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The Role of Religion in Russia's Ukraine War. Part 1: A Map of the Situation

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Abstract In Russia's 2022 Ukraine war the role of religion is manifest in the "metaphysical" narratives anchoring (and feeding into) it, and – to that end – in religion's amalgamation with apparently "anticipatory" nationalist-eschatological philosophies. These depict themselves as "spiritual" to play the role of ideological "proto-religions" in order to ground old-new policies of territorial conquest in alleged meta-historical patterns. The return of the use of religion to justify aggression and war by simplifying complex conflict patterns and clothing bullying, violence and killing into allegedly metaphysical ideals is a signal of historical regress.

Keywords Ukraine War · Russia · Religion · Orthodoxy · Eschatology · Geopolitics · Imaginal Politics · Ideology

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Die Rolle der Religion in Russlands Ukraine-Krieg. Teil 1: Eine Landkarte der Situation

Zusammenfassung Die Rolle der Religion in Russlands Krieg in der Ukraine zeigt sich beispielhaft in den „metaphysischen" Narrativen, die die Aggression seit Februar 2022 begründen und nähren. An den ideologischen Grundlagen des Kriegs zeigt sich auch die Verschmelzung von Religion mit nationalistisch-eschatologischen Philosophien, die sich selbst als „spirituell" darstellen, um ein „religiös-antizipatives" Geschichtsbewusstsein auf der Grundlage von Gewalt zu begründen. Die Rückkehr der Religion zur Rechtfertigung kriegerischer Aggression mittels Vereinfachung komplexer Konfliktinteressen ist ein Zeichen für historischen Rückschritt.

Schlüsselwörter Ukraine-Krieg · Russland · Religion · Orthodoxie · Eschatologie · Geopolitik · Imaginal Politics · Ideologie

1 Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has been the first such traditional "landmass war" carried out unilaterally by one nation against another in these proportions since WWII in Europe. It started on February 24, 2022, and has been widely discussed as a "turning point" in European and international relations (Atlantikbrücke 2022) as well as a "catalyst" into a "different geopolitical era" (Criekmans 2022). What has been undervalued though is the role of religion, spirituality and related esoteric-eschatological narratives, which are used as carriers of a metaphysically-loaded ideological nationalism in order to justify the aggression. In Russia's 2022 Ukraine war, religion in its most anti-progressive understanding is once again being instrumentalized

- to systematically sustain the fight of an authoritarian, in many ways "quasi-fascist" regime (Motyl 2015; Snyder 2022; Will 2022; The Economist 2022) for relevance in the international system;
- to feed anti-internationalism in favor of a universalist nationalism, often condensed in the term "Russkiy mir", or "Russian World" (DGAP 2016);
- to conceive the nation it rules as a "civilization in itself and for its own right" to isolate it from the rest of the international community in order to better control it through patriarchic oppression (Hu Wei 2022);
- to justify historic revanche ambitions and to restore totalitarian Soviet-style power and geopolitical expansionism;
- and to consolidate, exploit and amplify the impact of an authoritarian regime on re-globalization (Benedikter 2021a), i.e., onto the ongoing transition process of the liberal global order implemented by the West after WWII into an allegedly upcoming multi-polarity (Alekseenkova 2021).

Indeed, since the mid of the 2010s the global order has been increasingly questioned by the joint rise of an alliance of ever more confident and geopolitically audacious authoritarian regimes. Their leaders are present in the United Nation's

Security Council (UNSC), Russia and China, and they feature an increasing number of sympathizers. Together, the authoritarian alliance interprets the current "re-globalization" process (Benedikter 2021b) as their chance to establish their own non-democratic, "vertical" order. Their three approaches to do so are

- changing the existing system through repeated and targeted provocation and intimidation, such as in the South China sea or with regard to Hongkong and Taiwan. This also includes, in the hopes of Putin, his war against Ukraine;
- establishing their global mega-projects, such as China's "New Silk Road" (Chatzky and McBride 2020) and its attempted "Global Power Grid" (Global Energy Interconnection, GEI) (Cornell 2019), as well as Russia's grip onto the Arctic (Solski 2022; cf. Saakashvili 2019); and overall,
- strategically and rhetorically paralleling the existing "one globalization for all" by the concept of "two globalizations for two different ideological blocs" (Benedikter 2022a).

Taken together, the goal is to transform "re-globalization" into an instrument to establish an "alternate form of globalization". To do so, the Russian authoritarian regime under Vladimir Putin (1999–present) has used religion as a particularly effective leverage of Manichean-style (Us against them) neo-nationalism and of both "hybrid" and traditional warfare. The return of religion and eschatology to justify the return of European 18th century imperialism—Putin has been actively referring to the example and legacy of Peter the Great, 1682–1725 (Roth 2022)—by bringing destruction to 21st century Europe indicates a worrisome trend. It can be of far-reaching consequences for the phase of global transition and with its impact it profoundly misrepresents the potential positive role of religion for a constructive and cooperative re-globalization effort.

2 The re-politicization of religion by neo-expansive autocracies: a tool to "re-globalize" the Western-led liberal order against itself and its values

In my book *Religion in the Age of Re-Globalization* (Benedikter 2022b) I identified 21 trends that shape the situation of religion and spirituality in today's "re-globalizing" world (Benedikter 2021a, b). As one of these trends, I asserted that one major trajectory of "re-globalization" – and of the related new frontiers of social, economic and political globalism (Benedikter et al. 2022) – is the re-conjunction of traditional religion with nationalist governmental and state politics. This happens mostly in authoritarian, illiberal and borderline systems, which, despite their (in most cases) apparent opportunistic secularism, are increasingly instrumentalizing religion – including its spectrum of sub- and related fields – to serve as the old-new tool to justify expansionist, neoimperial and aggressive policies. In addition, they nurture an ideological basis in (proto-)eschatological philosophies which are often strongly referring to traditional religions. They utilize religious rhetoric to "close the ranks" internally and to facilitate conflict and war towards the outside.

