

# The imagined Great Russian World

*Putin's religious motives to justify the invasion of Ukraine*



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### Vital Interest

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## Introduction

Russia's Cathedral of the Armed Forces (RCAF), placed in the military Patriot Park near Moscow, is consecrated in June 2020. The Cathedral is dedicated to the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Russian victory in the Great Patriotic War (Kolov, 2021). Angels gaze down on Russian soldiers in a mosaic commemorating the country's role in Syria's civil war, the invasion of Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. (The Economist, 2022). This is not the only exemplary mosaic in this Cathedral. Images of Putin and Stalin are amongst them (Coynash, 2020). Why does Putin agree with his image in the mosaic of this Cathedral?

This essay attempts to identify the contribution of religion in the period of Putin's rule which ultimately culminated in the invasion of Ukraine. Since no one can investigate Putin's mind with certainty, the question is approached with some caution. Much research has already been done into Putin's motivations. Additional articles by his own hand are also available. One article is exemplary for his way of thinking: *"Modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era. We know and remember well that it was shaped on the lands of historical Russia... Ukraine and Russia have developed as a single economic system over decades and centuries... When the USSR collapsed many people believed that our close cultural, spiritual, and economic ties would certainly last... True sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia... Ukraine's ruling circles decided to deny its past, except for border issues. The US and EU systematically and consistently pushed Ukraine to limit economic cooperation with Russia... Our spiritual unity has also been attacked... Russia has done everything to stop fratricide... We will never allow our historical territories and people close to us living there to be used against Russia... We are one people."* (Putin, 2021)

In this regard the research question can be formulated: in what way does Putin use religious motives to justify the invasion of Ukraine? To answer this question, three main influences on his ideology will be described (Kozelsky, 2014). Subsequently, the relationship between the church and state and its development since the collapse of the Soviet Union will be explained. This chapter is followed by a brief description of increasing dissatisfaction on the side of Putin for it might have influenced the assumed main reason why the invasion has been inevitable and will be discussed thereafter. Lastly, the way Putin tries to justify his actions will be analyzed. Then will be concluded with an analysis on how religious motives played a role in this multidimensional conflict to support Putin's goals.

## The Holy Rus, *Ruskyi Mir* and Eurasianism

Russia is built upon the story of the *Rus*. In this story Norwegian Vikings came to the Kyiv region with boats. *Rus* in Viking language means 'men who row'. They experience attacks from all sides. To defend themselves they decide to attack first and gain territory this way. The geographical development and extension are combined with a permanent perception of an outside threat. This has led to a top-down 'unity' to hold the stand against these threats from the east and from the west (Benedikter, 2022). Additionally, the strategic thought develops to attack first to prevent upcoming threats. Finally these pagan people became officially Russian when Prince Vladimir converted to Orthodox Christianity in 988. (Jha, et al 2022, Kozelsky 2014, Krawchuk, 2021, Putin 2021).

The key doctrine of Putin's ideology of *Ruskyi Mir*, a Greater Russian World, is the "quasi-messianic role for Russia in saving Christian civilization from the decadent West through the spreading of Russian language, culture and values ... and exerting influence throughout the wider Orthodox and western world." (O'Beara, 2022). "The goal of the ideology of Putin is to make Russia strong and feared again, and to protect the power and wealth of Russia's current ruling class." (Applebaum, 2013). His carefully worked out system is an attempt to revive the pre-revolutionary period (Kozelsky, 2014, Surzhko Harned, 2022). This period has the following main features. Until the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Orthodox identity remained quite stable. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century on different wars and invasions, for instance between Polish-Lithuanian and Russian armies, WWI, and WWII influenced territorial, ideological, and economical differences between 'the East' and 'the West' bank of the Dnipro in Ukraine. This schism is placed within the context of the greater Russian region. Sometimes the bifurcation of East and West appear as clear boundaries, like the Dnipro, but on the dimension of economy, religion, and culture the boundaries were diffuse and mobile (Kozelsky, 2014, Alfarsi, 2022).

The separation is not as clear as it is portrayed. For instance, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) was on a large spiritual colonization quest with ever-expanding Russian borders, including Kyiv and Crimea (Kozelsky, 2014). At the same time a separate Ukrainian identity, literature and language started to develop. Two types of nationalism arise in the region, Russian and Ukrainian.

The third influence on Putin's ideology stems from Dugin's philosophy of nihilism. This philosophy is religious eschatological and isolationistic nationalistic in essence (Benedikter, 2009, Kozelsky, 2014). Its goal is to realize a 'metaphysical nationalism' wherein Putin is the eternal present savior (Benedikter, 2009, Surzhko Harned, 2022). Dugin views the world from a Russia-centered perspective. The quasi-messianic role of Russia and its savior must do whatever is necessary to save the world. Western civilization symbolizes the Anti-Christ of social order, everything a religiously unified Russia is fighting against. Putin wants to be remembered as the one who leads his people in this historical religiously based role for Great Russia (Benedikter, 2009).

