religious organizations



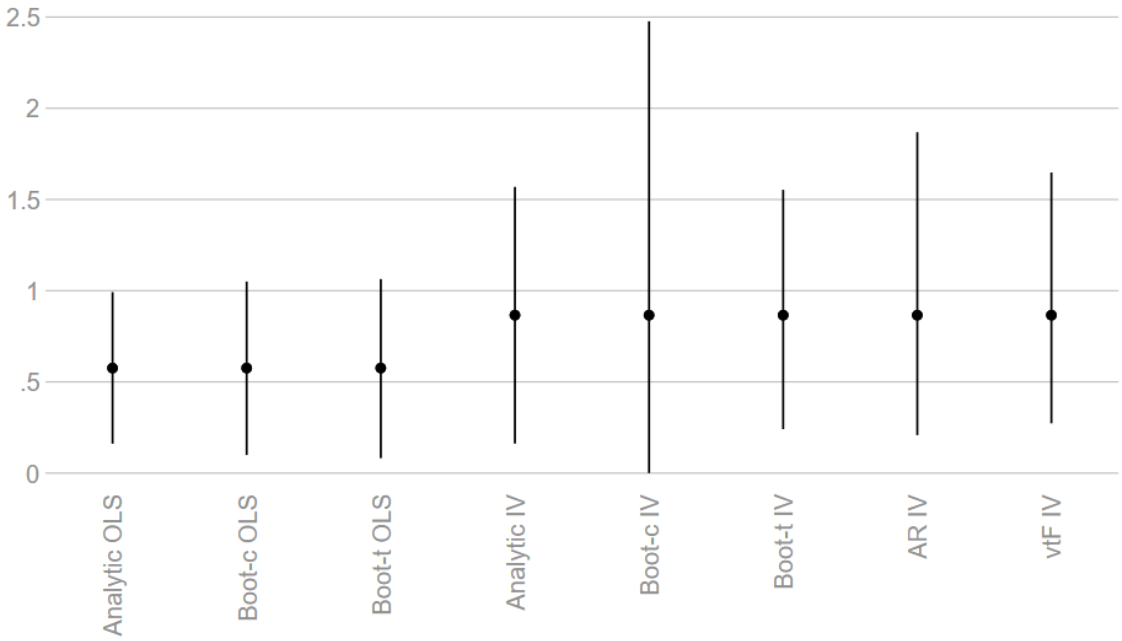
Note: The map shows the number of Orthodox religious organizations across Russian regions in 2019, measured per 1,000 inhabitants. Crimea and Sevastopol are excluded from the analysis.

Figure A2: Historical density of Orthodox monks and nuns



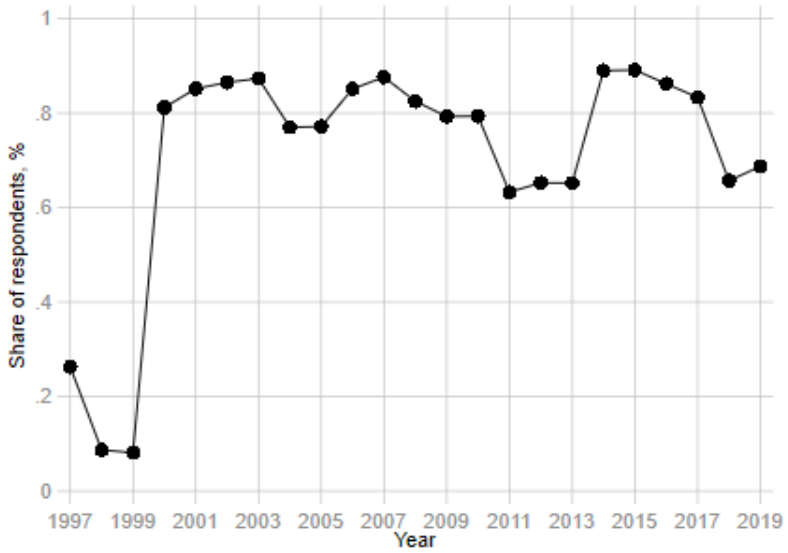
Note: The map shows the historical density of monastic populations across contemporary Russian regions. It is measured as the number of monks and nuns residing in Orthodox monasteries in 1907 per 1,000 inhabitants of each region's 1997 population. Crimea and Sevastopol are excluded from the analysis.