The new convergence of religion and state politics is what we have seen on the rise not only in Russia, but as a trend in various parts of the globe. Indeed, in many places religion today is serving once again as the immaterial kit used to justify and unify authoritarian and totalitarian governmental logics. Religion is used as the instrument for – and expression of – a new "unitarism" between state, rulers' ideology, population, community-building narratives and institutionalized order. In particular, religious discourse is used to recreate the classical myth of the uniform "modern" nation state "from one cast" of the 19th century which, allegedly,—unites belief, culture, language and sense of belonging all in perfect uniformity, and in such is diametrically opposed to what authoritarians often call the diversity mess of democracies, the transnational disorder or the globalization chaos".

In its ideal self-projection, the new neo-unitarism combines clear borders against the external world with the assimilation of minorities internally. In the present turn to "re-globalization", religion is used to re-implement this unitarist narrative in a world that over the past decades has been following the exact opposite logics. The grand narrative behind Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is the myth of a "unitarian modern nation" which is "its own civilization". Yet the liberal global order since the 1990s has promoted the coming-into-existence of globalized, i.e., "post-unitarian" and "post-modern" "post-nations" – for example in the European Union where nations have become mutually borderless and thus to some extent permeable against each other. Such "open societies" are indeed open, with all the pros and cons connected with this choice. They aspire to reach beyond civilizational lines and cultivate an ethics of accentuated internal pluralism, trans-sectorial interaction and participation. They also include gender-emancipation to overcome patriarchic patterns, and they practice the validation of minorities with a strong accent on human rights. For the past thirty years (ca. 1990–2020), globalization and globalism (Steger 2008) have tried to bridge civilizations by making them more permeable in order to foster an emerging global "meta-civilization" for humanity. In this they were sustained by global bodies such as the UN, UNESCO, WTO, IMF or the World Bank (Eurac Center for Advanced Studies 2021). Globalization, in its idealist form, for example in the form of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), has referred not only to common global minimum value standards of in principle – and necessarily – rather cosmopolitan and thus liberal orientation, but also to "transversal" international challenges to be solved jointly, such as the climate emergency, global migration or growing economic, technological and social interdependencies.

In contrast, already since 9/11 but unnoticed by many a traditionalist and regressive religious discourse – of a variety of affiliations – has returned to the international stage as an enforcer of a rather de-globalizing identity conception (Eurac Center for Advanced Studies 2021). In fact, religion has been increasingly used by authoritarian politics as a tool to shift the definitions of "globalism" (of problems) towards a more abstract, often nebulous "universalism" or even "cosmologism" (i.e. coating secular ideas with metaphysical paint); and of "cosmopolitanism" (i.e. the ideology of globalism) towards the "re-empowerment" of "sovereignty" (used as a pseudo-ethical mask for neo-nationalism).

Although considered a historical anachronism, this "return of religion" to a carrier of "separatist civilizational" politics and as a – sometimes more explicit, some-

times more implicit – vehicle of non-democratic rulers' power projections and their "imaginal politics" (Bottici 2014) seems to be a strong factor and even driver of contemporary development. Religion as a political factor is living through a highly-differentiated and sometimes sophisticated process of revitalization. Within the re-globalization process, the re-positioning of religion at the center of forcibly "unitarian" socio-political narratives often falsely tries to depict itself positively as a process of "de-polarization" (Carothers and O'Donehue 2019): i.e. as an alleged re-unification of the secular and the spiritual, the collective and the individual, and the public and the private spheres. In reality though, its aspired monolithic effects are exactly the contrary: they are deeply polarizing and disruptive for peaceful coexistence and cooperative problem solving both at home and abroad.

The contemporary trend to re-politicize religion for in most cases narrow interests obviously does not take anything away from the indelible and lasting value of religion *per se*. But if we observe the ongoings in Modi's India (Jaffrelot 2021), Erdogan's Turkey (Yavuz and Oezturk 2021), Sharif's Pakistan (Warraich 2017), and many other places in Africa, and the underlying trends even in nations such as the USA, in Latin America and in various Central Eastern European (CEE) nations such as, for example, Kaczyński's Poland (The Columbia Social Work Review 2021) or Orbán's Hungary (Martin and Gallaher 2020), it can be noted that religion tends once again to being degradated to a tool for purposes that are not necessarily inbuilt in its own *raison d'être*.

3 An exemplary case: The evolving convergence of politics and religion in Putin's Russia (1999–present)

Perhaps the place where we have seen such regression of religion to a servant of a "metaphysically loaded" nationalism – and, beyond that, of a "transversal" and encompassing de-globalization attempt – at work most clearly is contemporary Russia. The use of religion as a vessel for state ideology has been latent as a substitute for the crash of communist ideology since 1989–1991. But it fully concretized in its present form, in gradual steps, only with the tenure of President Vladimir Putin (since 1999). Since then, religion's role has continuously expanded to tighten the rains internally and to co-create an "alternative" geopolitical narrative towards the outside (Kirby 2022; Gardner 2022). In this process it has contributed to make Russia's stance towards the international political sphere more hostile. Religion in Russia's domestic sphere has acted as a force of internal "unity" against pluralism, which has put the country in direct opposition to the developmental patterns of civil societies in most of the rest of Europe. Russia today presents the weakest pluralism and strongest political uniformity in the largest geographical space; European democracies, in contrast, the strongest plurality in comparatively small spaces. The result: a direct opposition of geo-political parameters, value patterns, socio-psychologies and mindsets. In fact, the systemic-geographic dichotomy also reflects the struggle of two value formations, not only political systems. It is not by chance that Putin's war in Ukraine has been classified as a war of—fundamentally opposed—values, in specific of autocratic habits and their reckless culture of vested

interests against the basic values of the open societies of the West. As for example the German press wrote,

> [Former German Federal President] Joachim Gauck made it clear that Russia's war [against Ukraine] is also directed against Germany. 'Russia makes no secret of the fact that it is waging a war against our democracy, against our way of life, against our freedom,' Gauck said. And [thus] the German Federal Republic, he said, must do everything it can to help 'stop Russia in its imperial madness' (Piatov 2022b).

