

Messianism and the Third Rome:
Political Mythologies in Contemporary Russian Statecraft

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Abstract

This thesis discusses how the contemporary Russian government uses deeply rooted nationalist political mythologies like Russian Messianism and the Third Rome to justify actions and decision-making in foreign affairs. Recent examples of this are Russia's approach to events in South Ossetia in 2008, the Ukraine Crisis and annexation of Crimea in 2014, the schism of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in 2019, and the current war in Ukraine.

I. INTRODUCTION

There are a few concepts necessary to define before delving into our discussion. The first of these, “political mythology” or “political myth,” is difficult to define because there is a wide range of interpretations of the term. In his book *The New Third Rome: Readings of a Russian Nationalist Myth*, Jardar Østbø spends an entire chapter evaluating the merits of various definitions of “political myth” within the context of the Third Rome mythology.¹ After analyzing several interpretations of the phrase, he concludes (with some hesitation) that Chiara Bottici's definition is the most useful:

[A] political myth can be defined as the work on a common narrative by which the members of a social group (or society) make significance of their political experiences and deeds.²

This definition rejects a common view that political mythologies must make a claim to *truth*; instead, Bottici maintains that the mythologies must make a claim to *significance*. This core dependence on significance implies that political myths must be constantly evolving to retain their relevance in an ever-changing world. She also stresses that political myths always have a

¹ Jardar Østbø, *The New Third Rome: Readings of a Russian Nationalist Myth* (Stuttgart: *ibidem* Press, 2016), 39-80
² Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 45, Chiara Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 179

practical aspect, and are never simply an abstract phenomenon: they “are always at the same time a determination to act – they are narratives that prompt people to action precisely because they answer a need for significance.”³ The main reservation that Østbø relays about the applicability of Bottici’s definition to the Third Rome mythology is her argument that “myth does not coincide with religion.”⁴ As will be discussed below, the mythologies of the Third Rome and Russian messianism have ties to religion. In many cases, the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church seem to use them in a coordinated manner. However, Østbø concludes that her definition of political myth is still valid and relevant because these mythologies have large secular components as well.⁵ This paper will focus on the political myths of Russian messianism and the Third Rome, but they are not the only ones currently in use by the Kremlin. Others include Putin’s role as a national hero, the belief that Russia is constantly “beset and beleaguered by aggressive Western scheming,” and the myth of foreign encirclement.⁶

Another critical term, “nationalism,” is similarly difficult to pin down to a single concrete definition. It is critical to understand, though, because nationalism is often a key ingredient in the formulation of new versions of Russian messianism and the Third Rome myth. One popular model used to describe nationalism is the dichotomy of political (French) and cultural (German) nationalism. In her book *In the Name of the Nation*, Marlène Lauelle argues that this model is lacking, because political and cultural nationalism are not actually mutually exclusive, and because the concepts do not represent the views of the nationalists themselves.⁷ She also rejects the more recent binary model of civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism, once again suggesting

³ Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, 183

⁴ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 48

⁵ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 48

⁶ Bo Petersson, “Putin and the Russian Mythscape: Dilemmas of Charismatic Legitimacy,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2017), 244

⁷ Marlène Laruelle, *In the Name of the Nation: Nationalism and Politics in Contemporary Russia* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009) 6

that the terms are not antagonistic and any form of nationalism will inevitably include both of these types to a certain degree.⁸ A useful definition of nationalism that allows for the nature of the Russian reality is Anthony Smith's:

Nationalism can be defined as an ideological movement to attain and maintain autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population, some of whose members believe it to constitute an actual or potential "nation."⁹

Nationalism in the post-Soviet space is wrought with identity crisis, leading to the wide-ranging interpretations of the political mythologies discussed in this paper.¹⁰ As Laruelle emphasizes, the belief that Russian nationalism is purely exists as part of the extreme right is false, as "nationalism is in fact spread right throughout the country and cannot be viewed as a phenomenon confined to the margins of society."¹¹

