



Eximia Journal
(ISSN 2784-0735)

Vol. 13
2024

Sacred Power in Secular Politics: Exploring the Role of Orthodox Christian Organizations in U.S. Foreign Policy

Wu, Landuoer

Lumiere Research Foundation – Global

dollyw668@gmail.com

Abstract. This paper aims to examine the involvement and influence of religious non-state actors (RNAs) in the decision-making processes of United States foreign policy. It aims to provide insights into the reasons, mechanisms, and circumstances that lead such entities to engage in foreign policy and influence state actions. Principally utilizing primary sources, it presents original data with a unique glimpse into the strategies employed by RNAs. The paper shows that RNAs can informally but significantly participate in foreign policy decision-making by spotlighting a less-researched area that exists alongside formal initiatives.

Keywords. Religion, Non-state actors, Foreign Policy, United States, Turkey, Orthodox Church

INTRODUCTION

In light of the recent escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War, many headlines such as “The Russian Orthodox Leader at the Core of Putin’s Ambitions”^[1] and “How the Russian Orthodox Church is Helping Drive Putin’s War in Ukraine”^[2] have been frequently appearing in the news. This is no surprise as both Russia and Ukraine are overwhelmingly Orthodox Christian nations.^{[3],[4]} It follows that these events caused the influence and role of Orthodoxy to gain prominent attention on the global stage. As a result, Orthodoxy, as a religious and cultural force, has assumed a substantial role in shaping and influencing the dynamics of international politics and diplomacy. This warranted extensive research and studies concerning exactly how the Orthodox churches achieve this in the Eastern Europe region.

However, the influence of religious non-state actors (RNAs) extends beyond Churches and beyond just Eastern Europe. Even in a nation like the United States, where its Constitution clearly states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion^[5],” and where its most prominent religion, Christianity, now comprises just a bit more than half the population^[6], RNAs still wield significant influence over the nation's foreign policy. Indeed, the reach of RNAs has been underestimated, and its influence overall understudied. This paper aims to shift the attention away from Eastern Europe and the Orthodox church and instead look at how RNA organizations impact U.S. foreign policy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite religion appearing to be of less importance than in the past, there has been a

“resurgence of religion” (with the exception of Western Europe), as observed by Haynes, in the post-Cold War era.^[7] Indeed, the influence of religion had merely experienced a dip in the 17th century, which was then followed by a renewal towards the end of the 20th century and into the 21st. Haynes also noted that this resurgence places emphasis on politicized forms of religion. Although this trend doesn't necessarily affect the daily lives of ordinary citizens due to the nature of 21st-century life, it is reflected in the “increased political involvement of religious actors within many countries, as well as internationally”^[7]. Understanding the implications of increased engagement of RNAs for foreign policy necessitates a closer examination of the existing scholarly literature on this subject.

Influencing Parties and Politicians

One way RNAs influence foreign policy decision-making, especially in religious countries like the U.S. and Russia, is by directly influencing parties and politicians. One such influence is legitimacy. As Fox puts it, “Religion can lend legitimacy to governments as well as specific policies followed by governments”.^[8] He brings up the example of the Iraq War and the war on terror, and argues that “George W. Bush had repeatedly used religious imagery in his justification for the [wars]”. Although Fox is correct, he focuses only on the benefits for politicians and neglects the important advantages RNAs gain by welding this legitimacy. RNAs can directly influence how successful these policies are. Applying this to the previous scenario, it should be noted that Bush was only able to use this rhetoric due to strong support of the effort by Evangelical Churches.^[9] Therefore, it can be said that RNAs themselves have great influence over foreign policy.