The intricate relation between classical "unitarian" Russian Christian Orthodoxy and Putin's reign, as well as the related effects on national political and strategic decision-making, have long been a subject of analysis and controversy. Many of those trying to "make sense of Russia's illiberalism" (Laruelle 2020) have considered the return – and subsequent state-backed strengthening – of religious discourse in Russia's public rationality a prime ideological necessity of an increasingly oppressive system. From early on, the development reached far beyond the question whether illiberal "democracy needs religion" (Fradkin 2000) or not. The new convergence between religion and state in Russia was also widely independent of the question to which extent the "twin tolerations" (Stepan 2000) – that is, "the minimal boundaries of freedom of action that must somehow be crafted for political institutions vis-a-vis religious authorities, and for religious individuals and groups vis-a-vis political institutions" – were integrated into the development of the Russian regime from a "steered democracy" and an "opaque" and "managed illiberalism" at the start of the 2000s to a "clearly autocratic" and openly oppressive oligarchy since the 2010s.

Of the many facets involved, "Orthodoxy and Putinism" has become a field of extensive studies for more than twenty years. While the intricate relation between theology, religion and politics has always been a factor for those forces who wanted to create and protract what they regarded as the Russian empire and, in modern times, the "meta-pluralist" post-Soviet Russian identity (Astafieva 2018), the relationship has continuously evolved since 1991 (White and McAllister 2000). Religious observance increased dramatically in a Russia that in the "hour zero" of the collapse of Communism felt naked, without orientation and alone (White et al. 1994) The Orthodox Church was quick to respond to this socio-psychological state to fill the void. It first melted religion with secularism. As the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's "Task Force on U.S. Policy Toward Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia" wrote as early as in 2017,

> The [Russian] Orthodox Church developed a 'this-worldly' theology already [...] in pre-revolutionary times [i.e. before 1989–1991]; hence its engagement in secular issues [afterwards] [was] hardly something new. The post-Soviet religious revival began [...] outside the Church and [...] has remained *rastserkovlennyi* (unchurched). The Orthodox clergy and laity held a broad spectrum of belief (from a chauvinistic orthodox-alt to trans-confessional liberalism). Patriarch Aleksii II (1990–2008) focused mainly on brick-and-mortar rechurching, reacquiring and rebuilding physical churches, with minimal engagement in secular issues. Patriarch Kirill [I.] (2009–present) has expanded the rechurching to

emphasize the so-called inner mission through media and message. The patriarch's rhetoric seek[ed] to exhort and mobilize in the name of *raison d'église*, not *raison d'état* (Freeze 2017).

While this might have been the case until 2017, it has changed dramatically since. The Wilson Center has pointed out that in Putin times (since 1999) both church and politics increasingly moved closer to mutually sustain each other in order to use their – from early on clearly nationalist – alliance to "mobilize" the largest possible parts of Russian society for allegedly common goals:

What is really the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russian federal politics? Several events of the late 1990s prompted analysts of Russian politics to believe that the Russian Orthodox Church was gaining increased influence over the federal government. For example, the passage of a 1997 national law [when Putin was still the – influential in the matter – director of the FSB, the national Federal Security Service and successor of the KGB], restricting certain religious organizations from carrying out missionary work in the Russian Federation, was considered a political victory for the Orthodox Church, whose leadership lobbied the government heavily for the legislation. Additionally, the presence of the Russian Orthodox Church was ubiquitous starting in 1995. Images of Orthodox priests blessing new buildings, military installations, and construction sites throughout Russia [were] examples of the Church's [new] presence in everyday life. The Patriarch also conferred his blessing on each new president, further highlighting the growing public presence of the Church (Liedy 2011).

This went along with a growingly expansive and actively exclusive political activism against domestic competitors:

Since 1992, the Church had called for the restriction of other religious organizations competing with the Russian Orthodox Church on Russian territory; the introduction of Orthodox chaplains in the military; the restitution of Church property; and the introduction of an Orthodox component to the curriculum of public schools. The Church's informal demands addressed moral issues, such as the banning of abortion [...]. The central assumption behind the Church's demands vis-à-vis the state was that the Russian Orthodox Church represented 80 percent of the population of the state; therefore, it seemed logical for the government to consider the demands of the [Orthodox] Church based on its [allegedly] overwhelming backing among the Russian people. The state essentially believed this line of reasoning through [Boris] Yeltsin's reelection in 1996 (Laruelle 2020).

But on this well-prepared, evolving basis the "real big turn" towards a veritable "fusion" of religion and state had still to come. As again the Wilson Center rightly pointed out,

The Church-state relationship [...] changed significantly over the... years, [particularly] with the election of President Dmitry Medvedev [2008] and the enthronement of Patriarch Kirill I. [2009]. This change in leadership led to

> a growing recognition by the state of the Church's demands. With respect to the Church's 'staple list of demands', the leadership [...] managed to obtain the right to recover its property, thereby making the Patriarchate potentially the largest property owner in the Russian Federation. Additionally, the Church was granted authority to appoint military chaplains in the Russian Army, as well as to implement a modified version of Russian Orthodox education in public schools. Indeed, three things the Russian Orthodox Church [had] unsuccessfully lobbied for [...] were granted to the Patriarchate within a year or two of the turnover in leadership in both the Church and the presidency [in 2008 and 2009] (Liedy 2011).