Messianism is important to define within the context of this paper, especially because Russian messianism sometimes differs from more well-known forms (such as Jewish or Polish messianism). For instance, Russian messianism tends to rear its head "at crisis points" in the country's history. Examples are the Mongol-Tatar Yoke, serfdom, and the early Nineteenth Century, when Tsardom was in its death throes.¹² Traditionally messianism is a purely religious idea, but in the Russian context it has a large secular dimension. In approaching the topic of Russian messianism, Anthony Smith's model distinguishing between messianism of expansion and messianism of covenant is helpful. Messianism of expansion "aims at limitless expansion outside of its own community, energized by the burning desire to save the entire universe or to

⁸ Laruelle, *In the Name of the Nation*, 7

⁹ Anthony D. Smith, *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: a Cultural Approach* (London: Routledge, 2009), 61

¹⁰ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 23

¹¹ Laruelle, *In the Name of the Nation*, 6

¹² Peter J.S. Duncan, *Russian Messianism: Third Rome, Revolution, Communism and After* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 141

deliver on promises of the ultimate solution to social problems,” while messianism of covenant “turns to the past, toward the initial parameters of the ‘agreement’ between the ‘chosen people’ and God.”¹³ Both of these types of messianism are currently active within Russia, and the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church often choose which one to promote based on what fits their current needs better.¹⁴ Despite the unique difficulties in defining the specifics of Russian messianism, it does follow a basic formula: “Providence has a plan along which History unfolds, and in this plan the chosen one (individual or collective) has a special role to play (mission).”¹⁵ One of the challenges in analyzing the political myth of Russian messianism is its fluidity. The “chosen one” and the “mission” in this formula change in relation to world affairs. In Russian messianism the “chosen one” is generally either the state, the Church, or the nation.¹⁶ The “mission” is harder to pin down because it is more dependent on current events. In her examination of the topic, Curanović defines it as:

a projection of state identity in the international arena [which displays] the conviction of having a special destiny, a sense of moral superiority, [and] the conviction that the state’s activity is motivated not only by its own interest but also by a higher cause that is important for a broader (regional, global, etc.) community.¹⁷

She also points out the tendency of Russian messianism to link the past, present, and future; as a result, most cases of Russian messianism are fixated on “preserving or restoring the order disrupted by the actions of the West.”¹⁸

¹³ Mikhail Suslov, “Russian Conservatism as an Ideology: The Logic of Isolationism,” 85

¹⁴ Suslov, “Russian Conservatism as an Ideology,” 85

¹⁵ Alicja Curanović, “Russia’s Mission in the World: The Perspective of the Russian Orthodox Church,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 66, no. 4 (2019), 254

¹⁶ Curanović, “Russia’s Mission in the World,” 257

¹⁷ Curanović, “Russia’s Mission in the World,” 254

¹⁸ Curanović, “Russia’s Contemporary Exceptionalism and Geopolitical Conservatism,” in *Contemporary Russian Conservatism*, 207-232: 213

The myth of the Third Rome is even harder to concretely define than the myth of Russian messianism. The origins of the term date back to the early sixteenth century and it has cycled in and out of popularity throughout the years since then.¹⁹ Each evolution of the Third Rome mythology carries a distinct interpretation, and there are often several conflicting versions in circulation at any given moment. One of the fascinating aspects of this mythology is that it directly concerns—and is used as a tool by—both the Russian government and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Dmitrii Sidorov places the Third Rome myth at the center of the phenomenon he refers to as “Orthodoxy-related geopolitics.”²⁰ The post-Soviet identity crisis of Russian nationalism spawned countless new interpretations of the Third Rome, often with little in common aside from a nationalist bent. Østbø offers a useful model to describe the current landscape of Third Rome myths. According to him, most interpretations accept some level of religious significance, but they all fall somewhere on the spectrum between purely Orthodox, eschatological meaning and purely secular meaning. Similarly, they all fall on a spectrum between purely expansionist/imperialist and purely isolationist.²¹ He identifies four theorists representing the four corners of this spectrum: Aleksandr Dugin, Nataliia Narochnitskaia, Vadim Tsymburskii, and Egor Kholmogorov. They are not the only or even necessarily the most prominent Third Rome thinkers in contemporary Russia, but they do represent a variety of nationalist currents in contemporary Russia, such as neo-Eurasianism, neo-Panslavism, the civilizationist approach, and the Young Conservative movement.²² In my discussion of the Third Rome myth, I will focus on these same four theorists in order to demonstrate the breadth of

¹⁹ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 72

²⁰ Dmitrii Sidorov, “Post-Imperial Third Romes: Resurrections of a Russian Orthodox Geopolitical Metaphor,” *Geopolitics* 11, no. 2 (2006), 318

²¹ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 36

²² Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 8-9

choice the pragmatic Putin administration and Russian Orthodox Church have when adopting echoes of the myth to their public discourse.

