

# From Desecularization to Sacralization of the Political Language: Religion and Historiosophy in Vladimir Putin's Preparations for War

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**Abstract:** This article aims to analyze religious and mystical elements contained in Putin's public statements by referring to selected examples characteristic of contemporary Russian identity politics. In order to demonstrate the importance of religious and mystical threads in Putin's speeches, we chose five specific cases. The analysis of these statements indicates that religious and mystical motifs in Putin's language are an attempt at self-creation for the purpose of domestic policy. We claim that this self-creation is more of an effort to strengthen Putin's public support than proof that he borrows patterns for shaping Russia's political life from the Russian religious and political tradition. Putin's rhetoric is not so much a desire for an axiological renewal of Russian politics but an attempt to search for the new legitimization of the power system he created in confrontation with the West.

**Keywords:** Russia, Vladimir Putin, Russian Orthodox Church, church and state, Russian neo-conservatism

While analyzing the language of the Russian political debate, it can be noticed that since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that is, since Vladimir Putin assumed the presidency, the language has been undergoing steady and gradual desecularization. During his first (2000–2004) and second (2004–2008) presidential terms, Putin often mentioned that, in his opinion, Russia is part of the Western democratic world and could see its future precisely as a modern democratic state. After he assumed the presidency, however, his rhetoric also contained ideological elements that were hardly ever found in Boris Yeltsin's speeches. Since Putin's "Munich speech" in 2007, which marks the beginning of acute ideological confrontation with the West and whose strong initial accent was the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, Putin has been making fewer and fewer references to Western democratic values (although they have not disappeared completely). However, religious and mystical elements have become increasingly more prominent.

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Sacralization of the language of Russian politics coincides with another phenomenon that is only seemingly of the opposite nature. In recent years, primarily since the Pussy Riot protest in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow in 2012 aimed at the alliance of the state and Russian Orthodox Church, the previously existing consensus in Russian public debate on avoiding direct criticism of the church and its political involvement has been fading.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, it does not influence the direction in which the language of politics is developing. On the contrary, it appears to purposefully and significantly differ from the parlance of Western politics. The objectives of Russian internal and foreign policies are often manifested not only pragmatically but also in religious and mystical concepts. While it cannot be said that President Putin's rhetoric contains the voices of the Russian messianic tradition assigning to Russia a particular historic mission and moral superiority over the West, it can be noticed that religious and mystical motifs so frequent in his public statements are in keeping with Russia's new identity politics. They strengthen the idea promoted by Putin that Russia forms a separate civilization based on unique spiritual ties and building social unity through a community of traditional values as opposed to Western liberal values.

Therefore, this article aims to analyze religious and mystical elements contained in Putin's public statements by referring to selected examples characteristic of contemporary Russian identity politics. The analysis of these statements indicates that religious and mystical motifs in Putin's language serve as an instrument. They are an attempt at self-creation for the purpose of domestic policy. This self-creation is aimed primarily at Russian recipients, the citizens of the Russian Federation, and Russian-speaking citizens of post-Soviet states who identify as Russians. We claim that this self-creation is more of an attempt to strengthen Putin's public support than proof that he borrows patterns for shaping Russia's political life from the Russian religious and political tradition. Putin's rhetoric is not so much a desire for an axiological renewal of Russian politics (despite his repeated declarations) but an attempt to search for the new legitimization of the power system he created in an open ideological confrontation with the West.

## 1. Sources and Methodological Remarks

In order to demonstrate the importance of religious and mystical threads in President Putin's addresses, we chose five specific cases. They can serve as examples of these threads to be used in the correct sense, in an apparent religious or ideological

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<sup>1</sup> Uzlaner – Stoeckl, "From Pussy Riot's 'punk prayer' to Matilda," 427–430; Uzlaner, "The End of the Pro-Orthodox Consensus," 173–175.

context, and interpreted according to this particular key. This is an important initial remark. While analyzing Putin's language, one must be cautious when attributing deeper motivations to him or interpreting the religious and mystical themes contained in it. Putin often raises historical or religion-related issues in public speeches. Nonetheless, the style of those speeches can be quite casual, not devoid of irony or distance from the speech content. This observation is important because not all of his statements referring to religious themes can be interpreted in this context. Two famous public comments are a case in point. One is found in a known film by a Russian propagandist Vladimir Solov'yov *Miroporiyadok 2018* (World Order 2018), where Putin quotes the famous words of Burkhard Christoph von Münnich (1683–1767), a German who reached the rank of field marshal in the Russian army, claiming that "Russia is ruled by God." In another statement, in 2018, on a nuclear-armed conflict in which Russia might be involved in the future, Putin compares Russians to martyrs who will go to paradise and their opponents to those who will "perish in hell" because they will not even manage to repent.<sup>2</sup> These two well-known comments demonstrate the methodological difficulty in our study. Historical and religious themes often appear in Putin's language outside their proper context. They are more stylistic devices and references to famous historical accounts than an expression of the ideological orientation of Russia's new identity politics. This general remark points to potential difficulties with interpretation and the risk of overinterpretation. It does happen that Western observers, especially those representing conservative circles, would like to perceive Putin as a defender of traditional values or traditional patterns of social life and the opponent of liberalism and globalism. This perception, however, is not accurate.

We chose five statements by Vladimir Putin to examine, in which the reference to Russian historiography and religious and mystical tradition can be clearly linked to the current Russian identity politics. The selected statements are juxtaposed with their interpretations in Russian public life in order to determine how they relate to the objectives of said politics.

This article is divided into three parts. Firstly, we outline the main ideas in the new Russian identity politics implemented by Putin after 2007. Secondly, we analyze five case studies representing the sacralization of Putin's language. Thirdly, we provide an interpretation of his language from the perspective of the objectives of Russian identity politics.