Preston reaffirms this power dynamic when he argues for a second method of influence—alliances.^[10] He explains how RNAs can influence the social and cultural positions of political parties through alliances, subsequently impacting their foreign policy decisions. Although this form of alliance is not formal nor explicitly official, it still results in RNAs having more influence over how politicians formulate foreign policies and how they present them to the public. This is demonstrated by Preston's observation of how as the sexual revolution progressed, people who did not think of themselves as religious before began to lean towards conservative Protestant Churches. This allowed the evangelicals to gain more political power, which resulted in them embracing and being influential in Republican party politics.^[10]

Foreign Intervention

Furthermore, Fox observes that when states intervene in other states, “most interventions tend to be along religious lines”. Specifically, he identifies this within the context of ethnic minorities: “When states intervene on behalf of ethnic minorities, over 80% of the time they intervene on behalf of minorities with which they share a religion”.^[8] Given this framework, one could further say that RNAs hold significant influence over the countries in which the U.S. interferes, thereby shaping its foreign policy. Preston adds to this by emphasizing that there is general support from the RNAs regarding foreign interference, especially ones involving their religion. One such instance he brings up is the support for the wars against Iraq: “The Christian Right has been accused of cheerleading for U.S. intervention abroad, most notably in the wars against Iraq in 1991 and 2003”.^[10]

However, although the previous is still true, Preston notes that this type of foreign interference is declining and is being replaced by policies regarding climate change and global poverty. These policies appeal to a broader spectrum of global concerns, which is similar to the concept of soft power.

Soft Power

Originally coined by Nye, soft power refers to “the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment”.^[11] Haynes first briefly mentioned that one form of soft power RNAs possess is their values shaping politicians’ mindsets. This is evidently true, as religion is a large factor in shaping a person’s morality and perception. It follows that his policies are then guided by these factors. However, this merely scratches the surface of RNAs’ soft power, and Haynes goes on to argue that soft power comes from influencing not just politicians but also social movements and coalitions. One such example is demonstrated by human rights issues. RNAs advance and spread their own values on morality in the process of gathering public support for these issues. The more attention the movement pulls, the more soft power the RNAs gain, which in turn, leads to more influence on the general public.^[12]

While these existing literature provides valuable insights into how RNAs influence U.S. foreign policy decision-making, these studies predominantly emphasize the role of public support. The power of RNAs to lend legitimacy and influence foreign policy depends on the extent to which the public adheres to their beliefs, and the amount of influence within the government and the political party they are allied with garners. Similarly, the success of movements aligned with RNAs’ values also relies on activists. However, there are instances where RNAs still exert influence over foreign policy even in the absence of strong public support. Although Orthodox Christians make up only 0.5% of the U.S. population^[13], Orthodox organizations still have a significant impact on the U.S. stance towards Turkey, particularly in the context of religious freedom. This will be clearly demonstrated by the end of this paper.

These observations highlight the multifaceted nature of RNA influence and underscore the importance of examining various dimensions beyond public support in understanding their impact on U.S. foreign policy. Furthermore, besides the dependency on public support, existing literature lacks empirical studies on Orthodox organizations in the realm of foreign policy. This paper seeks to shed light on and address these neglected facets of RNAs’ influence on foreign policy.

METHODOLOGY

This paper utilizes a qualitative methodology that emphasizes literature review as well as elite interviews, process tracing, and primary sources. The researcher will first draw from existing scholarly literature on the broader topics covered by the research question. This will serve as context by acknowledging the research that has already been carried out on these subjects. Then, the researcher will point out the missing pieces of information within these literature that fail to address aspects of the research question. That will be what the extensive research of primary sources and interviews seek to fill.

The primary sources, which are the main data of this paper, consist of primary documents, reports, statements (including press statements), official websites, and news articles that record a firsthand witness of the events. In addition, the elite interviews containing both structured and unstructured formats are essential for gathering information about actors and processes that may not be available through documented sources. Together, this will produce a thorough investigation of the interactions among foreign policy actors and their internal mechanisms, as well as help capture the dynamics of informality alongside states and RNAs. In essence, only by rigorously studying primary sources and conducting interviews that gain access to elites can we discern the reasons, methods, and strategies pursued by various actors and the outcomes they aim to achieve. Indeed, the success of influence in foreign policy by any

non-state actor including RNAs can be attributed to their ability to act with less accountability than traditional state actors.