Figure A3: Sensitivity analysis



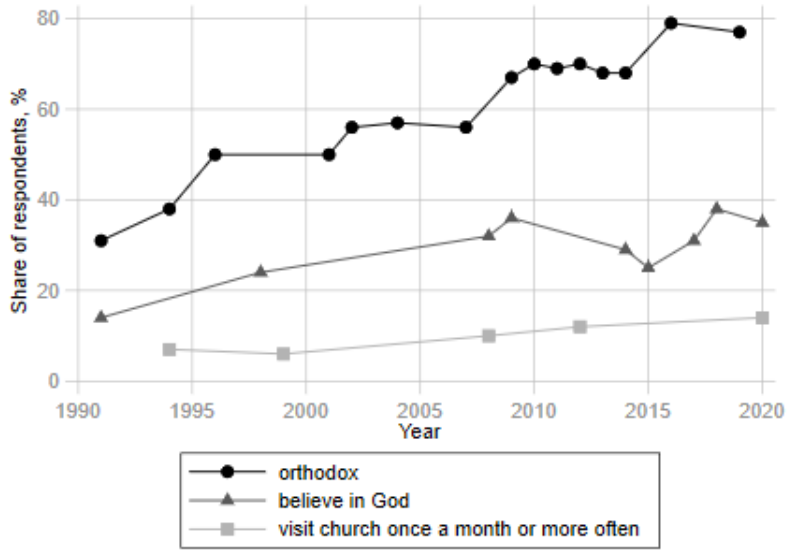
Note: The graph presents OLS and IV baseline estimates alongside 95% confidence intervals from various inferential methods: bootstrap-c, bootstrap-t, Anderson-Rubin, and VtF.

Figure A4: Approval of the current president



Note: The graph shows the average approval rating of the current president by year. The first significant shift in the approval in 2000 is associated with Putin being elected president for the first time, and the second, in 2014, is linked to the annexation of Crimea.

Figure A5: The shares of orthodox Russians, believers, and "churched" believers



Note: The graph shows the average shares of those who self-identify as orthodox, believe in God, and visit church once a month or more often. It uses aggregated data from an annual report by the Levada Center (Zorkaya, Gudkov, and Mihaleva 2021).

B Appendix: Supplemental Tables

Table B1: Summary statistics

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N	Years
Regional variables:						
Orthodox org., per 1,000 pop.	0.104	0.077	0.000	0.518	1,840	1997-2019
Muslim org., per 1,000 pop.	0.019	0.047	0.000	0.396	1,840	1997-2019
Other religious org., per 1,000 pop.	0.056	0.046	0.001	0.336	1,840	1997-2019
1907 monasteries, per 1,000 pop.	0.007	0.008	0.000	0.041	1,840	1997-2019
1907 monks and nuns, per 1,000 pop.	0.545	0.610	0.000	2.621	1,840	1997-2019
Log of real GDP, pc	16.078	1.290	12.462	19.347	1,830	1997-2019
Unemployment rate	9.122	6.429	0.800	66.900	1831	1997-2019
Population, thsd	1,800.763	1,675.160	49	12678	1,840	1997-2019
Share of urban pop.	0.692	0.131	24.580	100.000	1,840	1997-2019
NGOs, per 1,000 pop.	1.187	0.389	0.349	3.175	800	2007-2016
Share of votes for gov. candidate	0.671	0.117	0.250	0.998	400	2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2018
Share of votes for ruling party	0.512	0.164	0.262	0.995	319	2003, 2007, 2011, 2016
Share of votes for communist cand.	0.185	0.089	0.000	0.478	400	2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2018
Share of votes for communist party	0.147	0.058	0.000	0.326	320	2003, 2007, 2011, 2016
Share of votes for liberal dem. cand.	0.055	0.035	0.000	0.150	400	2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2018
Share of votes for liberal dem. party	0.120	0.056	0.000	0.299	320	2003, 2007, 2011, 2016
Protests, total	8.744	28.107	0	378	800	2007-2016
Political protests	2.985	10.590	0	148	800	2007-2016
Economic protests	1.304	4.559	0	98	800	2007-2016
Civic protests	1.923	8.090	0	118	800	2007-2016
Protesters, per 1,000 pop.	0.492	1.770	0.000	35.211	717	2007-2016
Mentions in reg. sources, scl	0.058	0.307	0.000	5.961	1,840	1997-2019
Total mentions, scl	12.740	13.423	0.167	46.867	1,840	1997-2019
Media coverage index	-0.000	1.071	-4.087	6.766	1,829	1997-2019
Individual variables:						
Approval of president	0.705	0.456	0	1	35,395	1997-2019
Approval of governor	0.595	0.491	0	1	28,666	2000-2016, 2018, 2019
Approval of Government	0.493	0.500	0	1	30,054	1999-2016, 2018, 2019
Approval of Duma	0.420	0.494	0	1	12,556	2011-2016, 2018, 2019
Trust in president	0.565	0.496	0	1	23,177	2000-2016
Vote for gov. candidate	0.492	0.500	0	1	19,008	1997, 1999-2003, 2005-2007, 2009-2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Vote for ruling party	0.454	0.498	0	1	15,545	2002-2007, 2010-2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Trust in Putin	0.595	0.491	0	1	23,177	2000-2016
Vote for Putin	0.596	0.491	0	1	16,679	1999-2003, 2005, 2006, 2009-2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Female	0.547	0.498	0	1	36,332	1997-2019
Age	44.814	16.809	18	99	36,332	1997-2019
Higher education	0.226	0.418	0	1	36,332	1997-2019
Employed	0.589	0.492	0	1	36,276	1997-2019
Rural	0.249	0.433	0	1	36,332	1997-2019
Orthodox	0.718	0.450	0	1	8,542	2003, 2007, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2018
Other denominations	0.152	0.359	0	1	8,542	2003, 2007, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2018