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<sup>2</sup> "My kak muchenniki popadem v ray."

## 2. Vladimir Putin's New Identity Politics

In this article, the new identity politics refers to the actions undertaken or inspired by the Russian Federation authorities to influence various groups in Russian society to reinterpret Russian identity and the meaning of “being Russian,” belonging to Russian society, and participating in creating Russian culture and tradition. These actions can be considered on three levels. Firstly, they are manifested in the media language (directly or indirectly controlled by the state), in the reinterpretation of school curricula (especially regarding history), or in programs for cultural and educational institutions promoted and financed by the state. Secondly, the new identity politics is supported by changes in legislation. For example, both the Constitution of the Russian Federation (amended in 2020) and legal acts referring to numerous areas of national security include much ideological and identity content. In addition, recent years saw changes in criminal legislation, broadening legal protection to the official interpretation of history and redefining the level of protection for religious people's feelings. Thirdly, the new identity politics manifests itself in the language used by the representatives of Russian political elites, especially President Putin.

Therefore, why should contemporary Russia's identity politics be considered “new”? The main reason is that it is fundamentally different from the identity politics implemented in Russia after 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The era of Boris Yeltsin, despite the lack of consistent democratizing of Russia's political life, was an attempt to build Russian identity as a part of a greater Western identity.<sup>3</sup> Although in the symbolic domain, one could still notice a reference to the imperial past and the collaboration between the authorities and the Russian Orthodox Church was official, the identity discourse was based, at least in its verbal layer, on values and standards characteristic of liberal Western democracies. It was expressed particularly in the provisions of the Constitution of the Russian Federation of 1993. The Constitution explicitly states that the rights and freedoms of the person are of supreme value in public life, and their protection is the duty of the state (Article 2). The list of rights and freedoms corresponds to the concept of legal state organization adopted in the West (Articles 17–64). The source of state power is exclusively the people, who exercise their power primarily through democratic elections (Article 3). The Constitution also disallows the existence of any state ideology (Article 13). Moreover, Russia is a secular state, where separation of church and state is guaranteed (Article 14).

These provisions remained in the Constitution of 2020, which not only made it possible for Vladimir Putin – in his fourth term in the presidential office – to run for the presidency for two more terms but which also, more importantly from our point of view, included new regulations containing ideological and identity

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<sup>3</sup> Stent, *Putin's World*, 51.

content. Noteworthy, those regulations reference ancestors who passed their faith on to the citizens of the Russian Federation, implying that Russia's history goes back a thousand years (Article 67.1.2), and the state has an obligation to defend historical truth and disapproval of diminishing the heroic deeds of Russia's defenders (Article 67.1.3). This is how the complexity of the new identity politics is expressed. On the one hand, official statements and Russian legal documents contain declarations as to the significance of democratic values, including respect for the rights and freedoms of a person. Yet, on the other hand, new regulations are being introduced that reinterpret the extent of these rights and freedoms and aim to legally protect the version of Russian history accepted by the authorities.

The main elements of the new identity politics are contained not only in the updated Constitution but also in other legal acts. Significant identity issues, including permissible and impermissible interpretations of historical facts, are now regulated at the legal level. For example, after further modifications, the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation provides for legal protection of religious people's feelings without providing adequate protection for the views of non-religious citizens (Article 148). The federal law on Commemorating the Victory of the Soviet People in the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945, amended in 2021, prohibits mentioning the Nazi-Soviet alliance and military cooperation between Nazi Germany and the USSR before 1941. It also opposes denying the decisive role of the Soviet people in defeating the Nazis and the humanitarian motives of the USSR behind liberating European countries (Article 6.1). Clear identity elements, in most cases oppositional to Western concepts, are contained in Russian strategic documents concerning national security.

This new identity politics can be viewed as a set of main ideas introduced to legislation, media coverage and educational curricula, and the language of Russian political elites. Although this set cannot be considered comprehensive, it does express the idea and main objectives of said politics well.

Firstly, Russian identity is depicted as based on conservative values, contrary to the liberal and decadent West.<sup>4</sup> Russia embodies its identity by challenging the universal nature of liberal values. Instead, it becomes the center for promoting traditional values in the world, which are spiritual and strictly connected to religion. Secondly, there is continuity of the history of the Rus' and Russia in various forms of political organization from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards, which is traditionally said to be the beginning of the Rus' statehood (baptism of the Kyivan prince Saint Vladimir in 988) to the present. Russia is the only continuator of this Rus' state tradition. Thirdly, Russia has a particular mission to complete in the post-Soviet area. Its main objective is to protect Russian-speaking citizens of post-Soviet states and spread the message

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<sup>4</sup> Engström, "Contemporary Russian Messianism," 356–358; Likhacheva – Trifonov, "Modernizatsiya Rossii," 60–61.

of the Soviet Union's positive role, both in terms of the development of its republics and the social and cultural development of the inhabitants. Finally, Russia identifies as a global empire. It cannot resign from this international role without the risk of losing its own identity. Therefore, it deserves the area of influence, which combines the majority of the post-Soviet region (except for the Baltic states) acknowledged by the international community.

### 3. Case Studies

The elements of the new Russian identity politics indicated above (conservative turn, emphasis on Russia's axiological separateness, unity of the Rus' and Russia's historic mission, and Russia as a separate civilization) are present in President Putin's statements. What we mean here is not the occasional remark on the issues related to current political events. Putin's speeches, in which the mystical and religious elements are particularly evident, concern the Russians' existential problems, the future of society and state, and fundamental values which are supposed to ensure Russia's continuous existence and development. This is why such statements are rooted in the context of the ongoing and increasing conflict with the West, characteristic of the official Russian propaganda, and even the conviction that Western culture, lifestyle, and dominant values pose an existential threat to Russia.<sup>5</sup>

#### 3.1. The Collapse of the Soviet Union as a Geopolitical Catastrophe

Since assuming power in 2000, President Putin has made a number of gestures interpreted as a rehabilitation of the Soviet Union in the symbolic domain. The most famous is perhaps adopting the melody of the Soviet Union anthem as the anthem of the Russian Federation, with new lyrics that are strikingly reminiscent of the Soviet anthem lyrics. However, it would not be true to state that the Russian president is rehabilitating the Soviet period. He has not abstained from criticizing communist totalitarianism.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, he has not supported crucial ideological elements underpinning the Soviet Union. Therefore, one could not say that Putin is nostalgic for the Soviet era.