Given this context, the following will provide an outline of how specifically this research is being conducted. First, the researcher will extensively investigate the available primary sources. Then, a list of relevant interview partners will be compiled and a guideline designed in order to acquire concrete answers. In this paper, an elite familiar with how RNAs interact with the U.S. government and officials will be interviewed. The researcher will then perform subsequent analysis on key themes or issues. After all, the involvement of an RNA can be comprehended by conceptualizing and understanding the decision-making process, the underlying reasons and motivations, and the mechanisms employed to exert political influence, and these insights allow us to ascertain whether an RNA played a role in the given context.

EMPIRICAL CHAPTER

The case study that this paper will examine is the influence of the Order of Saint Andrew the Apostle, Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in America on U.S. foreign policy.

Background

The Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate^[14] are individuals honored by the Patriarch of Constantinople for their dedicated service to specific branches of the Eastern Orthodox Church under his guidance. The Order of Saint Andrew, consisting of Archons residing in America, was established in 1966 by Patriarch Athenagoras. Archbishop Iakovos bestowed this honor upon thirty members of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America at that time. When inducted into the Order of St. Andrew, the honoree collectively pledges an oath to uphold and promote the Greek Orthodox faith and its traditions. The current Grand Commander of the Order is Dr. Anthony J. Limberakis. Under his leadership, the Order has actively advocated for the religious freedom of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople, where the Turkish government has tried to oppress him.^[15]

Relationship with the U.S. Government

As an RNA with limited public support in the U.S., the Order of St. Andrew primarily collaborates with U.S. government commissions to advocate for the religious freedom of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. U.S. commissions are multifaceted bodies designed to serve specific functions in administrative, legislative, and judicial domains.^[16] These commissions typically hold responsibilities related to the implementation and enforcement of statutes, with a focus on executing their designated mandates. One such commission the Order is openly collaborating with is the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)^[17]. Each year, USCIRF publishes an annual report^[18] detailing its observations of the status of religious freedom abroad. As stated by the Order of St. Andrew during the Organization for Security and Cooperation's 2019 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, "in 2019 Turkey continues to be on the 'watch list' of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), as it has been since 2013. According to the 2019 USCIRF Report, 'in 2018 the state of religious freedom in Turkey remained deeply troubling'^[19]". Again, one of the biggest religious oppressors the Ecumenical Patriarch faces is the Turkish government. Another instance of the cooperation between the Order and USCIRF was during the 2010 International Archon Religious Freedom Conference in Brussels where the Order sponsored Dr. Elizabeth Prodromou, the vice chair of USCIRF, to speak on the issue of religious freedom in Turkey^[20].

However, USCIRF, as a commission, can only suggest foreign policy actions and monitor the implementation of such legislation related to religious freedom, but lacks the authority to draft or pass such laws. At the end of the day, the legislative and executive branches of the U.S. government control the concrete foreign policy powers.^[21] This means that the Order of St. Andrew must work with members of these two branches along with USCIRF. This hypothesis was confirmed during the 2019 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting as the Order reveals that it “is also dedicated to defending against religious discrimination for people of faith everywhere. Members of the United States Congress, key U. S. government officials, as well as others committed to the struggle against religious discrimination, are members of the Order”. To study this dynamic further, this paper shall take a look at a specific case where all three actors collaborate together: the Turkey and Ecumenical Patriarchate Religious Freedom Act of 2021.

Turkey and Ecumenical Patriarchate Religious Freedom Act of 2021

The Turkey and Ecumenical Patriarchate Religious Freedom Act of 2021 (H.R.3056) is a bill that was referred to the House of Representatives by the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and was later introduced in the House.^[22] This bill asserts that Congress acknowledges that designating Turkey as a country on the "Special Watch List" for severe violations of religious freedom would be a powerful tool to bring attention to religious freedom abuses in Turkey, particularly those against the Ecumenical Patriarchate. This designation is seen as a method to encourage improvements in religious freedoms and the rights of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Turkey. Through this bill, Congress recommends that the President follow the recommendation of the USCIRF and designate Turkey as a country on the Special Watch List again.