Table B2: Correlations between the density of monks and nuns in 1907 and regions' characteristics in 1897

	Dependent var: Density of monks and nuns	
	(1)	(2)
	without province FEs	with province FEs
Nobility	0.137*	0.230***
	(0.073)	(0.086)
Clergy	1.922***	1.943***
	(0.346)	(0.534)
Merchants	1.522***	1.246**
	(0.494)	(0.620)
Meshchane	0.031**	0.050**
	(0.015)	(0.021)
Peasants	0.012***	-0.005
	(0.002)	(0.006)
Literacy	0.048***	0.035**
	(0.011)	(0.016)
Orthodox	0.017***	0.012*
	(0.003)	(0.006)
Muslims	-0.014***	-0.011
	(0.002)	(0.007)
Number of stone buildings, pc	-0.000	0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Number of telephone connections, pc	0.000	-0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Number of places in hospitals, pc	0.000	-0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)
City budget revenue, pc	0.000	-0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Urban population	0.010*	0.015*
	(0.006)	(0.008)
Employment, female	0.000	-0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Employment, male	-0.000	-0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Distance to Moscow, km	-0.022***	-0.093**
	(0.003)	(0.042)

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: In column 1, each row reports the coefficient from a separate cross-sectional regression of the 1907 density of monks and nuns (scaled by the 1897 population) on a single district characteristic in 1897. Column (2) shows the same regressions with province fixed effects included. The number of observations varies between 397 and 413, depending on data availability for the district characteristic. Robust standard errors are in parentheses.

Table B3: Correlations between the density of monks and nuns in 1907, regions' characteristics in 1990, and the density of orthodox religious organizations in 1997

	Independent var: Density of monks and nuns	
	(1)	(2)
	without district FEs	with district FEs
Fixed capital investments, pc	-321.533**	-101.615
	(135.479)	(109.386)
Income, pc	-0.025***	-0.017
	(0.009)	(0.011)
Employment rate	-4.002	-1.768
	(3.733)	(1.736)
Housing, sq.m pc	1.729***	0.544
	(0.331)	(0.377)
Urban population	-0.013	-0.065*
	(0.020)	(0.034)
Paved roads, km per sq.km	4.004	2.815
	(2.478)	(3.021)
Elderly population	5.280***	1.758**
	(0.871)	(0.753)
Women	1.564***	0.363
	(0.257)	(0.223)
Birth rate	-2.170***	-0.373
	(0.509)	(0.542)
Life expectancy, years	0.605**	0.041
	(0.246)	(0.219)
Students, pc	-6.495	-33.447
	(12.579)	(34.527)
Museum visits, pc	152.336	-383.444
	(134.825)	(350.820)
Theatre visits, pc	-36.143	-128.800**
	(24.450)	(64.350)
Published newspapers, pc	-4.23e+04	-2.17e+05
	(3.6e+04)	(2.1e+05)
Marriage rate	-0.527***	-0.232
	(0.126)	(0.161)
Divorce rate	-0.482***	-0.292
	(0.180)	(0.184)
Crime rate	-199.469***	48.589
	(64.535)	(69.343)
Distance to Moscow, km	-1728.175***	-158.093*
	(295.062)	(90.680)
Meshchane, pc historical	0.272	-0.425
	(0.772)	(1.189)
Literacy, historical	3.896**	-2.188
	(1.748)	(2.505)
Orthodox organizations, pc	0.036***	0.020***
	(0.005)	(0.007)