If any nostalgia can be detected in Putin's comments related to the Soviet Union, it is limited. Nevertheless, it has clear social, ethical, axiological, and historiosophical motifs. It manifests itself in the longing expressed by many participants in Russian public life for unity and uniformity in Soviet society, which is in stark contrast

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<sup>5</sup> Pain, "The Imperial Syndrome," 60.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Putin, "Totalitarizm dostoin osuzhdeniya."

to the social and economic stratification of contemporary Russian society. This Soviet social unity and uniformity is partially a myth and does not correspond to the truth. Nevertheless, it serves as a starting point for Putin to present ethical values and fundamentals that unify Russian society.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting that Putin, who was a member of the Communist Party, like many officials of the contemporary political elite, and is currently identifying as an Orthodox Christian,<sup>8</sup> notices a strong relation between Christian axiology and ethical values forming the foundations of Soviet society. In this context, he claims that the “Moral Code of the Builder of Communism” (*Moral’nyy kodeks stroiteley kommunizma*), containing basic moral rules and key values indispensable for building Soviet society, was, in fact, a simplified copy of moral values based on the gospel.<sup>9</sup> Even more interesting is that a similar view is expressed by the head of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, Gennadiy Zyuganov, who claims that values and social norms preached by Jesus Christ were identical to the fundamental ethical values of Soviet communism.<sup>10</sup> Although such views of President Putin and Zyuganov may seem disputable, they do intend to portray the Soviet Union as a state and society built on solid, universal human principles. In the same way, the collapse of the Soviet Union should also be, in their opinion, interpreted not as a result of internal weaknesses and systemic, ideological, or economic discrepancies but more as a result of the destructive influence of external forces opposing Soviet social and moral order.

In this perception of the Soviet Union reflected in Putin’s rhetoric, a clear historiographical theme is noticeable. This theme has been exploited heavily in the writings of representatives of the Russian alt-right, such as Aleksandr Dugin or Sergey Kara-Murza. They perceive the collapse of the Soviet Union as a sign of foreign aggression aimed at Russia.<sup>11</sup> The consequence of said aggression was not only supposed to be the political crisis and weakening of Russia’s international influence, especially in the post-Soviet region, but from a historiographical perspective, it was also the threat to the independent existence and development of Russian culture and national identity. According to Russia’s Constitution, this identity is understood as the identity of a multi-ethnic society based on shared values (Article 3.1). According to this take, the collapse of the Soviet Union was not merely the climax of a political or economic crisis but a social disaster.

In this context, the significance of President Putin’s address to the Federal Assembly in 2005<sup>12</sup> is fully revealed. Putin said then that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This statement

7 Laruelle, “Russia as an Anti-liberal European Civilisation,” 287–290.

8 Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 90; Fagan, *Believing in Russia*, 27.

9 “Putin sravnil kommunisticheskuyu ideologiyu s khristianstvom.”

10 “Nagornaya propoved’ i kodeks stroitel’stva kommunizma.”

11 E.g., Dugin, *Geopolitika Rossii*, 426–436; Kara-Murza, *Demontazh naroda*, 434–453.

12 Putin, “Poslaniye Federal’nomu Sobraniyu Rossiyskoy Federatsii” [2005].

was to be interpreted according to the historiosophical and social key, which he later explained in the context of acute confrontation with the West. In 2017, Putin was interviewed<sup>13</sup> by Oliver Stone, an American director and a Putin supporter. Putin claimed that his nostalgia for the collapse of the Soviet Union did not have any political or ideological background. In his opinion, however, its collapse was a tragedy for Russian society and all societies of former Soviet republics. He reminded people that on December 25, 1991, the final day of the Soviet Union, 25 million Soviet citizens, who considered themselves ethnic Russians, were left outside of Russia's borders. According to Putin, the fall of the state led to severing family ties, the destruction of the health and social system, economic collapse, and a dramatic rise in poverty. Massive social problems that began with the destruction of the Soviet state have not been wholly tackled to this day. Moreover, the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in ethnic, often armed, conflicts in the post-Soviet region, including two Chechen Wars described by Putin as fully fledged domestic conflicts.

### 3.2. The Historiosophical Interpretation of the Annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol

Vladimir Putin adopted a similar historiosophical interpretation of the annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol by the Russian Federation in 2014. Significantly, he avoided anti-Ukrainian rhetoric in this context. He did not point to the armed conflict with Ukraine as the cause of annexation. Besides, during public addresses after the annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol and the beginning of the conflict in Donbas, Putin often claimed that he still considered the Russians and Ukrainians as one people, permanently united by culture, history, and religion.<sup>14</sup>

From the modern perspective, one can search for various explanations as to why Putin abstained from open anti-Ukrainian rhetoric after the events of Kyivan Euromaidan and the "Revolution of Dignity," the annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol, and the actual armed intervention on the part of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts controlled by Ukraine. At the same time, anti-Ukrainian statements did often appear in state-controlled media. Moreover, numerous Russian political or intellectual elite representatives also expressed anti-Ukrainian sentiment. In this context, it is worth pointing out that even Aleksey Naval'nyy, who portrays himself as the leader of Russia's democratic opposition, did not oppose the annexation of Crimea.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, Putin's language regarding the history and future relations between Russia and Ukraine and Russian and Ukrainian nations should be analyzed against this background.