The reason for these far-reaching concessions was that according to Liedy, "Dmitry Medvedev is a somewhat more religious man than Vladimir Putin, and Patriarch Kirill I of the Orthodox Church is a much more forceful personality than his predecessor, Alexy II" (Liedy 2011). Yet in effect, after the return of former KGB agent and "forceful personality" Vladimir Putin to the presidency in 2012, following, by previous agreement, Medvedev's presidential term, Kirill apparently managed to "make Putin more religious", too. He impressed Putin with his knowledge about and acknowledgment of the traditional, long-standing relationship between religion and imperialism in Russia's history. In so doing, and by appealing to Putin's historic post-Soviet *ressentiments*, Kirill rapidly developed a growingly intimate relationship with the Kremlin's strongman, who, as appeared long clear, was there to stay in increasingly concentrated and unquestionable power indefinitely. During Putin's following repeated inaugurations, Kirill usually sat in the first row and soon gained the reputation as "the man who blesses Putin's rockets and lives in luxury" (Spyropoulou 2022). The subsequent development was to some extent only logical. As German media wrote at the start of Putin's 2022 Ukraine war, "Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, stands by Putin during his bloody war in Ukraine, blessing tanks and missiles, [and] declaring the West and Ukraine 'forces of evil' shortly after the invasion" (Spyropoulou 2022).

4 At the beginnings: The eschatological psychology of encirclement and anticipation

Yet, this was only a first culminating point of a longer, not always uncomplicated story. Religious pluralism had it never easy in Russia. Authoritarianism and traditionalism profited from each other over most of the country's history for reasons apparently deeply rooted in the psychology of its beginnings. Of these, the foundations and backgrounds of "rus" may be the psychologically most important. It is the story of the so-called "wandering communities" of Norman settlers who rowed in from the North ("rus" is an Old Norse term for "men who row") into unchartered territory along the river Dnieper and eventually settled in the area of the Kyiv Rus, creating the first villages around it (History Channel 2019). During their early development from the 10th century A.D. on, these settlers had to continuously endure enemy attacks mainly from the East, eventually feeling the need to forcibly expand

the borders of their early territory to be safe from future foreign attacks by the means of anticipation, i.e., by attacking first. This approach evolved in grand style under the reign of Ivan the Terrible (Ivan Grozny IV of Russia, ruler from 1547 to 1575), who conquered large territories in the East by partly waging a war of extinction against actual and potential enemies.

This deeply rooted experience of continuous threats and encirclement from the outside, combined with the success of anticipation in—actual or potential—conflict produced a somewhat lasting psychology revolving around the need of "anticipating threats from the outside". It triggered a mechanism of "natural expansion" that the late Roman Empire similarly claimed. In essence, this mechanism consists in the – conscious and subconscious – conviction that expansion is necessary because it is "anticipatory self-defense". As Rome before, Russian rulers justified the nascent empire's expansion over centuries with the need of anticipating outside attacks. This founding psychology may explain, to the present day, the – in principle and literal – "stand-alone" psychology of Russian leaders who feel constantly threatened, and even encircled, from the outside even without evidence. It may explain why they feel urged to anticipatorily expand their territory even when they already have the largest on earth available.

Over the course of history, Orthodox religion gave this founding psychology a justificatory narrative, putting anticipatory expansion on the "right side" of history, of humanity and even of God. From early on, Orthodoxy became the main carrier for equipping the psychology of anticipatory expansion with a missionary narrative: the defense of Christianity, the implementation of "moral" statehood and the "right way to live" by defending and imposing one's own values against never-ending outside threats. The trend to a conscious renewal of the traditional "moralization" of Russian politics started at the beginning of the 2010s (Popova 2017) and continued thereafter with Putin's 2020 reform of the nation's constitution which reenforced Orthodox, patriarchal and authoritarian elements (Pomeranz 2020). It all ultimately culminated in the Kremlin leader's address on the eve of his Ukraine invasion on 21st February 2022, which made Putin the self-declared grand defender of "traditional values" in the service of the "true Russia" (Putin 2022; cf. Rollins 2022).

The secularized West observed this evolution with growing skepticism and rejection. Jeremy W. Lamoreaux and Lincoln Flake rightly pointed out already in 2018 that

> The apparent "symphonia" of church-state cooperation in Russia is a matter of concern in the [secularized] West. By some accounts the [2014] war in Ukraine [i.e. Putin's first invasion leading to the annexation of the Crimea peninsula and the subsequent "frozen war" in the Donbass since April 2014] kicked that collusion into another gear entirely, with the Russian Orthodox Church now a fully assimilated part of the Kremlin's domestic and foreign policy machine [...]. The rise in political authoritarianism in Russia and its neighborhood is being matched by [the fact that] [...] both the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church benefit from the policies and practices of the other. Consequently, [it] is not a good time to be a member of a non-traditional church or of a so-called foreign sect in Russia. More disconcerting, a continuation of these trends may

> portend further crackdowns not just on religious freedoms, but across the spectrum of civil liberties in Russia (Lamoreaux and Flake 2018).

The authors concluded, anticipating aspects of what indeed came as an encompassing "crackdown" on the nation's civil society shortly before and since the 2022 Ukraine invasion:

> Perhaps most disconcerting is what this [...] portends for civil society at large in Russia. Freedom of religion is usually a reliable barometer of the long-term trajectory of civil society. If this is the case, and we believe it is, developments in the religious space are a poor omen for broader human rights and civil society in Russia (Lamoreaux and Flake 2018).