## Church – State relationship

In 1990 The Ukrainian Orthodox Church, with the acceptance of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), arises next to the ROC. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 Ukraine became independent. The ROC grew enormously, and religious diversity flourished in the period of Yeltsin. Due to the developed dichotomy between East and West and the emergence of two churches, there was a lack of political and religious unity, not in the liking of the ROC or the later Putin's regime. The ROC became fond of Putin's idea of a Great Russian World. To realize this, Putin believes the rulers of the state must have control over the life of the nation.<sup>1</sup> "Events cannot be allowed just to happen, they must be controlled and manipulated." (Applebaum, 2013). In Putin's first years he already understood the added value of religious imagining. The defense of Orthodox Christianity gave him the psychological tools to stand on the right side of humanity (Benedikter, 2022). He 'managed (religious) pluralism' for his, and his friends, benefit. This managing developed quickly into state control. Everyone who opposes Russia is automatically suspicious. Putin is concerned that foreign power (western democracy) wants "to destroy Russian statehood and usurp power." (Applebaum, 2013).

In the beginning of 2000s, the ROC sees all other denominations and religious groups as a threat for their privileged position and relation with the state (Lamoreaux, 2018). The ROC has power on behalf of the structures of unity and tradition. Its focus is holy victory gained by the military as an active agent. The military works for the State and for God (Kolov, 2021). This merging of Church and State accelerated when Kirill became the Patriarch in 2009 for "Kirill impressed Putin with his knowledge about and acknowledgement of the traditional, long-standing relationship between religion and imperialism in Russia's history." Kirill made Putin more accessible to the given opportunities by religion to stay in power (Benedikter, 2022). Since early 2010s the Russian government has re-sacralized political behavior and public consciousness towards a traditional, orthodox model. "As faith has fallen along nationalist lines, Ukraine and its holy places ... have become battlegrounds of identity." (Kozelsky, 2014).

## The increasing dissatisfaction

The first two terms of Putin are characterized by economic growth and a narrative of a unitarian modern nation, a standalone Russian civilization (Benedikter, 2022). His third term knows a decline of economic growth. To stabilize the regime's power an addition to the narrative was needed. One that focused more on traditional Russian values (Kolov, 2021). Where Putin's Russia believes in one Russia where Ukraine is part of, the latter sees this quite differently. According to the latter there are big differences between Russia and Ukraine. Tension raised between Ukraine and Putin's Russia from the moment he came to power. In 2014, days after the Orange Revolution, Putin started to actively support the pro-separatist movement in the Crimea and in Eastern Ukraine provinces Donetsk and Luhansk (Tolmor, 2015). This conflict was the basis for the secession of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC). A third Orthodox Church emerged in 2019 in Ukraine (Leustean, 2023).

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<sup>1</sup> Putin's hero is Andropov, the longest serving director of the KGB. He had a straightforward theory of governance: order and discipline.

The main difference between Russia and Ukraine is the latter's focus on western civilization, its economy and democracy. The greatest geopolitical threat for Putin is this western rhetoric. Ukraine is 'drifting away' from Russia and its values (Putin, 2020). The regime doesn't wish discontent, public questioning, and open criticism within Russia. Putin sees Ukraine as part of Russia. This opens the door to a more open society (Applebaum, 2013). An open society carries the possibility of losing power. The developments in Ukraine are not in his interest.

"Russia can remain safe only by sustaining its capacity to repel inexorable dangers from without. The attacks on the state are articulated as attacks on the Russian people and as assaults on the faith." (Kolov, 2021). internal and external politics are inextricably linked. The unification of religion and politics is the civilizational difference between Putin's Russia compared to the West and its secular ideology (Benedikter, 2023). Putin's ideology appeals to people who have difficulty with a borderless globalized world (Bauman, 2012, Triandafyllidou, 2017) and who need distinction between 'us' and 'the other' to identify themselves. Western civilization is the 'other'. To hold a stance against the other, there is no place for division or diversity. Ukraine is the place where this (bigger) fight against the other is being played out. The dichotomy between Russia and Ukraine reflects the struggle of two political-economical systems and two value formations (Kolov, 2021) and as such it's an example of a clash of civilizations (Huntington, 1996).

## Religious nationalism under threat

From the perspective of Ukraine, to accept being part of the Russian world, means you accept being a Russian colony and being oppressed by the Russian regime. Ukraine sees a denial of historical grievances like the Holodomor and sees their meddling as an attempt to restore the Russian empire and to neglect Ukraine's independency (Feklyunina, 2016, Putin, 2020). Putin feels threatened at his borders and sees it as his holy right to protect what is naturally his (Kolov, 2021, Putin, 2020). His religious nationalism contains the national substance (faith), unity of people and sovereignty of the state. "Religious nationalism is the potent infusion of national identity with religious belief" (Kozelsky, 2014). The goal of religion, as understood by this regime, is to create great powers by unification and inspiration (Kolov, 2021). Therefore, the Russian World is an example of ethno-ideological religious nationalism (Juergensmeyer, 1996). With the geopolitical developments in Ukraine, religious nationalism is under threat. Legal pressure, public propaganda, and violence against internal opponents in both Russia and Ukraine are justified (Applebaum, 2013). The 'special military operation' of Russia started to defend itself from western influence in the region and specially in Ukraine.