13 "The Putin Interviews."

14 Putin, "Ob istoricheskom yedinstve russkikh i ukrantsev."

15 "Rossiyskiy oppozitsioner Aleksey Naval'nyy o Kryme."



This language again emphasizes historiosophical themes, most notably in a speech given on March 18, 2014, right after the annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol.<sup>16</sup> It is not a coincidence that it did not contain anti-Ukrainian accents. The annexation of a part of a neighboring country was not presented as a result of war or a political or ethnic conflict either. Instead, according to Putin, Crimea and Sevastopol were returned to where they belonged, to their homeland.<sup>17</sup> Putin explained, “after a long, hard, and exhausting voyage, the Crimea and Sevastopol are returning to their harbor, to their native shores.” It was a clear reference to Sevastopol’s history as a city connected with the Russian fleet and a site of bloody fights during the Russo-Turkish wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and World War II.<sup>18</sup>

Such language reveals the historiosophical concept of unity in the Rus’ history. This concept does, in fact, negate the independent existence of states, a distinct culture, and identity of other nations that are part of the historical Rus’, namely the Belarusians and Ukrainians.<sup>19</sup> According to this idea, said nations constitute part of one cultural sphere of the “Rus’ world” (*russkiy mir*), whose center and the guarantor of existence and identity is Russia. The historiosophical explanation of the annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol and the constant emphasis on the unity of Russia and Ukraine’s nations conform to the image Putin created in the public domain as the “gatherer of Russian lands” (*sobiratel’ zemel’ russkikh*). This is reminiscent of Prince Vasili III, who – after the division of the Kyivan Rus’ – began the unification of the Rus’, taking the previously insignificant Moscow as its center.

### 3.3. The Monument of Vladimir the Great – A Vision of Historical Continuity, Axiological Unity, and Identity of the Rus’ and Russia

The important idea in Russian history of “gathering Rus’ lands” justified Moscow’s (Muscovy and then Russia) political, cultural, and religious claims to occupy a dominant position among Rus’ peoples in the past. It also justified the transference of the political, cultural, and church capital of the Rus’ from Kyiv (called “the Mother of Rus’ cities” – *Mat’ gorodov russkikh*) to Moscow. This idea has a strong historiosophical and mystical character. Its historiosophical aspect expresses the notion of the Rus’ uninterrupted existence and its unique mission in the world despite political changes, including the fall of the Kyivan Rus’ as well.<sup>20</sup> Its mystical dimension is expressed in the concept of “Moscow, the Third Rome,” it justified Moscow’s dominance by noting that the Moscow State remained faithful to Orthodoxy while western Rus’ lands, including Kyiv, were for a long time under the political and cultural influence

<sup>16</sup> “Putin poblagodaryl krymchan i sevastopol’tsev.”

<sup>17</sup> Auer, “Carl Schmitt in the Kremlin,” 957.

<sup>18</sup> Putin, *Rossiya ustremennaya v budushcheye*, 128.

<sup>19</sup> Richters, *The Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church*, 101.

<sup>20</sup> Putin, *Mysli o Rossii*, 42–43.

of non-Orthodox states: first the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and then the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In the period of Russia's expansion to the west and gradual subjugation of western Rus' lands, the idea of "gathering Rus' lands" became the basis for questioning the distinct character of Belarusian and Ukrainian cultures, as well as denigrating Belarusian and Ukrainian languages. On the linguistic level, it even led to the creation of an artificial concept of "Little Russia" to denote Ukraine in contrast to "Great Russia," namely Russia itself. This linguistic aspect is also visible in the Russian Orthodox Church, whose leader uses the title of Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus'. On the one hand, this title refers to the cultural and religious unity of the Rus'. On the other, it indicates the dominance of the Russian Orthodox Church over local Orthodox churches in Belarus and Ukraine.

The idea of the historical continuity of the Rus', leading to the actual identification of the Rus' and Russia, is also present in the contemporary language of Russian politics. In the view of right-wing conservative and nationalist circles (such as Aleksandr Dugin), it justifies Russian political and military expansion in Ukraine and denies the sovereignty of Belarus and Ukraine as independent states.<sup>21</sup> As mentioned above, however, Putin's language lacks such simplifications because, at least officially, Putin portrays himself as a politician working for the unity of Rus' cultural space as well as peace and reconciliation between Russia and Ukraine. In Vladimir Putin's take, the concept of the historical continuity of the Rus' and Russia has an axiological dimension. It points to the continuity of fundamental values differentiating the Rus' and Russia from other states and nations and ensuring the identity and survival of the Rus' and Russia over the centuries. Vladimir Putin expressed this notion in his speech during a significant event. On November 4, 2016, during the ongoing conflict with Ukraine in Donbas and the second year after the annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol by the Russian Federation, a monument to Vladimir the Great, Prince of Kyiv, was unveiled in Moscow. It should be noted that during the reign of Prince Vladimir, Moscow did not even exist (the year 1147 is accepted as the date of its establishment by Prince Yuriy Dolgorukiy). Nonetheless, Vladimir, who is also a saint in the Orthodox Church, occupies a special place in Rus' historiography. Due to his decision to adopt Christianity from Constantinople (in 988), he is considered the creator of the Rus' as an independent political and cultural entity, where values and patterns preached by Orthodoxy shape social and individual lives. Referring to Vladimir and placing him in the pantheon of the Rus' and Russian rulers is a symbolic confirmation that modern Russia continues the historical mission of the Kyivan Rus'.<sup>22</sup>

During the unveiling ceremony, President Putin said Prince Vladimir provided the moral foundations to shape Russian lives. These foundations are the Russians'

<sup>21</sup> Shlapentokh, "Dugin Eurasianism," 232.

