

## ANALYTICAL COLUMN

# From Abortions to HIMARS — the ROC Explains Everything, and It Irritates Russians

*Liubov Tsybulska, Join Ukraine*

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<b>Author</b>	Liubov Tsybulska — Founder & Director, Join Ukraine
<b>Source</b>	Join Ukraine OSINT monitoring (VKontakte & Telegram, 2025-26)
<b>Sample</b>	≥ critical posts on the ROC in VK (2025), regional Telegram, last 3 months
<b>Published</b>	ZN.ua, 30 May 2026

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Pets won't make it to heaven. Vitamins are "nonsense." Aliens might be angels. HIMARS strikes are God's punishment for abortions. And the greatest danger to a person is "having one's own opinion." These are real public statements made by representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church over the past year.

The ROC long ago moved beyond the walls of the church. It stands alongside Putin, governors, the school, the army, conversations about the birth rate, "traditional values," and the war against Ukraine. Its voice mostly sounds not like pastoral advice but like part of a state signpost: what to love, whom to support, how to raise children, for whom to pray, and when it is better not to ask unnecessary questions.

The number of Russians who call themselves Orthodox has doubled over the past three decades, and today it is about 75% of the country's population. But according to [data](#) from Pew Research Center, only 6% of them attend church weekly, and 15% say religion is very important in their lives. "Orthodox," in the Russian case, is mostly a cultural label rather than a matter of church life. A Russian may light a candle at Easter and at the same time be angry when church hierarchs meddle in school, medicine, or the war.

Social media show this contradiction well. Since 2022, we at Join Ukraine have been studying public sentiment in Russia's regions, coding millions of posts and comments on VKontakte and Telegram every year. Over the course of 2025, we separately analyzed thousands of posts about the ROC, its role in the war, its alliance with the authorities, and the rhetoric of the clergy. Criticism of the ROC in Russian regional social media is not a mass anti-clerical movement, but a steady background of irritation. It contains sarcasm, distrust, everyday anger, and a sense that the church has become just another bureaucrat's office, only with a censor. This is a story not only about VKontakte. In a regional Telegram sample over the past three months, we recorded at least 1,424 critical posts about the ROC

in virtually all regions. The greatest indignation is caused by imposition, privileges, money, political loyalty, and the clergy's confidence that it is entitled to comment on everything — from abortions to the school curriculum.

In terms of the volume of discussions, the war is not the main topic in our data: Russians on social media often react more actively to school, money, or absurd statements. But it is precisely the war that best shows how far the ROC has drifted from the role of a spiritual institution.

The Russian Orthodox Church stands firmly alongside the state and helps lend the aggression a sacred meaning. In 2024, OSW wrote that a structure linked to the ROC and headed by Patriarch Kirill [called](#) the war against Ukraine “holy.” In 2026, Chatham House separately [described](#) how the church's role in military recruitment and support for the army is becoming increasingly noticeable.

In Russian social media, this role is perceived without reverence. When the clergy explains frontline risks as [punishment](#) for swearing, commentators reduce it to a formula: killing is allowed, the main thing is no foul language. When [stories](#) appear about an icon that “saved a soldier,” the reaction is skepticism or jokes. Behind them stands a more serious claim: the church talks about the war from a safe distance but asks others to treat it as a moral authority.

There is another layer. Church figures [tie](#) military events to sins, abortions, “wrong” behavior, or a lack of obedience. This is convenient for the state: blame can be shifted downward, onto citizens, rather than onto those who make the decisions. The same institution that blesses the war machine simultaneously claims the role of moral arbiter inside Russia.

The same motif appears in the patriarch's public statements. In December 2025, Fontanka [wrote](#) that Kirill urged Russians to thank God for the authorities and called the present time “very prosperous.” It is the official loyalty of a state functionary wrapped in church rhetoric.

School is another zone of steady irritation. From September 1, 2026, Russian schools are beginning to introduce the subject “Spiritual and Moral Culture of Russia.” As the media [report](#), in the 2026/2027 academic year the course will be taught in the fifth grade, and from 2027/28 — in the fifth, sixth, and seventh. Its description includes not only “traditional values” but also the study of heroes of the “SVO”: the war is already being built into the moral-educational framework for children.

Against this background, the proposal by Metropolitan Yevgeny of Yekaterinburg to replace social studies with lessons on Orthodox culture in the senior grades stood out as especially telling. The “Rossiyskaya Gazeta” [wrote](#) about this, and regional channels, [including](#) “Typical Voronezh,” picked up the topic. This sparked one of the most substantive discussions: some commentators read the proposal as an attempt to replace secular education with managed upbringing under a religious banner.