5 Mind-forming ideas behind the 2022 Russian war of aggression against Ukraine

In retrospect, most of Lamoreaux and Flake's assessment has proven to be accurate. In addition, the conjunction of politics and religion has been effectively supplemented by an eschatological philosophical superstructure. This second pillar of the merging of state and metaphysics has been delivered by allegedly independent "religious philosophers" of public intellectual stature such as Alexandr Gel'evič Dugin (born 1962). During Putin's reign, Dugin's thought and related philosophies moved progressively closer to the regime's center of power. While the Russian government wisely let certain other spiritual and (proto-)religious affiliations vegetate (Miroshnikova 2015) as long as they were useful or at least did not interfere, and while it acted intelligently in keeping Islam, which it always distrusted, under more or less direct state control without much noise (and in many occasions even successfully used it for political, polling and election purposes), from the mid of the 2010s on one decisive axis to bind also the intellectual debate positively to the regime's unitarism had become the Putin-Dugin axis, which increasingly narrowed down to a sort of mutually beneficial instrumental *do-ut-des*. Starting in the 2010s, the nationalist philosophy of Dugin was de facto elevated to national philosophy; and Dugin became the grand intellectual of a profoundly irrational state ratio.

Dugin's rise solidified and furthered the already existing trend towards a "desecularization from above" (Lisovskaya and Karpov 2010), which now was also undertaken conversely by the realms of philosophy and the arts. These now started to ascribe truly messianic powers to the Russian president, because only he as a person would be able to "save Russia" from the gradually worsening "encirclement" by a constantly growing number of enemies. Just one example of many for this psychology in philosophy and the arts was the famous open letter written by nationalist filmmaker Nikita Sergeevič Mikhalkov (born 1945) and two other artists to Putin in 2007, asking him to stay in power indefinitely, because only he alone – as the personification of the conjunction of traditional values, moral integrity, religion and spirituality – could guarantee the positive development of the nation. Mikhalkov and his companions claimed that they were speaking for the whole of the Russian cul-

tural sphere, which was obviously their invention. Nevertheless, under the influence of the "re-religionization" of the arts and the philosophical debate (which in Russia remained politically significantly more important than in Europe and the West where it declined as a public factor in the 21st century), official Russian culture increasingly became a carrier of personal glorification for the president. Not by chance, dissident novelist Vladimir Sorokin, acknowledging this trend, already predicted in 2007 that

> "our future is becoming our past". [Sorokin's] books, a few years ago, were destroyed and stuffed into a big papier-mâché toilet bowl devised by some ultra-nationalist youth groups. Mr. Sorokin's [...] novel [*День опричника, Day of the Oprichnik*, 2006] foretells a Russia that has fallen into an ancient state of authoritarian rule. "We are returning to Ivan the Terrible's era," he predicted, speaking about the church and the general inward-turning, anti-Westernism afoot (Kimmelman 2007).

The Ukraine war revealed the full plausibility and extent of these predictions. With the explicit glorification of Putin as a one-person-ruler, aspects of what Gergana Dimova has described as the "3 Ps of populism" (Dimova 2018) were implemented in Russia by the means of a proto-religious nationalist underpinning: personification, popularity-orientation and provocation. Personification and popularity-orientation worked mainly for a domestic audience. The third aspect, provocation, became the – to some extent – "natural" ingredient of Russia's politics towards the "rest of the world", the "Russkiy Mir" ideology, clearly encouraged by its "otherworldly" religious legitimation.

The result was a post-Soviet Russian "geopolitics of faith" based on "religious soft power" (Henne 2019). It ran parallel to some remotely similar trends within the Anglo-Saxon sphere, particularly in the U.S. The power-religion complex step by step substituted Communism as the previous universalist, "anticipatory" and expansion-oriented ideology not only as a domestic remedy, but now also as a geopolitical narrative (which had been already inherent – and never ceased to be latent – in pre-Soviet Russian state ideology for centuries). The "re-spiritualization" of the Putin era from the 2010s on was to some extent just the "natural" continuation of the immaterial ideological kit that had permeated Russian exceptionalism and self-projected global solitude for centuries.

Just one inbuilt irony in all this was that the Russian autocratic regime repeatedly accused the United States of "exceptionalism", while vice versa such an accuse rarely occurred. This once again indirectly justified the Russian fantasy of being right in its "lonely" convictions. It renewed the increasingly solipsist regime's belief that a "sole savior" had to act as the personalized pillar of neo-nationalism, i.e. Putin; and it helped to enforce this belief against all internal opponents, thereby upholding the system of "managed democracy" and its narrowing authoritarianism over the course of time.

6 Beyond power and authority: Transcending the parameters of national and international relations by the means of religion

Overall, the role of religion and religious philosophy in Russia's domestic politics, as well as in its global power projections and "hybrid warfare" (Antúnez 2017), have continuously expanded particularly since the formal return of Vladimir Putin to the presidency in 2012 (which he in essence had never left since the start of this first tenure in 1999). As a result, religion and politics in Russia moved "beyond the binary of power and authority" (Köllner 2021). Starting in the 2010s, religion in the Russian neo-authoritarian framework evolved beyond the usual parameters of "soft power" to become a key part of the narrative of "universalized unification" both internally – i.e., as a tool to exclude those who do not stand with the government and its exclusive ideology – and towards the external world, i.e. against all who questioned Putinism. For example, religious universalism served to ascribe "one's own identity to others", as in the case of Putin's main justification of the Ukraine war in 2022 when he ascribed the Russian identity to Ukraine (David 2022). This re-interpretation prominently included narratives which were provided by pseudo-historic philosophy.

The effect of Putin's relentlessly growing "mixture of religion and politics" (Wallis 2022) over the past 20 years has ultimately been an ideology of "one government, one nation, one religion, one culture, one identity, one civilization". Such ideology has also led, again and again, to the reaffirmation of Russian exceptionalism in *realpolitik*: to the increasing conviction of the country's "lonely" elites since the 2000s that Russia is neither a European nor an Asian civilization, but in reality "its own civilization". This, in turn, in their view must make it a "natural" world power in its own right – in the sense, for example, of Samuel P. Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" (Huntington 1993), which was taken as one blueprint for justifying the Ukraine war as a war of principles of "the Russian civilization" against "the Western civilization" by Russian pro-war-propagandists since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (cf. Batashvili 2017).