<sup>22</sup> Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 186.

source of unity and their ability to unite, overcome various obstacles, and achieve victories over their enemies, as well as the source of Russia's rise to power over the generations. According to him, the Russians must oppose the challenges and threats to their country, which is possible thanks to the spiritual foundations that date back to Vladimir and the Rus' tradition of unity and peace. Speaking of Prince Vladimir, Putin repeated the claim that Russian history spans a thousand years.<sup>23</sup>

The concept of the historical continuity of the Rus' and Russia, even if shown in an axiological context as in Putin's statements, must lead to the conclusion, however, that contemporary Ukraine has no participation in the historical and cultural heritage of the Kyivan Rus'. Even if President Putin does not state this as openly as thinkers such as Dugin, such historical (historiosophical) thinking contributes to the attempts in Russian political life to question Ukraine's sovereignty or the foundations of its identity as an independent state with its own culture, history, and language. Since the only heir to the Kyivan Rus' legacy is modern Russia, Ukraine can preserve its own identity only in close political, cultural, and religious (in the basic axiological layer) ties with Russia.<sup>24</sup>

### 3.4. The Uniqueness of the Russian People – Genetic Distinctiveness and Moral Superiority

It is not a coincidence that Putin's statements contain references to the uniqueness of the Russian people – a recurring motif in the Rus' and Russian historiosophy. However, the significance of these references is sometimes neglected when other representatives of Russian political elites trivialize and take them to extremes. This is what happened with the famous comment by the former Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinskiy, who claimed that the uniqueness of the Russians resulted from the possession of an additional chromosome, which distinguished them from other nations.<sup>25</sup>

Despite some apparent similarities to the absurd rhetoric mentioned above, Putin's language regarding the Russians' uniqueness is decidedly different. He sees the distinctive character of the Russians and their uniqueness in a moral and axiological layer, not a biological or genetic one.<sup>26</sup> Putin, therefore, also referred to the Russian unique genetic code in a well-known statement on April 17, 2014, during a televised meeting with the nation (*Pryamaya liniya*).<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, he clearly indicated that what he had in mind was the "moral genetic code" characteristic of the Russians, which was one of the factors related to historical continuity in the Rus' and Russian culture and tradition. This Russian moral genetic code makes the Russians

<sup>23</sup> "Putin prizval protivostoyat' vyzovam i ugrozam."

<sup>24</sup> Putin, "Ob istoricheskom yedinstve russkikh i ukraintsev."

<sup>25</sup> "Ministr kul'tury schitayet, chto u rossiyan jest' lishnyaya khromosoma."

<sup>26</sup> Torbakov, *After Empire*, 326

<sup>27</sup> "Ne soglasilsya by ostavat'sya prezidentom pozhiznenno."

morally and spiritually different from other nations. Furthermore, this separateness is interpreted as moral superiority, although Putin does not emphasize any xenophobic or nationalist stereotypes in these types of statements.

In Putin's approach, this special moral genetic code has enabled the Russians to survive various difficulties throughout their history. It is also a source of social norms and order. The essential norm is the Russians' renunciation of individualism, understood as concern for one's own well-being and prosperity. According to Putin, it is characteristic of the Russians to subjugate the individual to society and sacrifice individual interests for the good of the community (nation, society, or state).

Putin contrasts such a position with Western egoism and individualism. In his opinion, "Western values mean that a person is focused on themselves, and the greater the success one achieves, the better they are." Meanwhile, for the Russians, individual success has no real value. In this context, he referred to an old Russian saying *Na miru i smert' krasna* ("When in the community, even death is beautiful"). In his interpretation, a Russian can sacrifice their interest and give up their life for others, friends, or their country. According to him, Russians' moral uniqueness and superiority have become a source of heroism during wars and their ability to sacrifice throughout history. He also claims that the Russians are "less pragmatic," but they have "wider souls," which is how Russia's authentic greatness manifests itself.

The absolute emphasis on the priority of the good of a community (society or state) over the good of an individual coincides with Russian Orthodox anthropology, which stresses that a human being becomes a person only in a community. The community is, therefore, a source of human dignity and value, in contrast to Western concepts of the human person in which the community performs a serving role towards an individual.

While talking about the uniqueness of the Russian people, Vladimir Putin also mentions its genetic aspect in the biological sense. His approach, however, emphasizes the internal variety of the Russian nation, which is the result of historical forming by integrating various ethnic groups into one state and one cultural space. This approach corresponds to the concept of "multinational people" (*mnogonatsional'nyy narod*) contained in the Constitution of the Russian Federation. It can be understood as the supra-ethnic idea of a nation composed of various ethnic groups bound together by deep ties, not only common history, language, or state, but far more common values or norms of social and individual life.<sup>28</sup> As Putin said, "Our country, like a vacuum cleaner, has sucked in the representatives of particular ethnic groups, particular nationalities. Through mixed marriages, we have created a strong genetic code. Our genetic code is one of our special strengths."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Davydova – Bokov, "Mnogonatsional'nyy narod," 101–111.

<sup>29</sup> "Ne soglasilsya by ostavat'sya prezidentom pozhiznenno."

The context of this statement is crucial for political reasons. It was made during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in Donbas and not long after the annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol. It is not a coincidence that Putin spoke about unity not only to the Russians (meaning the citizens of the Russian Federation) but most of all to those belonging to the “Rus’ world,” namely both ethnic Russians living outside the Russian Federation as well as representatives of ethnically close nations, primarily Belarusians and Ukrainians. At the time, he also said, “the foundation of the Russians’ uniqueness is moral guidelines. A Russian, or more precisely, a person belonging to the “Rus’ world,” believes that a human being possesses a certain higher moral principle. Therefore, a “Russian person” focuses not on the inside but on the outside.”<sup>30</sup>

While commenting on these words, it should be remembered that Russia supported the separatists of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics precisely in order to defend the “Rus’ world” and the Russian-speaking inhabitants of eastern Ukraine.<sup>31</sup> This is the concept of cultural unity and, at the same time, uniqueness and superiority over other nations to which the participants of Russian public life referred when they justified their support for Donbas separatists and even called for open-armed intervention in Ukraine.