This bill had a total of 13 cosponsors. Congress members were informed of this issue by USCIRF and were targeted to sponsor this bill based on the congressional caucuses they were a member of. For example, most of the cosponsors are either members of the International Religious Freedom Caucus or the Hellenic Caucus (which focuses on human rights issues along with others).^{[23], [24]} USCIRF is also a large provider of information in many of these caucuses. Not only is the USCIRF involved in the policy-making process, but RNAs like the Order of St. Andrew also play a large role, as confirmed by source familiar with this matter who was interviewed for this paper. The persecution of specific religious groups in particular contexts has the ability to unite supporters from both political parties, a phenomenon that is relatively uncommon in the current political landscape. Another instance of this is the attention garnered by issues concerning Christians in the Middle East, which received bipartisan recognition.

Despite the bill not ending up on the House floor for voting, it has made an impact. The “Special Watch List” is designated by the President to the Secretary of State.^[25] Although this legislation is ineffective in the legal sense, the U.S. Department of State under the Secretary continued to point out violations of religious freedom in Turkey in its *2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Turkey* and specifically addressed the continued closure of the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary.^[26] Halki was a seminary of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and its closure deprived the Ecumenical Patriarchate of a facility for training Orthodox clergy in Turkey.^[27] In addition, the Department of State also made a press statement in the same year in light of the 50th Anniversary of the closing of Halki Seminary.^[28] Finally, the Department of State affirmed that the Turkish government was urged by U.S. officials to lift restrictions on oppressed religious groups and make progress on property restitution. Not only did the Department of State take action as an entity, but the former Secretary of State Michael R.

Pompeo was scheduled as a keynote speaker on October 29, 2021, at the Founding Members Banquet of the *Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew Foundation*.^[29] In his speech, Pompeo talked about the persecution of Christians and the state of religious freedom around the world.

CONCLUSION

This paper delved into the engagement of RNAs in U.S. foreign policy decision-making processes, with the aim of understanding the reasons, methods, and conditions under which such actors participate in shaping foreign policy and influencing state actions. Drawing primarily from extensive field research, interviews, and utilizing a range of primary sources, this study has generated an original dataset that offers a unique glimpse into the strategies employed by various RNAs.

The case of the Order of St. Andrew illustrates that RNAs can play an informal, yet meaningful, role in shaping U.S. foreign policy decisions. Even in an explicitly secular nation like the U.S., RNAs still work closely with the government in order to promote their interests such as religious freedom. This collaboration in turn impacts the foreign policy decisions the nation makes. Hence, this study contributes to the advancement of literature surrounding practical foreign policy as it sheds light on this denied and neglected area of foreign policy.

As the Russo-Ukrainian war continues and NATO continues to expand, the role of RNAs especially surrounding Orthodoxy will undoubtedly be more and more prevalent. After all, not only are two Orthodox countries at war but NATO's Eastern Flank is comprised of many overwhelmingly Orthodox countries, such as Romania, Greece, Montenegro, and Bulgaria.^[30] Alas, in an increasingly intricate and rapidly evolving global landscape such as now, it will be imperative to continue to study the role RNAs play in states' foreign policy decision-making processes.

References

- [1] Horowitz, Jason. "The Russian Orthodox Leader at the Core of Putin's Ambitions." *The New York Times*, 21 May 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/05/21/world/europe/kirill-putin-russian-orthodox-church.html.
- [2] "Ukraine - the Russian Invasion of Ukraine | Britannica." *Www.britannica.com*, www.britannica.com/place/Ukraine/The-Russian-invasion-of-Ukraine.
- [3] "Almost 70% of Russians Identify as Orthodox Christians, 19% of Them Observe Lent - Poll." *Interfax.com*, interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/76018/.
- [4] "The Role of Religion in Russia's War on Ukraine." *United States Institute of Peace*, www.usip.org/publications/2022/03/role-religion-russias-war-ukraine#:~:text=It%20also%20ignores%20the%20fact.
- [5] "The Constitution of the United States: A Transcription." *National Archives, The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration*, 2018, www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript.
- [6] Blake, John. "Predictions about the Decline of Christianity in America May Be Premature." *CNN*, 8 Apr. 2023, www.cnn.com/2023/04/08/us/christianity-decline-easter-blake-cec/index.html.
- [7] Haynes, Jeffrey. "Introduction." *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*. London, Routledge, 2010.
- [8] Fox, Jonathan. "Integrating Religion into International Relations Theory"