It is also worth noting some pervasive themes that will be seen throughout this investigation of Russian political mythologies, such as the relationship between the state and Church, the fitness of the myths within the population, and the idea of the West as an inevitable enemy. The first of these is the close relationship between the Russian State and the Russian Orthodox Church throughout history. There have been periods of dissonance between the two, and the power dynamics between them have fluctuated over time—there have been several instances of one trying to subordinate the other. Up to the present, however, they have remained tightly entwined, especially considering that the Russian Federation is not a theocracy. In fact, the Orthodox Church “enjoys an increasingly privileged status, which, although ambiguous, goes against the idea of religious equality in Russia.”²³ As Vladimir Putin put it in 2004, “Of course, our church is separated from the state. But in the people’s souls everything is together.”²⁴ In a 2012 meeting with Kirill, the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, Putin further clarified his understanding of a “secular state”:

If we are talking about the separation of Church and State, in the current state of affairs, we need to talk about a different essential meaning of secularism, and, in my opinion, a completely different relationship paradigm should be established between the State and religious organizations – a paradigm of partnership, mutual assistance and support.²⁵

²³ Laruelle, *In the Name of the Nation*, 167

²⁴ Cited in Zoe Knox, “Russian Orthodoxy, Russian nationalism, and Patriarch Aleksii II,” *Nationalities Papers* 33, no. 4 (December 2005), 542

²⁵ ‘Если мы говорим об отделении Церкви от государства, то в современных условиях мы должны говорить о другом содержании этой светскости, и она, на мой взгляд, должна заключаться в том, что между государством и религиозными организациями должен установиться совершенно другой режим взаимоотношений — режим партнёрства, взаимной помощи и поддержки.’ Vladimir Putin “Стенограмма встречи председателя Правительства РФ В.В. Путина со Святейшим Патриархом Кириллом и лидерами

The Russian State and Orthodox Church are inextricably linked, and it would be impossible to fully understand their use of political mythologies without keeping this in mind.

The significance of the Orthodox Church in Russia goes beyond just its ties to the government. It also holds a highly significant position within Russian culture. Orthodoxy is often considered a piece of the “Russian Soul,” regardless of how many people are practicing believers. In a survey of the population from 1999, 82 percent responded that they consider themselves Orthodox, while only 40 percent consider themselves believers.²⁶ This overwhelming majority of Orthodox-identifying Russians, which includes a atheists and practicing Christians alike, sheds some light on the persistence of these mythologies over several centuries.

Another theme which frequently appears is the idea that successful political mythologies draw on cultural phenomena which already exist. Any attempt to introduce a mythology without a foundation deemed acceptable by the population would be swiftly rejected. The use of political myths is a risky endeavor, because they constantly undergo a process sometimes referred to as “fitness tests”:

When passed, these fitness tests serve to legitimize the political leaders. When failed, the myths fade out, probably together with the leaders who have claimed to represent them. If the political elites do not live up to the myths and deliver accordingly, the contents of the myths can contribute to bringing down the incumbents. This is the ‘myth’s cunning’ – it may prove to be a treacherous companion.²⁷

This brings into consideration the ideas of “collective memory” and “mythscape,” which Duncan S.A. Bell coins and defines as “the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm[s]

традиционных религиозных общин России.” *Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchate*. February 8, 2012. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/2005767.html>

²⁶ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 32

²⁷ Petersson, “Putin and the Russian Mythscape,” 240

wherein the struggle for control of peoples [sic] memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly.”²⁸

Another common theme is the idea of the West as Russia’s inevitable enemy. Maria Engström describes one possible cause:

Contemporary Russian messianism is seen by its proponents as an alternative to the doctrine of American exceptionalism and as an important ideological tool for openly challenging Western hegemony and creating a new polycentric world order. They also argue that the real cause of the current new ‘ideological Cold War’ between Russia and the United States is the collision of two messianic projects with common roots in Christian eschatology and European political thought.²⁹