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: In column (1), each row reports the coefficient from a separate cross-sectional regression of a region characteristic on the historical density of monks and nuns (scaled by the 1990 population). Column (2) shows the same regressions with economic district fixed effects included. The number of observations varies between 72 and 80, depending on data availability for the regional characteristic. Robust standard errors are in parentheses.

Table B4: Correlations between the density of monks and nuns in 1907, 1917 Russian Constituent Assembly election results, and 1991 RSFSR presidential election results

	Panel A. 1917 Russian Constituent Assembly election *Independent var*: Density of monks and nuns	
	(1) without macroregion FEs	(2) with macroregion FEs
Bolsheviks[32]	0.047	0.019
	(0.033)	(0.024)
Cadets[33]	0.015*	0.013
	(0.009)	(0.010)

	Panel B. 1991 RSFSR presidential election *Independent var*: Density of monks and nuns	
	(1) without district FEs	(2) with district FEs
Gov. candidate	0.018	-0.010
	(0.018)	(0.030)
Communist	-0.010	0.006
	(0.013)	(0.017)
Liberal democratic	-0.001	0.008
	(0.004)	(0.005)

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: In column (1), each row reports the coefficient from a separate cross-sectional regression of the share of votes in the 1917 Russian Constituent Assembly election (Panel A) and in the 1991 RSFSR presidential election (Panel B) on the density of monks and nuns in 1907. The model in column (2) also includes geo-historical region/economic district fixed effects. The number of observations is 59. Robust standard errors are in parentheses.

[23]The Bolsheviks is the faction of the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, which renamed itself the Russian Communist Party in 1918.

[24]The Cadets is The Constitutional Democratic Party.

Table B5: The density of Orthodox religious organizations and approval of the president

	Approval of president			
	(1) OLS	(2) OLS	(3) OLS	(4) 2SLS
Orthodox density	0.599***	0.593***	0.576***	0.866**
	(0.218)	(0.216)	(0.208)	(0.352)
Female		0.042***	0.041***	0.042***
		(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Age		-0.006***	-0.006***	-0.006***
		(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Age squared		0.000***	0.000***	0.000***
		(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Higher education		-0.007	-0.007	-0.007
		(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Employed		0.001	0.001	0.001
		(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Rural		0.007	0.007	0.007
		(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)
Log(GDP)			-0.024	-0.024
			(0.037)	(0.036)
Unemployment rate			-0.004	-0.003
			(0.003)	(0.003)
Share of urban pop.			-0.001	-0.002
			(0.003)	(0.003)
Region FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
1st stage coef.				0.797***
				(0.242)
R^2	0.276	0.281	0.281	0.007
Kleibergen-Paap F				10.826
Anderson-Rubin 95% CI				[0.208, 1.869]
N	35,395	35,341	35,341	35,341

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: Columns (1)-(3) present the results of OLS analysis. Column (4) shows the results of 2SLS analysis (specification (1)). The years of the outcome variable are 1997-2019. Standard errors in parentheses are clustered by region.