- [9] “NPR : Profile : Silent Evangelical Support of Bush’s Proposed War against Iraq.” Legacy.npr.org, legacy.npr.org/programs/morning/transcripts/2003/feb/030226.hagerty.html.
- [10] Preston, Andrew. “The Deeper Roots of Faith and Foreign Policy.” *International Journal*, vol. 65, no. 2, 2010, pp. 451–62. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25681121>.
- [11] Nye, Joseph S. “Soft Power.” *Foreign Policy*, no. 80, 1990, pp. 153–71. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>.
- [12] Glenza, Jessica. ““Historical Accident”: How Abortion Came to Focus White, Evangelical Anger.” *The Guardian*, 5 Dec. 2021, www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/05/abortion-opposition-focus-white-evangelical-anger.
- [13] Author, No. “Orthodox Christianity in the 21st Century.” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, 8 Nov. 2017, www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/11/08/orthodox-christianity-in-the-21st-century/#:~:text=Orthodox%20Christians%20in%20the%20United.
- [14] “History - Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.” [Www.archons.org](http://www.archons.org), www.archons.org/about/history.
- [15] “Non-Recognition of “Ecumenical” Status - Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.” [Www.archons.org](http://www.archons.org), www.archons.org/religious-freedom-issues/non-recognition-of-ecumenical-status.
- [16] “Commission | Government.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/topic/commission-government.
- [17] “Efforts in the United States - Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.” [Www.archons.org](http://www.archons.org), www.archons.org/archon-efforts/united-states.
- [18] “Annual Reports | USCIRF.” www.uscirtf.gov, 2021, www.uscirtf.gov/annual-reports.
- [19] The Status of the Ecumenical Patriarchate the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe 2018 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw, Poland Working Session 6 Tolerance and Non-Discrimination. 2018.
- [20] <https://www.uscirtf.gov/user/41>. “USCIRF Vice Chair Elizabeth Prodromou on U.S. Perspectives on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Turkey.” USCIRF, 2023, www.uscirtf.gov/publications/uscirtf-vice-chair-elizabeth-prodromou-us-perspectives-freedom-religion-or-belief.
- [21] Masters, Jonathan. “U.S. Foreign Policy Powers: Congress and the President.” Council on Foreign Relations, Council on Foreign Relations, 2 Mar. 2017, www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-foreign-policy-powers-congress-and-president.
- [22] [Congress.gov](http://www.congress.gov), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/3056/all-actions?s=1&r=11&overview=closed>.
- [23] “International Religious Freedom Caucus - Summary from LegiStorm.” [Www.legistorm.com](http://www.legistorm.com), www.legistorm.com/organization/summary/122536/International_Religious_Freedom_Caucus.html.
- [24] “Hellenic Caucus.” Congressman Brad Sherman, 15 Aug. 2022, sherman.house.gov/helleniccaucus.
- [25] “Frequently Asked Questions: IRF Report and Countries of Particular Concern.” United States Department of State, www.state.gov/frequently-asked-questions-irf-report-and

- countries-of-particular-concern/#:~:text=The%20Secretary%20of%20State%2C%20under.
- [26] “Turkey.” United States Department of State, 2 June 2022, www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/turkey/.
- [27] “50 Years and Counting: The Continued Closure of Halki Seminary in Turkey | USCIRF.” [Www.uscirf.gov](http://www.uscirf.gov), 2021, www.uscirf.gov/news-room/uscirf-spotlight/50-years-and-counting-continued-closure-halki-seminary-turkey.
- [28] “50th Anniversary of the Closing of Halki Seminary.” United States Department of State, www.state.gov/50th-anniversary-of-the-closing-of-halki-seminary/.
- [29] “Secretary Pompeo to Deliver Keynote Address at Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew Foundation Founding Members Banquet - Archon News Article - Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.” [Www.archons.org](http://www.archons.org), www.archons.org/-/pompeo-keynote-oct29.
- [30] NW, 1615 L. St, et al. “1. Orthodox Christianity’s Geographic Center Remains in Central and Eastern Europe.” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, 8 Nov. 2017, www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/11/08/orthodox-christianitys-geographic-center-remains-in-central-and-eastern-europe/.