All of the contemporary Third Romes discussed in this paper view the West as a primary antagonist, and the topic is frequently broached in speeches by Putin and Kirill. The theme can also be seen in the offering of Russian exceptionalism as the answer to American exceptionalism. However, in recent years there has been a growing relationship between radical conservatives in Russia and the United States. For instance, in 2015, Aleksandr Prokhanov, one of Russia’s most prominent conservative ideologists and promoters of Russian messianism, stated that Russia should reconcile the “red” and “white” factions the same way America reconciled its competing Southern and Northern narratives after the Civil War.³⁰

II. EVOLUTION OF THE MYTHS

²⁸ Duncan S.A. Bell, “Mythscape: memory, mythology, and national identity,” *British Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 1 (March 2003), 66

²⁹ Maria Engström, “Contemporary Russian Messianism and New Russian Foreign Policy,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 35, no. 3 (2014), 357

³⁰ Marlene Laruelle, “Mirror Games? Ideological Resonances between Russian and US Radical Conservatism”

One of the reasons that the political mythologies of Russian messianism and the Third Rome are such effective tools is that they draw upon a long historical tradition that has become ingrained in the Russian national consciousness. The origins of these mythologies date back to the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, shortly following the breaking of the Mongol-Tatar Yoke.³¹ During this period there was a significant shift in the way the Muscovites saw themselves. They had achieved full sovereignty over a majority of the Rus' lands after the expulsion of the Mongols.³² Furthermore, Moscow's rapid rise to power occurred only a few decades following the fall of Constantinople in 1453.³³ The combined significance of these events was that Muscovy became the last remaining Orthodox Christian power in the world, a position which inevitably led to grandiose notions of Moscow's purpose in the world:

It is likely that to the Russians it seemed no coincidence that at the very moment when the Byzantine Empire, the Orthodox Second Rome, came to an end, they themselves were at last throwing off the few remaining vestiges of Mongol control: God, it seemed, was granting them their freedom because he had chosen them to be the successors of Byzantium. The new (Muscovite) Russia was now called to take Byzantium's place as protector of the Orthodox world, because it was the only Orthodox country (besides Georgia) which remained independent at this time.³⁴

These ideas surrounding Moscow's unique position gave rise to the concepts of Russian messianism and the Third Rome. Russian messianism is the more general of the two mythologies. The core of the idea is that the Russian people are chosen for a higher purpose, and that they are destined to "save" the rest of the world in some form or other.

³¹ Punsara Amarasinghe, "The depiction of 'Orthodoxy' in Post-Soviet Space: How Vladimir Putin uses the Church in his anti-Western campaign?" *Open Political Science* 4 (2021), 75

³² Amarasinghe, "The depiction of 'Orthodoxy'" 75

³³ Amarasinghe, "The depiction of 'Orthodoxy'" 75

³⁴ Sidorov, "Post-Imperial Third Romes," 321

Moscow as the Third Rome is a concept tightly tied to Russian messianism. Its first documented occurrence was in a 1511 letter from the monk Filofei of Pskov to the Tsar Vasili III. He wrote:

The Church of old Rome fell because of the impiety of the Apollinarian heresy; the Church of the Second Rome, Constantinople, was smitten under the battle-axes of the Agarenes; but this present Church of the Third, New Rome, of Thy sovereign empire: the Holy Catholic Apostolic Church...shines in the whole universe more resplendent than the sun. And let it be known to Thy Lordship, O pious Czar, that all the empires of the Orthodox Christian Faith have converged into Thine one empire. Thou art the sole Emperor of all the Christians in the whole universe...For two Romes have fallen, and the Third stands, and a fourth shall never be, for thy Christian Empire shall never devolve upon others.³⁵

This letter is generally accepted as the foundation of the Third Rome political mythology which has evolved over the centuries, continuously waxing and waning in its popularity. While Filofei is usually credited with the conception of the myth, his original intention is under dispute, and one of the greatest developmental factors in new iterations of the Third Rome.