Table B6: The density of Orthodox religious organizations and approval of the regional governor, Government and Duma

	(1) Approval of governor	(2) Approval of Government	(3) Approval of Duma
Orthodox density	1.821	0.113	4.841*
	(1.528)	(0.709)	(2.832)
Individual controls	✓	✓	✓
Regional controls	✓	✓	✓
Region FEs	✓	✓	✓
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓
Kleibergen-Paap F	20.285	18.727	9.531
Anderson-Rubin 95% CI	[-0.729, 5.572]	[-1.349, 1.575]	[0.672, 16.234]
N	28,612	30,001	12,556

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: The table presents the results of 2SLS analysis of the effect of Orthodox density on the approval rating of the regional governor (column (1)), Government (column (2)) and Duma (column (3)). Individual controls include gender, age, age squared, education, employment status, and an indicator for living in a rural area. Regional controls include the logarithm of real GDP per capita, unemployment rate, and the urban population share. The years of the outcome variable are: 2000-2016, 2018, 2019 in column (1), 1999-2016, 2018, 2019 in column (2), and 2011-2016, 2018, 2019 in column (3). Standard errors in parentheses are clustered by region.

Table B7: The density of Orthodox religious organizations, trust in the president and electoral preferences

	(1) Trust in president	(2) Vote for gov. candidate	(3) Vote for ruling party
Orthodox density	-0.663	0.423	0.662
	(1.606)	(0.619)	(1.121)
Individual controls	✓	✓	✓
Regional controls	✓	✓	✓
Region FEs	✓	✓	✓
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓
Kleibergen-Paap F	15.942	10.622	21.607
Anderson-Rubin 95% CI	[-4.285, 2.329]	[-0.581, 1.816]	[-1.208, 3.414]
N	23,128	17,062	15,505

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: The table presents the results of 2SLS analysis of the effect of Orthodox density on trust in the current president (column (1)), readiness to vote for the government candidate in presidential elections (column (2)) or ruling party in Duma elections (column (3)). Individual controls include gender, age, age squared, education, employment status, and an indicator for living in a rural area. Regional controls include the logarithm of real GDP per capita, unemployment rate, and the urban population share. The years of the outcome variable are: 2000-2016 in column (1), 1997, 1999-2003, 2005-2007, 2009-2012, 2014, 2017, 2019 in column (2), and 2002-2007, 2010-2012, 2014, 2017, 2019 in column (3). Standard errors in parentheses are clustered by region.

Table B8: The density of Orthodox religious organizations and election results: Government candidate and ruling party

	Shares of votes				
	(1) for gov. candidate	(2) for ruling party	(3) combined	(4) combined, OLS	(5) combined, 2SLS
Orthodox density:	0.106	0.720	0.295		
	(0.388)	(0.501)	(0.382)		
2000 presidential election				0.170	0.991**
				(0.422)	(0.487)
2003 Duma election				0.109	0.662*
				(0.306)	(0.335)
2004 presidential election				0.060	0.587*
				(0.280)	(0.308)
2007 Duma election				-0.052	0.453
				(0.244)	(0.282)
2008 presidential election				0.103	0.584**
				(0.249)	(0.283)
2011 Duma election				-0.164	0.284
				(0.280)	(0.344)
2012 presidential election				0.009	0.481*
				(0.209)	(0.266)
2016 Duma election				0.212	0.657**
				(0.206)	(0.263)
2018 presidential election				0.268	0.596**
				(0.217)	(0.270)
Regional controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Region FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kleibergen-Paap F	26.486	20.606	24.856		5.759
Anderson-Rubin 95% CI	[-0.796, 0.718]	[-0.236, 1.797]	[-0.597, 0.970]		
Anderson-Rubin p-value					0.034
N	398	319	717	717	717

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: The table presents the results of OLS (column (4)) and 2SLS analysis (the rest of the table). Presidential elections (in 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2018) are covered in column (1); Duma elections (in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2016) - in column (2). The dependent variable in columns (3)-(5) is pooled shares of votes for the candidate or party. Models in columns (4) and (5) interact Orthodox density with the dummy for each year. Endogenous interactions in column (5)'s model are instrumented with the interactions of the instrument with the same dummies. Regional controls include the logarithm of real GDP per capita, unemployment rate, and the urban population share. Standard errors in parentheses are clustered by region.