### 3.5. Spirituality as a Solution to Contemporary Social Problems

A permanent feature of Putin’s rhetoric when he talks about Russian identity and cultural differences from other countries, especially the West, is his emphasis on axiological issues. In his approach, despite its multi-ethnic and multi-religious character, the Russian nation is bound together by shared values and resulting behavior patterns. As Putin often admits to being an Orthodox Christian, he perceives the Orthodox Church as a special ally in cultivating and promoting said values.<sup>32</sup> His statements do not, however, favor one religious organization. Instead, he believes that spirituality and appreciation for values proclaimed by religious tradition, the acceptance of traditional patterns of social life, and the rejection of such forms of social progress which oppose them distinguish Russia from the contemporary West.<sup>33</sup>

This idea serves most of all the confrontation between Russian and Western cultures, the latter being portrayed as fallen and degenerate.<sup>34</sup> Not only does this idea justify the rejection of non-traditional family patterns and social equality for non-heteronormative people, but most of all, it serves to question the values which form the foundation in Western democratic societies – the subservient role of

<sup>30</sup> “Ne soglasilsya by ostavat’sya prezidentom pozhiznenno.”

<sup>31</sup> Trenin, *Should We Fear Russia?*, 46

<sup>32</sup> Putin, *Mysli o Rossii*, 51.

<sup>33</sup> Chadayev, *Putin. Nashi tsennosti*, 164–165.

<sup>34</sup> Semenova, “Osobennosti konstrukta politicheskoy identichnosti,” 175–177.

the state with respect to an individual, respect for freedom, including freedom of speech and property, as well as the right of every human being to self-definition according to their own identity.

In Vladimir Putin's approach, the community of values distinguishing Russia from the fallen West is primarily a spiritual one with a sacral dimension. Such a view was presented during his address to the Federal Assembly on December 12, 2012.<sup>35</sup> He pointed out that, in his opinion, Russian society lacks spiritual ties (*dukhovnyye skrepy*). He believes those ties also include characteristic values, such as mercy, compassion, mutual support, and assistance from a political point of view. They all bind together the life of society and do not explicitly address the well-being of a person. In Putin's view, the Russians have been proud of these values for centuries. These values have made the Russian nation stronger. Therefore, all Russian leaders must support those social institutions that pass on and strengthen traditional values. Moreover, he clearly said during his address that law could be used to defend traditional morality, even though there is no legal way to establish and promote said morality. The state does not want to encroach on the beliefs and opinions of individuals through legislation. He added, "Attempts by the state to encroach on the beliefs and opinions of individuals are without a doubt a manifestation of totalitarianism. I find it utterly unacceptable. We are not going to enter that path. We should not act through prohibitions and restrictions, but we should strengthen society's lasting spiritual and moral basis." Instead of state interference in worldview issues, President Putin announced his support for developing Russian culture, education, and activities for young people. In his opinion, these spheres, which cannot be considered mere services, account for the harmonious moral development of responsible and mature citizens of Russia.

These words were put into practice by implementing important social and ideological activities, such as introducing religious instruction into public schools, supporting the paramilitary patriotic youth organization Young Army (*Yunarmiya*), or social and educational activities conducted by the Russian Orthodox Church. Nonetheless, the interpretation of the actual meaning of the words uttered in 2012 is influenced by the further development of Russia's ideological politics under Vladimir Putin's rule. It was hard to ignore them, given the context of the Pussy Riot protest in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow in 2012. It led to changes in Russian criminal legislation regarding the protection of religious feelings of believers in the absence of protection of the beliefs of non-religious people.<sup>36</sup> A prime example of the application of law promoting a religious worldview was the case of the video blogger Ruslan Sokolovskiy, who was charged and subsequently sentenced

<sup>35</sup> Putin, "Poslaniye Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii Federal'nomu Sobraniyu Rossiyskoy Federatsii" [2012].

<sup>36</sup> Stoeckl, *The Russian Orthodox Church*, 100–101; Ponomariov, *The Visible Religion*, 292; Bernstein, "An Inadvertent Sacrifice," 221–222.

for offending religious feelings by “hunting Pokémon” in a church in Yekaterinburg.<sup>37</sup> Finally, the most important stage of introducing ideological elements into state legislation was the constitutional reform of 2020. It introduced an invocation to God into the Russian Federation Constitution, defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman, and assigned legal protection only to such a family pattern (Articles 72.1 zh1 and 114.1 v).

The promise of no ideological involvement on the part of the state through restrictive legislation interfering in one’s worldview sphere has not been fulfilled. On the contrary, as a source of Russia’s separateness and foundation of values that differ from the ones characteristic of liberal Western societies, spirituality has become a space of active state pressure. This pressure has manifested itself in the support for various social and educational initiatives considered desirable from the perspective of Putin’s political agenda. It has also led to tampering with legislation. In such a way, spirituality has become an important device in Russian internal politics, especially in culture and social life.

#### 4. Interpretation and Discussion

While analyzing numerous other statements of President Putin, it is worth asking the following questions: what is the meaning of such language? How does it present the truth about Russian political life, especially its axiological and anthropological aspects? To what extent was it artificially created to achieve specific political goals? The answer to these questions is complex and inconclusive. On the one hand, in his speeches, Putin does evoke motifs present in Rus’ and Russian historiosophy and mysticism. On the other hand, the context in which said speeches have been made strongly connects them to the immediate policy objectives of the authorities, especially to ideological influences on Russian society.