At the same time, such a "one civilization in itself and for itself" great narrative must almost unavoidably lead into a state of isolation, where – almost necessarily – the perception is that "the whole world is against us" (Weimer 2022), and that "we are in war with the whole world" (Piatov 2022a) – not as a one-time event, but as a permanent, first mental and then physical state of things. Isolation becomes the unavoidable prerequisite *and* effect, as well as the self-fulfilling prophecy, of the now proto-religious narrative of an allegedly "necessary" aggressive anticipatory action against others to safeguard one's own "moral" values.

7 A differentiated spectrum of radicalizing narratives

All this was exactly Putin's argument in starting his war against the "brother territory" of Ukraine which, in his view, has "always been" part of the greater unit of Russia's "civilizational circle". In all this, the narratives of the Orthodox church and their variations by eschatological philosophy have, by all means, not been the

only ones operative at the interface of the alleged "spiritualization" of Russia's power politics. There is, as in most historic de-secularization developments, also an addition of esotericism which has covered a differentiated spectrum of radicalizing stand-alone narratives. It presented sometimes rather mystical, sometimes rather speculative-intellectual aspects. Such radicalizing micro- and meso-arguments have surrounded Russia's Ukraine invasion in a vast number.

For example, on state television after the first setbacks of the 2022 war, Russian opinion makers close to Putin, including one of his alleged "chief strategists", Dmitri Kisseljow, threatened to "destroy Great Britain" with a massive "nuclear tsunami" caused by a submarine-based super-nuclear bomb ("Poseidon"), asserting that "we obviously cannot win the following nuclear war but in this case we will become martyrs" (T-online 2022). Kisseljow nevertheless did not specify what kind of "martyr" exactly, nor for which religion in particular.

Another – politically more relevant – "proto-religious" speculation was that of foreign minister Sergei Lavrov (EU vs Disinfo 2022), launched on the global stage in May 2022. Lavrov asserted that Adolf Hitler was of Jewish descent (BBC News 2022), so that "the Jews" would *de facto* have applied the Holocaust to themselves, which is obviously completely false.

Even more subconscious parallels have also thriven. As Ukrainian writer and survivor of Donbas concentration camp Stanislav Aseyev pointed out in his masterful account *In Isolation*, Russia has long used proto-religious "unification *as* isolation narratives" to justify internment, torture and isolation camps such as the *Izolyatsia* prison in Eastern Ukraine after 2014 (Aseyev 2022). The name is no accident. These "isolation" camps seem to be subconsciously related to the basic self-isolation mindset stemming from Russia's politico-psychological history described above. They are sustained by a constant victimization narrative which runs along with—and feeds into—the isolation narrative.

The interrelation between these narratives has constantly grown during Putin's more than two decades long reign. Even critics of Putin's war in Ukraine from the Russian establishment point in TV talk shows to "the fact that we are totally isolated, and that in essence the whole world is against us" (CNN News 2022). As the president himself repeatedly put it, Russia, in his view, was "bullied for hundreds of years" by the West to preventing it from fulfilling its "true mission", i.e. to be an influential force in Europe and on the globe (Soldatkin 2022). Departing from its alleged "natural" stronghold in "Orthodox Europe", Putin and his ideologues in the years preceding the Ukraine war uttered their conviction that Orthodoxy, being as it is spread across Europe like a geographical "spinal cord", provides the option for Russian dominance over the continent, given the long and large belt of Orthodox countries that ranges from Russia all over to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia.

This conviction nevertheless only makes sense if one departs from the assumption, as Putin obviously does, that Russia with its 145 million people despite being its own civilization (not identical with Europe) has at the same time the "innate" right to be a dominant power in Europe, and that this dominance would be the "normal" and "rightful" order of things which have been artificially prevented by the U.S. and its "servant" lickspittle Western European allies. In Putin's view, with the Ukraine war he has just started the process of restoring some amount of normality: i.e. Russian

dominance over the East of Europe, its alleged “natural sphere of influence”, which, in the more encompassing view, is to some extent identical to the sphere of Christian Orthodoxy. From a religious viewpoint, this sphere would reach clearly beyond Ukraine, comprising not only Belarus, but also Bulgaria, Cyprus, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Romania, and Serbia, i.e., all the European countries where Orthodoxy prevails.

8 Putin’s projection of religion and politics towards Europe: Unifying Orthodoxy and Panslavism?

This “natural dominance” theory is based on “metaphysical” reasoning. It is apparently the basic, religion-supported belief of Putin regarding Russia’s “mission” in Europe. In contrast, the victimization narrative which claims that Russia has been hindered to apply such natural dominance for decades, if not centuries, mirrors the profound “lack of relevance” psychology involved, i.e. the notorious feeling of marginalization as a result of administrative and political disfunction rendered, for example, by award-winning Russian pianist Alexandr Kobrin (Funk and Schwazer 2022). It is at the basis of foreign intelligence chief Sergei Naryshkin’s claim (Kirby 2022) that by the means of the Ukraine war today’s Russia “is fighting for its place in the world”, i.e. for relevance and recognition as a “great power” despite all shortfalls in order to reassure itself about itself – a need that Russia according to scholars has always felt (Radin and Reach 2017). The victimization narrative works on the basis of the combination of the “natural dominance” theory with the “lack of relevance” psychology as a carrier of expansionst ideologies.

In Putin’s times, the respective mechanism was based on – and went along with – the transition of Communism into Orthodox politics, i.e., of the transfer of the “Red man” into the “Holy man of the East” (Bednarska 2021). It was in retrospect the transition from one “second hand time” of Communist people being forced to give up their individuality in order to serve ideology for the state’s sake into another “second hand time”: now that of the “religionized” post-1991 “Holy man from the East” serving a unified Church and state for a similar or even the same purpose.