The Kremlin regime and the ROC have increasingly joined forces to give and maintain power for both. Church and military go hand in hand. The ROC support became a key component of Russia's all-of-government approach to foreign affairs (O'Beara, 2022). In the beginning religion melted with secularism to gain more power and land (Benedikter, 2009, Lamoreaux, 2018). Whilst Ukraine goes a democratic way, Russia finds itself in a difficult position. Russia could also seriously welcome democracy, but then power of Putin and his regime will diminish. This is not what Putin, or Kirill, favors (Plokhy, 2018). Patriarch Kirill spouts Kremlin propaganda, claiming that Russia is not the aggressor, and that genocide is being perpetrated by Ukrainians against Russian speakers in the Donbas. This addresses the Russian collective socio-psychological motive of self-perception and isolation in an uncertain environment. It's the condition of the first *Rus* and triggers the mechanism of victimization and the fact that to protect one's unity, one needs to expand (Benedikter, 2009, Kolov, 2021). The latter is done with military aggression and via the soft powers of narrative, the use of symbols and art (Feklyunina, 2016, Mulford, 2016).

## How to keep Russia's identity strong

Russia's identity has developed itself from belonging to Europe, to a great power equal to the West, to the normative superiority with a special responsibility for maintaining stability in the post-Soviet era (Feklyunina, 2016). Religious belief forms the foundation of identity construction for it gives meaning to life (Kozelsky, 2014). Identity is adaptive to external circumstances, if it's fate isn't being forced to belong to a community and its idea(l)s (Bauman, 2004).

Putin is aware of this social construct and uses soft powers to maintain an identity that serves his interests meanwhile preventing Ukraine from drifting away (Feklyunina, 2016).

The use of narrative is the basic vehicle of human knowledge and the fundamental instrument of thought (Richardson, 2000). It is used for developing a national identity and building society (Sideris, 2015). To control the masses is a characteristic of autocratic states that fear counter-narratives to the government's approved messaging (Mulford, 2016). Therefore, the Kremlin wants to control the narrative and the media.

The narrative is used to gain political power in a flexible though pragmatic way (Ganiel and Dixon, 2008). Its goal is to describe the structure of the Russian world, project its story and provide interpretations of various 'problems' and suggest possible solutions (Feklyunina, 2016). When problems occur, one needs a strong narrative like the messianic version of the Russian World to overcome this problem (Surzhko Harned, 2022). The regime was not particularly good in promoting this message, even with the use of religious symbols and what Kirill describes as 'the single spiritual body of the Holy Rus' (Krawchuk, 2021). The backlash strengthened the historical present socio-psychological element of victimization and confirmed the need for a more sacred reason for Russia's military actions in Ukraine (Kolov, 2014).

This need is reinforced by building on a long history of dedicating churches and icons to military achievements in Russia (Kolov, 2021). The RCAF is but one example. Other examples are blessing of new buildings, military installations and construction sites and the blessing of new presidents (Benedikter, 2022), the use of art to position Putin (Benedikter, 2022) or symbolic timing of celebration days (Kolov, 2014).

After 1991 the church-state relationship has developed again, so as the religious nationalistic view that Kyiv and Crimea are at the center of Russian religious identity (Kozelsky, 2014). Putin's regime is convinced that Ukraine and Russia are one. The control of this identity is difficult. The regime doesn't function anymore by mobilizing society with the help of a single grand vision. The religious narrative of the Russian World has had the opposite effect with the separation of the UOC (Harned, 2022). The next step Putin took, is using more suppression by demobilizing individuals, assuring them there are no certainties and no institutions that can be trusted but him and his regime (Benedikter, 2022). The ROC, with Patriarch Kirill in front, reinforces this suppression and functionally uses faith to subordinate people to strengthen national security (Benedikter, 2022, Kolov, 2021). The church is instrumentalized by major political actors (Mulford, 2016). "Religion is a tool to define territories and separate grounds, assigning lands based on differing ideologies." (Jha et al, 2022).

## Conclusion

This research aimed to analyze how religious institutions and motives are used and positioned in various ways in this multidimensional conflict. The religious dimension is closely intertwined with its historical, socio-political, and ideological aspects, making it a complex and sensitive issue. The religious 'factor' is subordinate to the power of the State, especially Putin and his friends. It is used for two goals, to claim a religious founded national identity and as a tool for political manipulation. Therefore, it can be concluded that religion is used as an instrument to maintain a specific socio-cultural vision of Russia, its role in today's world and for personal benefit of Putin and his friends. Even though Putin tries to blame western civilization as the source of tension and division, it has become clear that his aggressive military activity combined with the use of soft powers with a religious touch has backfired upon him and the imagined Great Russian World. This serves Ukraine, and the West, well in her fight against imperialist Russia.

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