Table B9: The density of Orthodox religious organizations and election results: Challengers

	Shares of votes									
	(1) for communist	(2) for Communist party	(3) combined	(4) combined, OLS	(5) combined, 2SLS	(6) for liberal	(7) for LDPR	(8) combined	(9) combined, OLS	(10) combined, 2SLS
Orthodox density:	-0.781***	-0.219	-0.613**			0.077	-0.224	-0.040		
	(0.283)	(0.228)	(0.238)			(0.067)	(0.177)	(0.100)		
2000 presidential election				-0.062	-0.614**				0.073	-0.039
				(0.263)	(0.283)				(0.098)	(0.122)
2003 Duma election				-0.341*	-0.853***				0.106	-0.090
				(0.191)	(0.237)				(0.086)	(0.106)
2004 presidential election				-0.098	-0.539**				0.067	0.004
				(0.175)	(0.229)				(0.082)	(0.105)
2007 Duma election				-0.183	-0.632***				0.117*	-0.016
				(0.152)	(0.207)				(0.063)	(0.080)
2008 presidential election				-0.116	-0.579***				0.046	-0.088
				(0.151)	(0.203)				(0.068)	(0.090)
2011 Duma election				-0.132	-0.529***				0.112	-0.068
				(0.137)	(0.196)				(0.078)	(0.097)
2012 presidential election				-0.111	-0.510***				0.068	-0.027
				(0.128)	(0.192)				(0.049)	(0.074)
2016 Duma election				-0.290**	-0.630***				0.093	-0.097
				(0.122)	(0.179)				(0.081)	(0.099)
2018 presidential election				-0.314**	-0.692***				0.055	-0.003
				(0.130)	(0.190)				(0.044)	(0.063)
Regional controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Region FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kleibergen-Paap F	26.486	20.606	24.856		5.759	26.486	20.606	24.856		5.759
Anderson-Rubin 95% CI	[-1.322, -0.237]	[-0.627, 0.310]	[-1.067, -0.107]			[-0.0338, 0.243]	[-0.577, 0.144]	[-0.222, 0.189]		
Anderson-Rubin p-value					0.002					0.085
N	398	319	717	717	717	398	319	717	717	717

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: The table presents the results of OLS (columns (4) and (9)) and 2SLS analysis (the rest of the table). Presidential elections (in 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2018) are covered in columns (1) and (6); Duma elections (in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2016) - in columns (2) and (7). The dependent variable in columns (3)-(5) and (8)-(10) is pooled shares of votes for the candidate or party. Models in columns (4), (5), (9) and (10) interact Orthodox density with the dummy for each year. Endogenous interactions in column (5)'s and column (10)'s models are instrumented with the interactions of the instrument with the same dummies. Regional controls include the logarithm of real GDP per capita, unemployment rate, and the urban population share. Standard errors in parentheses are clustered by region.

Table B10: The density of Orthodox religious organizations and Putin's personality

	(1) Approval of president OLS	(2) Approval of president 2SLS	(3) Trust in Putin	(4) Vote for Putin
Orthodox density:			-0.719	0.672
			(1.602)	(0.714)
Yeltsin period	0.654*	1.799		
	(0.390)	(1.104)		
Putin period	0.542**	1.118**		
	(0.219)	(0.522)		
Medvedev period	0.862***	1.450**		
	(0.252)	(0.557)		
Individual controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Regional controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Region FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kleibergen-Paap F		6.158	15.942	19.722
Anderson-Rubin 95% CI		[1.799, 3.946]	[-4.333, 2.581]	[-0.520, 2.564]
		[1.118, 2.133]		
		[1.450, 2.534]		
N	35,341	35,341	23,128	16,651

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: The table presents the results of OLS (column (1)) and 2SLS (columns (2)-(4)) analyses of the effect of Orthodox density on the approval rating of the current president (columns (1) and (2)), trust in Putin (column (3)) and readiness to vote for Putin (column (4)). Models in columns (1) and (2) interact Orthodox density with the period dummy for the presidency of Yeltsin (1997-1999), Putin (2000-2003, 2008-2019), Medvedev (2004-2007). Endogenous interactions in column (2)'s model are instrumented with the interactions of the instrument with the same dummies. Individual controls include gender, age, age squared, education, employment status, and an indicator for living in a rural area. Regional controls include the logarithm of real GDP per capita, unemployment rate, and the urban population share. The years of the outcome variable are: 1997-2019 in columns (1) and (2), 2000-2016 in column (3), and 1999-2003, 2005, 2006, 2009-2012, 2014, 2017, 2019 in column (4). Standard errors in parentheses are clustered by region.