To some observers, the combination of these elements which have been notoriously present in recent Russian history but build on a longstanding psychological fundament posits the question whether Russia has been imperialist “by psychology”, “by tradition”, “by geography” or only by leadership (Dickinson 2022). This includes the – per se hyper-problematic – question, which today is asked more frequently in the United States than in Europe (Gregory 2022; Neier 2022), whether there is “collective guilt” involved in Russia’s Ukraine war due to collective psychology, or not, i.e. if it is “just Putin’s fault”.

It is important to note again that a second, more secular identity definition used in Cold War times for Soviet hegemony in Europe (1947–1991) was “Panslavism”. It combined, to a certain extent, the secular expansion and “unification” narrative with a quasi-metaphysical and ethnocentric-missionary gestus, as most ideologic-nationalist movements in the history of ideas in the 19th and 20th centuries did.

Taken together, the 21st century's narrative ideal for Putin's envisaged Russian dominance in Europe would, logically speaking, be the combination of both narratives: Religious Orthodoxy *and* Panslavism. The problem with this combination is that the second dimension – Panslavism – obviously does not work well because, with perhaps the only exception of Serbia, all the others – Ukrainians, Georgians, Bulgarians, Romanians, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Slovenians, Croats, Macedonians, and Montenegrins – don't seem to want to join a Russian-led politico-cultural sphere because they fear Russia, or more precisely: its regimes and elites. This is why they have historically mistrusted even a potentially "benevolent" Russian pan-slavist hegemony, and why over the past decades they have oriented themselves mainly to the West. The only partial exception was the EU accession candidate Serbia which, hardly by chance, is geographically the farthest away from Russia's "motherland" and thus from its direct influence sphere. Hence the push of the religious dimension by the contemporary Russian elite to determine a "unifying" and yet authoritarian narrative for Russia's claimed European influence space that substitutes Panslavism.

9 Leadership dialectics: Is the coalition between religion and politics in Russia ultimately an internally differentiated path, against all appearances?

While with these elements the overall picture is already complex, there is one final aspect that makes it even more pluridimensional. It is the fact that, despite the regime's rhetoric, there is no complete uniformity between the various religious, "spiritual", esoteric and eschatological actors, institutions and narratives in place. Rather, there is a diverse spectrum of "metaphysical" groundings that support politics in contemporary Russia, which also involves the leadership and the elites.

First, as mentioned, former president and now Deputy Chairman of the National Security Council Dmitrij Anatol'evič Medvedev seems to be more traditionally religious than President Vladimir Vladimirovič Putin. Medvedev regularly goes to church, cultivates a rather literal and aggressive understanding of religion and continues to entertain a close relationship with Patriarch Kirill. In contrast, Putin rather seems to be more inclined towards the esoteric-adventurous and the eschatological. This is what his alleged proximity to philosopher Alexandr Dugin (born 1962) has suggested, who is considered to be his "personal ideologue" (Rick DuFer 2022). Although there are many overlapping points, the traditional-religious and the eschatological-esoteric poles are competing in many ways against each other, so that there may be an inner dialectics within the realm of contemporary religious-eschatological political discourse in Russia. Yet both poles nowadays converge in contributing to justify and defend aggression and war, not only in the case of Ukraine, but also with regard to their fundamental hostility against the West, open societies and Western culture and lifestyle altogether, which they regard as despicable and "sinful" and thus reject. This rejection includes apparent contradictions which expose the regime's exponents to ridiculousness—for example, when Putin's Foreign Minister Sergej Viktorovič Lavrov in November 2022 appear on self-made photos at the G20 summit in Bali wearing a 'Basquiat' t-shirt, prompting ironic reactions like that

of Ian Garner, author of the book *Generation Z: Into the Heart of Russia's Fascist Youth*: "Sergey Lavrov taking a break from Russia's war against Western depravity by slipping on a Basquiat t-shirt is perfect. Basquiat was a queer, anti-colonial Black artist. Just the sort of guy who'd love Sergey's war" (Garner 2022). Nevertheless, the symbol of Basquiat's crown which Lavrov wore on his t-shirt stands for loyalty and heroism, i.e. for what Lavrov thinks to represent already since his time as a young Russian councelor to the Soviet mission at the United Nations in New York.

Exactly in its variability, it was this often poorly coherent spectrum of mind-forming ideas that influenced – or was behind – Putin's unprecedented demands to NATO and Western democracies at the eve of the Ukraine war: that they should withdraw to their spheres of influence of 1997, i.e., excluding Bulgaria, Romania, the Visegrad states, the Baltic states and former Yugoslavia with Serbia, from stationing troops and equipment; as well as preventing Ukraine and Georgia from getting in any way closer to the West, including NATO- or EU-memberships. To justify the war Putin redefined history referring to an alleged, "indelible" past and a metaphysical mission of Russia to erect and uphold a "Russian World" (*Russkiy Mir*) (Spiegel Ausland 2014).

Allegedly, the same or similar ideas had already influenced his aggression against Ukraine in 2013 and 2014 with the annexation of Crimea, only to be further strengthened by the outcome of this then – in the view of the Russian elite – relatively successful operation (Lamoreaux and Flake 2018). The lessons then learnt by the Russian regime were exemplarily (and perhaps all too openly) expressed by Medvedev in his statement that "the West can only watch helplessly, but not interfere, with Russia's concentrated power" (Osborn 2022), leading him to the conclusion that an ideologically unified Russia "does not need diplomatic ties with the West anymore" (Osborn 2022). As Medvedev stated in February 2022 on his verified page on the Russian social network VK to make Russia's "mission" explicit,

> We don't especially need diplomatic relations [...]. It's time to padlock the embassies and continue contacts looking at each other through binoculars and gun sights [...]. The sanctions [of the West and the international community] are being imposed for one simple reason – political impotence arising from their inability to change Russia's course (Osborn 2022).