In an attempt to interpret the political and ideological significance of Putin’s words of a historiosophical and mystical character, one should extrapolate three issues: firstly, the evolution of Putin’s language, in which we can observe an increase in such content; secondly, the way in which he treats religion in his policies (especially in the internal policy and relation with the so-called near abroad, namely the countries formed after the collapse of the Soviet Union, except for the Baltic states); finally, the question of whether the sacralization of Putin’s language is also manifested in his other activities, which would further imply an actual attempt at the quality change in Russian politics and axiological strengthening of Russian social life.

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<sup>37</sup> Amnesty International, “Russian Federation.”

#### 4.1. The Increasing Sacralization of Putin's Language

One can easily notice a significant evolution in Vladimir Putin's language since 2000 when he took over the office following Boris Yeltsin. In the first years of his presidency, Putin was building his image as a modern leader in opposition to Yeltsin's public image. He referred both to imperial and Soviet traditions, whose signs were symbolic gestures, such as restoring the melody of the Soviet Union's national anthem. At the same time, however, he supported the democratization of Russia, opposed any forms of authoritarianism, did not allow the possibility of violating constitutional deadlines for presidential terms, and supported freedom of speech and independent media. In that period, he described Russia as part of Western civilization.<sup>38</sup> He saw Russian culture as an integral part of European culture.<sup>39</sup> Dmitriy A. Medvedev adopted a similar style during his presidency (2008–2012), although the interpretational context was decidedly different – after Vladimir Putin's "Munich speech" in 2007 and the Russo-Georgian War in 2008.

The change in Putin's rhetoric, including its historiosophical and mystical threads, can be noted after his address during the Munich Security Conference in 2007. He announced Russia's disapproval of the world order and international relations patterns proposed by Western liberal democracies at that time.<sup>40</sup> It is worth noting that the significance of the "Munich speech" as a turning point in the ideological orientation of his policies was emphasized by his supporters stemming from alt-right and conservative circles.<sup>41</sup>

The ideological evolution of Vladimir Putin's language was influenced not only by external conflicts in which the Russian Federation participated but also by significant personal changes in Russia. After the unexpected death of the Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus' Alexiy II on December 5, 2008, Metropolitan Kirill (Gundayev) was elected as his successor on January 27, 2009. This change resulted in a decidedly closer collaboration between the Russian Orthodox Church and the authorities. In cultural policy, axiology, or opposition to values characteristic of Western democratic societies, this collaboration sometimes assumes the form of symbiosis.

What is reflected in Vladimir Putin's language then is the "conservative turn" observed since 2007 both in Russian external policy and various areas of internal policy. It is particularly notable in the sphere of freedom of speech and mass media, education, or the extent of legal regulations of ideological issues, such as the protection of religion and the promotion of an official version of Russia's history accepted by the authorities. In the linguistic dimension, the term "conservative turn" is revealed

<sup>38</sup> Evans, "Putin's Legacy," 900.

<sup>39</sup> Galeotti, *We Need to Talk About Putin*, 41–42; Chadayev, *Putin. Nashi tsennosti*, 114.

<sup>40</sup> Putin, *Rossiya ustremlyennaya v budushcheye*, 93–94.

<sup>41</sup> Silvius, "The Russian State," 59.



in the abandonment of the language of politics and public life that is characteristic of liberal democracies. On the other hand, this type of language expresses the concept of Russia's historical mission and reclaiming its rightful place in the world. Although one cannot reasonably speak of the penetration of the idea of Russian messianism into the authorities' official language, it is impossible not to notice the key features of Rus' and Russian religious historiosophy. These include (1) the idea of Russia's special mission, the idea of historical and cultural continuity of the Rus' and Russia; (2) the conviction about the spiritual superiority of the Rus' and Russia (the source of which is the concept of Moscow, the Third Rome); and (3) the view that Russia is fundamentally different from Europe on a civilizational level (the source of which are the views of Russian Slavophiles of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Eurasians in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). All these ideas are increasingly more recognizable in the public addresses of President Putin, primarily when he refers to Russia's axiological separateness from the Western world or presents Russia as a "spiritual" country and society built on perennial spiritual foundations.

While interpreting this evolution of Vladimir Putin's rhetoric, one cannot ignore its political context. This evolution occurs alongside the toughening of Russian foreign policy, both with respect to Western liberal democracies and the so-called near abroad.<sup>42</sup> Military, political, and economic confrontation with the West is accompanied in Russia by the striving to present Western culture as fallen, decadent, and dying. At the same time, political pressure in the post-Soviet region is followed by denying the cultural and historical separateness and questioning the territorial integrity of some states: Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, and, in recent years, Kazakhstan. Particularly in the case of Ukraine and Belarus, which occupy a large part of the territory of the historical Rus', the historiosophical idea of the continuity of the Rus' and Russia and the unity of Rus' and Russian culture forms an ideological argument for challenging their national, cultural, and linguistic separateness and state sovereignty.

#### 4.2. Instrumental Treatment of Religion

The collaboration between the Patriarchate of Moscow and the Russian Federation authorities tightened after Patriarch Alexiy II's death and Kirill's election. The most influential bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church have repeatedly expressed their full support for the authorities and, personally, for Vladimir Putin. Two recent statements are worth mentioning. In an interview published in November 2021, Patriarch Kirill called Russia "the leader of the free world."<sup>43</sup> In his opinion, there are no problems dividing Russian society at the moment. Russia is developing and treading

<sup>42</sup> Stent, *Putin's World*, 35.