Table B11: The density of orthodox religious organizations and protests

			Protests		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Protesters, pc	Protests, total	Political	Economic	Civic
Orthodox density	3.969	-2.041	-1.423	-1.055	2.797
	(3.586)	(7.444)	(4.513)	(3.992)	(6.907)
NGOs per 1,000 pop	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Regional controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Region FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kleibergen-Paap F	9.143	8.495	8.495	8.495	8.495
Anderson-Rubin 95% CI	[-1.453, 16.737]	[-16.346, 5.551]	[-10.244, 5.672]	[-13.760, 4.527]	[-14.503, 13.425]
N	717	800	800	800	800

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: The table presents the results of 2SLS analysis with the following logarithmically transformed dependent variables: maximum number of protesters registered during the year per 1,000 population (column (1)), total number of protests (column (2)), number of political protests (column (3)), number of economic protests (column (4)), number of civic protests (column (5)). Regional controls include the logarithm of real GDP per capita, unemployment rate, the urban population share, and the number of NGOs per 1,000 population. The years of the outcome variables are 2007-2016. Standard errors in parentheses are clustered by region.

Table B12: Romano-Wolf p-values corrected for multiple hypothesis testing

Dependent variable	(1) Original p-value	(2) Bootstrapped p-value	(3) Romano-Wolf p-value
Approval of president	0.0167	0.0010	0.0030
Approval of governor	0.2376	0.0020	0.1039
Approval of Government	0.8735	0.7493	0.7493
Approval of Duma	0.0313	0.0030	0.0030
Trust in president	0.6811	0.3097	0.5964
Vote for gov. candidate	0.4433	0.1848	0.4386
Vote for ruling party	0.5567	0.2817	0.5554
Share of votes for gov. candidate	0.7846	0.7283	0.8501
Share of votes for ruling party	0.1549	0.0639	0.2987
Share of progov. votes	0.4431	0.2847	0.5714
Share of votes for communist cand.	0.0071	0.0010	0.0040
Share of votes for communist party	0.3393	0.1968	0.5325
Share of procommunist votes	0.0118	0.0010	0.0070
Share of votes for liberal dem. cand.	0.2553	0.1389	0.4206
Share of votes for liberal dem. party	0.2090	0.0759	0.3826
Share of proliberal votes	0.6927	0.6244	0.8501
Protests, total	0.2433	0.0929	0.2138
Protesters, per 1,000 pop.	0.7314	0.5135	0.7912
Political protests	0.6635	0.5045	0.7912
Economic protests	0.6210	0.4635	0.7912
Civic protests	0.7628	0.5744	0.7912

Note: The table presents the original analytical uncorrected p-values (column (2)), standard bootstrapped uncorrected p-values (column (3)), and Romano-Wolf p-values corrected for multiple hypothesis testing (column (4)). The p-values correspond to the estimates of the effect of the orthodox density in the regressions with outcomes displayed in column (1). The number of replications is set to 1000.

Table B13: Robustness checks

	Approval of president					
	(1) baseline	(2) distance to Moscow	(3) meshchane	(4) literacy	(5) fed. unit x year FEs	(6) fed. unit FEs, r s.e.
Orthodox density	0.866**	1.091**	0.736**	0.977***	1.374***	0.238***
	(0.352)	(0.421)	(0.349)	(0.300)	(0.435)	(0.092)
Inidividual controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Regional controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Region FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Fed. unit x Year FEs					✓	
Fed. unit FEs						✓
Kleibergen-Paap F	10.826	7.368	10.240	11.548	5.178	8924.083
Anderson-Rubin 95% CI	[0.208, 1.869]	[0.307, 2.619]	[0.085, 1.798]	[0.477, 1.949]	[0.734, 4.914]	[0.033, 0.565]
N	35,341	35,341	34,708	34,708	35,341	35,341

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: The table presents the results of 2SLS analysis with various modifications of the baseline presented in column (1): column (2) - distance to Moscow x year is added, column (3) - historical share of meshchane x year is added, column (4) - historical literacy x year is added, column (5) - year x federal unit fixed effects instead of year fixed effects; column (6) - federal unit FEs instead of region FEs, standard errors are robust. Individual controls include gender, age, age squared, education, employment status, and an indicator for living in a rural area. Regional controls include the logarithm of real GDP per capita, unemployment rate, and the urban population share. The years of the outcome variable are 1997-2019. Standard errors in parentheses are clustered by region in all columns except for column (6), where parentheses contain robust standard errors.