The arrival point of this view would ultimately be a new "Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy" (Adamsky 2019), where "religion, politics and strategy" have melted together towards the conviction that war carried out by an Orthodox Russia would be "religious" in itself – even if it was an all-destructive nuclear war. It became the belief that the old-new unity of politics, religion, philosophy, the arts and "spirituality" came from the country's alleged "tradition" that had already spurred the anticipatory expansive drives of Ivan the Terrible and later Peter the Great where self-protection against attacks from the outside and forceful expansion were the same.

Overall, the union of politics and religion was itself—and as such—superelevated to a religious mission. It was conceived as the decisive "civilizational" difference of Putin's Russia compared with the West. Consequentially, Putin's declaration was that the war ultimately was not against Ukraine, but against "the West" and its values – as exemplified, for example, by the letter "Z" on Russian military equipment used

in the invasion. Z stands for "Zapad", which in Russian means "West". It suggests that the Russian army had the mission to go to the "West", where Ukraine is, but also where Europe and ultimately Western democracies and the U.S. are located. "Z" ultimately suggests: "We are on a mission, and we are coming for you, West".

10 Putin's Russia in the big picture view: "A system of self-deception"

Taken together, an openly ideological anti-Western and anti-globalist view first took over officially with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent frozen conflict in the Donbas. Both were sustained by a metaphysical-religious underpinning which had developed more or less openly in Russian political, diplomatic and academic circles. It led to a perspective where Russia unfolded an in any aspect "contrary" narrative on internationalism and globalization which turned the UN's and Western concepts of the term "global system" upside down. It went contrary to basically all of the open societies' world views on global developments by reading every single event as embedded in a directly opposed view of things.

Russia also never accepted the Western claim that due to globalization "the world was now flat" (Friedman 2007). On the contrary, also after 1991 its basic views and self-perception was and remained tied to the importance of geography and the resulting logics (Kaplan 2013). Contrary to the West, to Russian leaders the "return of geography" (Marshall 2016), and with it the return of "civilizational" views on conflict patterns, never lost in importance. Because of this view, which over time became increasingly self-referential, scholars such as Elena Alekseenkova of the Russian Academy of Sciences already in June 2021 spoke of Russia-West relations as a "piece of the broken mirror of globalization" (Alekseenkova 2021). From the – by then more or less mainstream – Russian perspective, in mid 2021, i.e. a little more than half a year before the Ukraine war, according to Alekseenkova there was a "devaluation of common values and identity", a "destruction of the common space", a "devolution of economic interdependence", a "deinstitutionalization of multilateral cooperation formats" and a "delimitation of information flows" (Alekseenkova 2021) between Russia and the rest of the world.

Not everybody agreed with this view, consolidated by alleged moral-religious supremacy. In open protest against it and the Ukraine war, Boris Bondarev, Russia's Counsellor to the United Nations in Geneva after 20 years of active service to Russia's diplomatic corps publicly resigned in May 2022. He summarized the – simultaneously self-referential and low-self-esteem-ridden – worldview that Putinism had established by pointing towards its more profound motivations:

> The aggressive war unleashed by Putin against Ukraine, and in fact against the whole Western world, is not only a crime against the Ukrainian people, but also, perhaps, the most serious crime against the people of Russia, with a bold letter Z crossing out all hopes and prospects for a prosperous free society in our country. Those who conceived this war want only one thing – to remain in power forever, live in pompous tasteless palaces, sail on yachts comparable in tonnage and costs to the entire Russian Navy, enjoying unlimited power and

> complete impunity. To achieve that they are willing to sacrifice as many lives as it takes. Thousands of Russians and Ukrainians have already died just for this (Neuer 2022).

Departing from this insight, the all decisive sentence in Bondarev's "statement" was: "A system has been built that deceives itself" (UN Watch 2022).

Indeed in the framework of the Putin-Kirill-Dugin nexus, religion and "spirituality" have become catalysts for a – both systematic and systemic – self-deception. Some may argue that their embodiment in the basic self-perception of isolation and lack of self-confidence have been the historically rooted basis of Russia's behavior over the course of the 21st century up to the present day.

At the heart of this self-deception stands, to point it out for a last time, the basic motive behind the notorious "Russian problem" (Kaufmann 1996). It is the self-inflicted psychology of lack of self-confidence connected with the perception of a constant outside threat which leads to anticipatory expansion abroad at the cost of poor participation and innovation internally. As said, this basic motive may also lie at the core of the country's systemic dysfunctionality, which has been only mirrored in the obvious limitations of its military that surfaced with the Ukraine war (Buhl 2022).

The conclusion of all this? Russia's real "spiritual" tragedy in the 21st century is that in the framework of an increasingly tightening regime the isolation narrative has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. It manifested itself already before the 2022 Ukraine war in countless cases – for example in the doping-related banning of Russian athletes from competing under the flag of their nation in international sports events. Despite all nationalism, many Russians feel homeless. The matter of isolation – again, self-perceived and then to a large extent self-induced –, is a consequence of a kind of historical distress trauma combined with an overinflated geographical extension. It has generated a self-fulfilling prophecy over large periods of Russian history leading to repeated phases of practical political isolation. It has been a dominating aspect of modern Russian (socio-geographic) psychology, sometimes hidden behind closed curtains, sometimes openly manifested, but most of the time subconsciously active. Since the 2010s, it has also led to an self-isolating political practice in the nation's diplomatic institutions, as Bondarev observed:

> Today, the [Russian] Ministry of Foreign Affairs is not about diplomacy. It is all about warmongering, lies and hatred. It serves interests of few, the very few people thus contributing to further isolation and degradation of my country. Russia no longer has allies, and there is no one to blame but its reckless and ill-conceived policy (Buhl 2022).

Bondarev's short, but substantial statement may remain in history as a document of γνῶθι σεαυτόν (*gnôthi seautón* – know thyself) in the framework of Russian moral pride and sincerity – which as it seems also is and remains an indelible part of the so-called "Russian soul" despite all odds.

(To be continued with Part 2: Developments and Perspectives)

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