Alongside school is private life. In Join Ukraine's VK monitoring, an entire set of topics is noticeable where the ROC acts as an arbiter of family, reproduction, and “correct” behavior: abortions,

contraception, having many children, childless men, upbringing, family conflicts. To [stories](#) about church initiatives on abortions, commentators react not with theological arguments but with a very down-to-earth question: who will then pay for the consequences of this advice? If the church calls for having more children — will it support the child, treat the mother, pay for the education?

This topic is especially sensitive for Russians, because the state itself is actively moving toward control over private life: demography, the “traditional family,” bans, the stigmatization of childlessness. Church moralizing collides with reality: low incomes, expensive housing, poor medicine, and the war. Against this background, the call to “just pray” sounds roughly like advice to eat cake when there is no bread.

Money, privileges, and urban space are another steady topic. In our [study](#), it is noticeable that commentators are irritated by stories about the tithe, donations of property, the construction of churches in contested urban areas, expensive restorations, and church ceremonies attended by local authorities. The criticism here is very practical: if a city lacks transport, medicine, or proper amenities, news of yet another deduction for a church or the construction of a new cathedral is perceived accordingly.

The 2026 Telegram report also contained pinpoint but telling cases: in a St. Petersburg crematorium, the police were called over a conflict between priests about the fee for a funeral service; in Yekaterinburg, the appointment of a priest’s wife to a high university position caused outrage. Such stories do not create an anti-clerical program, but they feed the main feeling: the ROC is part of a world of connections, positions, money, and access.

Absurd statements are a separate genre that gathers the largest reach: social media love short formulas that practically beg to become memes. Among the viral occasions are [statements](#) that pets “won’t make it to heaven,” that vitamins are “nonsense,” that aliens might be angels, and that bad officials befell Russians because of the people’s sins. The [story](#) about a pig-to-human organ transplant also spread separately, discussed in regional channels as an example of strange church expertise. At such moments, the ROC seems to moonlight as the editor of a satirical channel itself. For free, with inspiration, with complete dedication.

But behind the absurdity lies a deeper crisis of authority. Commentators mock not only a specific phrase but also the ROC’s claim to speak in the name of higher truth on any topic. When an institution linked to power, war, and school simultaneously produces statements about the sinfulness of illnesses, tattoos, education, or female independence — its words begin to be met with hostility. One can laugh at cats in heaven. But the laughter ends when the same voice comes into a textbook, a hospital, or a military unit.

Criticism of the ROC in Russian social media is not limited to Moscow. In the Telegram monitoring, Moscow was only fourth in the number of critical posts, with a share below the average. The highest relative concentration of criticism is in Chechnya (5.87% of all regional negativity) and in Dagestan (4%), which is several times higher than the all-Russian average. This is a separate layer. In the

Caucasus and part of the Volga region, criticism of the ROC is connected not with jokes about yet another strange quote but with a sense of inequality between faiths. In Dagestani channels [such as](#) “Netipichnaya Makhachkala,” the church theme easily shifts into a conversation about the center and the periphery, “us” and “them,” loyalty and the right to one’s own identity. For Muslim regions, the ROC is a symbol of a federal Russian identity that has access to the state apparatus, school upbringing, ceremonies, and privileges.

A high share of ROC criticism in the Caucasus does not mean liberal or anti-war protest. It is often a different type of competition: a local Muslim identity against the Orthodox frame that the federal center presents as all-Russian. But that is precisely why this data is useful: it shows that the attempt to make Orthodoxy the universal language of Russian statehood does not work equally everywhere. In a multi-confessional country, the church-state model may not unite but rather underscore inequality.

The alliance of the ROC and the state gives the Kremlin a convenient ideological language. Through it, one can speak of the war as a mission, of obedience as a virtue, of power as a blessing, of school as a space for proper upbringing. But for the ROC itself, this alliance is a trap. The closer it stands to the state, the more often its statements are read as an order from above. Criticism of the ROC in Russian social media rarely looks like a consistent political position — it is more like irritation, sarcasm, and fatigue. But where the church speaks with the voice of the state, it is answered as a state: with distrust, anger, and jokes that are sometimes more precise than long sociological questionnaires.

And a system that people start laughing at and stop believing in mobilizes people for war far worse.