Table B14: Robustness checks (continued)

	Approval of president						
	(1) baseline	(2) 1990 population	(3) w/o Moscow	(4) w/o St.Petersburg	(5) w/o <5th pctl regions	(6) plausibly exogenous	(7) clusters by fed. unit x year
Orthodox density	0.866**	0.866**	0.847**	0.764**	0.720**	3.413***	0.866**
	(0.352)	(0.352)	(0.396)	(0.348)	(0.325)	(1.103)	(0.398)
Individual controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Regional controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Region FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kleibergen-Paap F	10.826	10.826	10.204	10.263	9.893		10.246
Anderson-Rubin 95% CI	[0.208, 1.869]	[0.208, 1.869]	[0.108, 2.052]	[0.115, 1.755]	[0.051, 1.644]		[0.124, 2.076]
N	35,341	35,341	32,716	34,123	33,478	35,395	35,341

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: The table presents the results of 2SLS analysis with various modifications of the baseline presented in column (1): column (2) - the number of monks and nuns in the instrument is scaled by 1990 population, column (3) - Moscow is dropped, column (4) - St.Petersburg is dropped; column (5) - regions with fewer respondents than the 5th percentile are dropped; column (6) - implements an extension by Van Kippersluis and Rietveld (2018) of the local-to-zero "plausibly exogenous" IV estimation developed by Conley, Hansen, and Rossi (2012); column (7) - standard errors are clustered by year x federal unit in addition to region. Individual controls include gender, age, age squared, education, employment status, and an indicator for living in a rural area. Regional controls include the logarithm of real GDP per capita, unemployment rate, and the urban population share. The years of the outcome variable are 1997-2019. Standard errors in parentheses are clustered by region in all columns except for column (7), where they are clustered by region and by year x federal unit.

Table B15: The annexation of Crimea and impact of church network on approval of president

	Approval of president	
	(1)	(2)
	OLS	2SLS
Orthodox density X 1997	1.928**	2.819**
	(0.844)	(1.218)
1998	0.278	1.487
	(0.637)	(1.030)
1999	0.345	0.526
	(0.466)	(0.633)
2000	0.886*	1.166
	(0.500)	(0.755)
2001	0.565	0.818
	(0.417)	(0.584)
2002	0.754**	0.871*
	(0.347)	(0.451)
2003	0.312	0.585
	(0.320)	(0.390)
2004	0.489	0.364
	(0.401)	(0.478)
2005	0.258	0.401
	(0.344)	(0.536)
2006	0.336	0.730*
	(0.316)	(0.372)
2007	0.245	0.361
	(0.434)	(0.501)
2008	0.603*	1.024**
	(0.333)	(0.420)
2009	0.871***	1.091**
	(0.300)	(0.452)
2010	1.380***	1.630***
	(0.360)	(0.439)
2011	0.420	0.838*
	(0.397)	(0.471)
2012	0.629**	0.987**
	(0.302)	(0.453)
2013	0.891***	1.531***
	(0.312)	(0.405)
2014	0.174	0.457
	(0.345)	(0.365)
2015	0.382	0.775**
	(0.334)	(0.371)
2016	0.415	0.624*
	(0.274)	(0.330)
2017	0.378	0.895***
	(0.236)	(0.259)
2018	0.718***	1.063***
	(0.263)	(0.359)
2019	0.723***	1.145***
	(0.255)	(0.351)
Individual controls	✓	✓
Regional controls	✓	✓
Region FEs	✓	✓
Year FEs	✓	✓
Kleibergen-Paap F		1.372
Anderson-Rubin p-value		0.000
N	35,341	35,341

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: The table presents the results of the OLS (columns (1)) and 2SLS (column (2)) analyses where the density of churches is interacted with year dummies. Individual controls include gender, age, age squared, education, employment status, and an indicator for living in a rural area. Regional controls include the logarithm of real GDP per capita, unemployment rate, and the urban population share. The years of the outcome variable are 1997-2019. Standard errors in parentheses are clustered by region.