<sup>43</sup> "Patriarkh Kirill."

its path while successfully opposing foreign pressure. Thanks to solving social problems and a high degree of social consensus on important issues for public life, Russia can set an example for other countries. In another interview published in October 2021, Metropolitan Tikhon (Shevkunov), a bishop supposed to be Putin's spiritual adviser, made an already famous statement when he said that Vladimir Putin had gained such authority – both nationally and internationally – that it would be difficult to find a decent successor. According to Metropolitan Tikhon, the main problem for Russia is that Putin is not immortal. He is the one saving Russia, thus completely sacrificing himself for his country.<sup>44</sup>

Such statements reveal that the Russian Orthodox Church profits from the collaboration with the state.<sup>45</sup> In particular, the Church and organizations connected to it are the main beneficiaries of the state grant system, which supports social organizations that perform important educational, cultural, and charitable functions.<sup>46</sup> In addition, the authorities have taken many other measures in favor of the Russian Orthodox Church, such as supporting the construction of new churches, introducing classes on the basics of Orthodox culture in public schools, and recognizing theology as an academic discipline.

However, the extent and manner of state support to the church raise doubts about the motivation of such support.<sup>47</sup> On the one hand, the state benefits from the church's endorsement of implementing the objectives of social policies that it finds politically profitable.<sup>48</sup> An example of this was the campaign against the LGBTQ+ community, which resulted in adopting a law prohibiting the promotion of “non-traditional sexual relations” in 2013, penalizing any form of the public presence of LGBTQ+ community representatives.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, the state has not made any demands from the church regarding moral issues that do not enjoy sufficient social support (such as the prohibition of or restrictions on abortion).<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, state authorities endorse the presence of the Russian Orthodox Church wherever it is politically advantageous for Russia, particularly in Belarus (where the local church is part of the Russian Orthodox Church structure) or in Ukraine (where the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, an autonomous part of the Moscow Patriarchate, supports pro-Russian politicians and plays a significant role in Ukraine's political life).<sup>51</sup> As a result, in many aspects of domestic and foreign policy (especially

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44 “Mitropolit Tikhon o Putine.”

45 Drinova, “Napravleniya i priority,” 41–53.

46 Mitrokhin, *Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov'*, 278–279.

47 Papkova, *The Orthodox Church*, 200–201; Fagan, *Believing in Russia*, 28–29; see also Zabaev – Mikhaylova – Oreshina, “Neither Public nor Private Religion,” 17–38.

48 Kelly, “Competing Orthodoxies,” 312–313.

49 Stoeckl, *The Russian Orthodox Church*, 96, 100.

50 Ponomariov, *The Visible Religion*, 293–296.

51 Trenin, *Post-Imperium*, 299.

in relations with Belarus and Ukraine but also with Bulgaria and Serbia), the church has become a tool for implementing a very pragmatic Kremlin policy subordinated to political, economic, or military interests.<sup>52</sup>

## 5. Conclusions: Sacralization as a Self-Creation

Even when speaking on strictly political topics, President Putin's language is often puzzling. At times, it is filled with metaphysical depth; at others, it evokes nostalgia for the lost past or is full of a religiously rooted hope that seems to transcend longings characteristic of political life. This emotional language appears in his most significant statements. Sacralization of Putin's rhetoric is supposed to indicate, at least in the official message, the abandonment of the Western pragmatic language of politics and, consequently, Western political patterns to achieve clear political goals. It is supposed to indicate a turn towards the language and politics of the historic mission, which transgresses political, economic, or military dimensions. This is how numerous Russian neoconservatism and neo-imperialism representatives would like to interpret Putin's statements. Given such an interpretation, President Putin's open rejection of secularism, frequent references to religious ideas (mainly, but not exclusively, Orthodox), and invocations to God could point to a new vision of politics, full of metaphysical depth answering the spiritual depth of the human person and the uniqueness of Russia itself as a country built on spiritual foundations and values.

While it is difficult to deny that Putin's rhetoric does contain elements of sacralization, the appreciation of religion in social and political life does not correspond to changes in the moral standards of said life. Besides this basic, albeit difficult to measure, argument, one can also indicate two more obvious ones, which suggest that the discussed sacralization is a part of his identity politics, devoid of any actual metaphysical depth or more profound message.

Firstly, despite repeated references to religious and mystical motifs, Putin did not decide to make religion the identity foundation of contemporary Russia. This is understandable since Russian society, despite the significant presence of Orthodoxy in public life, is multi-ethnic and multi-religious. Hence, according to Putin's declaration, the main element of the Russian "national idea," which binds this extremely diverse society and ensures the country's stability, should be patriotism.<sup>53</sup> While not placing religion at the center of his identity politics, Putin uses only some of its

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<sup>52</sup> Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 86–87; Laine, "The Russian World," 208–210.

<sup>53</sup> Sakwa, *Russian Politics and Society*, 316.

elements, which he considers profitable from the perspective of immediate political objectives.

Secondly, religious and mystical threads found in Putin's statements are taken out of their interpretational context and placed in a foreign context in political and historiosophical references. They promote the idea that Russia is separate from the West and that the values of Western liberal societies do not correspond to traditional Russian axiology.<sup>54</sup> They also serve as support for the reinterpretation of Russia's history. This reinterpretation makes explicit references to current events because it questions the cultural uniqueness and sovereignty of Ukraine and Belarus to a certain extent.

All the above considerations can lead us to conclude that the sacralization of President Putin's political language is more the result of self-creation than an actual willingness for quality changes in internal and foreign policies, even if it uses the Rus' and Russian political and religious traditions quite well. At the same time, this shows that the path from a declared appreciation for the religious sphere in political life to an actual radical transformation of said life following declared values is often quite long – a view that can refer to the states in which political elites are trying to provoke a “conservative revolution” or renewal by supporting arbitrarily defined traditional values.

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<sup>54</sup> Stent, *Putin's World*, 36; Torbakov, *After Empire*, 319.

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