Peter I's reign marked the first major turning point in the development of these political mythologies. Many proponents of the ideas saw his reforms as a massive step in the wrong direction. Indeed, they saw the changes as an assault on their core values. Messianism and the religious side of the Third Rome lost their prominence in Russian political thought, and their promoters went on the defensive. One of the most noteworthy groups is the Old Believers, a sect

³⁵ Translation in Cyril Toumanoff, "Moscow the Third Rome: Genesis and Significance of a Politico-Religious Idea," *The Catholic Historical Review* 4, no. 40 (1955), 438

of Orthodoxy that formed after a church schism in 1666 and has remained in existence to the present.³⁶

Peter's attempts at westernization flew in the face of Russian messianism, as any such effort would be inherently at odds with the idea that the Russian people had some kind of spiritual high ground. In 1721 he emblematically rejected the title "Christian Emperor of the East," which the Senate had proposed for him.³⁷ Furthermore, his decision to move the capital to St. Petersburg was a massive blow to the supporters of the Third Rome mythology. After all, Moscow, not St. Petersburg, is central to the belief. The construction of the new capital was a symbolic "abandonment of the Moscow traditions."³⁸ He followed this symbolic move with a more concrete departure from tradition—the abolition of the position of the Moscow Patriarch and its replacement with a Holy Synod.³⁹ This new Synod was directly answerable to Peter himself, in keeping with his policies of westernizing and increasing the Church's subordination to the State.⁴⁰

While Peter had roundly rejected the religious aspects of the Third Rome, he did not turn his back on the mythology entirely. He and his successors over the course of the eighteenth century embraced the imperial qualities of the Third Rome, seeing the opportunity to relate the pursuit of Russian Empire to the expansionism of the First Rome.⁴¹ In this vein, Peter chose to take the Latin title "Imperator" after he had refused the Orthodox-oriented "Christian Emperor of the East."

³⁶ Duncan, *Russian Messianism*, 14

³⁷ Duncan, *Russian Messianism*, 14

³⁸ Duncan, *Russian Messianism*, 14

³⁹ Duncan, *Russian Messianism*, 13

⁴⁰ Duncan, *Russian Messianism*, 13

⁴¹ Duncan, *Russian Messianism*, 14

The Slavophile movement was a philosophical response to Peter I's new drive towards Westernization. It emphasized the uniqueness and superiority of the Russian *narod*, putting the average Russian peasant on a pedestal as the ideal person. Slavophilism was not very organized and saw a high degree of infighting amongst its adherents, but one of its nearly universally accepted ideas was that Orthodoxy is the foundation of Russia's national essence and uniqueness.⁴² The Slavophiles placed much less of an emphasis on the imperialistic aspects of the Third Rome mythology than they did on Russian messianism. Peter J.S. Duncan writes that even though it has been suggested that

the doctrine of 'Moscow, the Third Rome' was not taken very seriously by the Muscovite tsars as a guide to policy formulation, and the concept was significantly modified or abandoned with the move to Petersburg...the masses of the populations sometimes behaved as if they took aspects of the doctrine very seriously. The peasant version of Russian messianism emphasized the holiness and uniqueness of the Russian land and people rather than the holiness of the Tsar.⁴³

It is a significant distinction, as the Slavophile brand of Russian messianism and the Third Rome was a heavily religious one that was at odds with the almost exclusively secular version of the mythologies being used by the state at the time.

The October Revolution of 1917 marked yet another intriguing and significant shift in the nature of these mythologies, especially messianism. In the context of communist revolution, it shed its last vestiges of religious meaning, becoming "socialist Russian messianism."⁴⁴ Similarly, the Third International (Comintern) became seen as the new Third Rome. This association was first popularized by the émigré philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev. In his writings he argues that the

⁴² Duncan, *Russian Messianism*, 22

⁴³ Duncan, *Russian Messianism*, 14

⁴⁴ Duncan, *Russian Messianism*, 52

Third Rome evolved from a purely religious idea to an imperialist one because the national and religious were tightly interwoven in the Russian mind.⁴⁵ In a passage from his book *Istoki I smysl russkogo kommunizma*, Berdiaev explains the progression from Third Rome to Third International:

The Russian people did not carry out its Messianist idea of Moscow as the Third Rome. The religious schism in the 17th century revealed that the Muscovite tsardom was not the Third Rome. The Petersburg empire was of course least of all a realization of the idea of the Third Rome. Here the bifurcation became complete. The Russian people's Messianist idea took either an apocalyptic or a revolutionary form. And then something astonishing in the history of the Russian people happened. Instead of the Third Rome, Russia succeeded in realizing the Third International, and many features of the Third Rome were transferred to the Third International. The Third International is also a sacred kingdom, and is also founded on an orthodox faith. In the West the fact that the Third International is not International, but a Russian national idea, is poorly understood. This is the transformation of Russian Messianism.⁴⁶

This interpretation of the evolution of the Third Rome has become well-known, arguably due to Berdiaev's influence in the West.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 62

⁴⁶ 'Русский народ не осуществил своей мессиянской идеи о Москве, как Третьем Риме. Религиозный раскол XVII в. обнаружил, что московское царство не есть Третий Рим. Менее всего, конечно, петербургская империя была осуществлением идеи Третьего Рима. В ней произошло окончательное раздвоение. Мессиянская идея русского народа приняла или апокалиптическую форму или форму революционную. И вот произошло изумительное в судьбе русского народа событие. Вместо Третьего Рима, в России удалось осуществить Третий Интернационал и на Третий Интернационал перешли многие черты Третьего Рима. Третий Интернационал есть тоже священное царство и оно тоже основано на ортодоксальной вере. На Западе очень плохо понимают, что Третий Интернационал есть не Интернационал, а русская национальная идея. Это есть трансформация русского мессиянизма.' Nikolai Berdiaev, *Istoki I smysl russkogo kommunizma*, (Moskva: Nauka: 1990), 117, translated in Østbø 63

⁴⁷ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 64

Even before the Revolution of 1917, Lenin's disdain for religion took on a particular hostility towards the Russian Orthodox Church due to its close ties with the Tsarist government.⁴⁸ After the Revolution, large swaths of hierarch and priests were arrested, and many believers were killed. Tikhon, the Patriarch of Moscow, was arrested 1922 and subsequently published a confession in which he repented for his "anti-Soviet activities."⁴⁹ In 1929 the Law on Religious Associations proscribed religious propaganda and ushered in another decade of religious persecution within the Soviet Union.⁵⁰

Under Stalin's regime the Orthodox Church briefly regained some of its power and influence in the Soviet Union. The Church's return to the forefront was accompanied by a temporary return of the religious underpinnings of messianism and the Third Rome. The return was driven largely by Stalin himself in the years surrounding the Second World War. Stalin's World War II Russian messianism differed from the post-Revolution form in a few significant regards, which followed a general trend of circling back to the themes of its older iterations. First, the "chosen" people of the mythology were no longer the Bolsheviks; they were once again the Russian people. Stalin acknowledged this in 1941 when he said, "We are under no illusion that they are fighting for [the Party]. They are fighting for Mother Russia."⁵¹ In his victory toast in 1945, Stalin made a point of declaring the Russian people to be the "guiding force of the Soviet Union among all the peoples of our country."⁵² Following the war, Soviet propaganda pushed the universalist theme of "Russia as servant" by stressing the Russian people's "military

⁴⁸ Duncan, *Russian Messianism*, 58

⁴⁹ Duncan, *Russian Messianism*, 58

⁵⁰ Duncan, *Russian Messianism*, 58

⁵¹ Referenced in Duncan, *Russian Messianism*, 56

⁵² Referenced in Duncan, *Russian Messianism*, 57

service to humanity.” At the same time, it pushed nationalist messianism, declaring that Russia “owed nothing to the West, but led the world in everything.”⁵³

Another change in Russian messianism that coincided with World War II and the return of the Orthodox Church was the emphasis on making Stalin a messianic figure himself. In exchange for a new privileged position compared to the other faiths, the Church

heaped the highest praise on him, using language normally reserved for Jesus. Stalin was “the first man of peace”, with an “all-embracing heart which takes on itself all the pain of suffering.” It was he “whom Divine Providence chose and placed to lead our Fatherland on the path of prosperity and glory”...The presentation of Stalin as “God’s chosen one” was a direct descendant of Filofei’s portrayal of the Tsar. This concept was extended to the messianic presentation of Moscow as the “chosen city”, the “Third Rome”.⁵⁴

The parallels drawn between Stalin and Filofei’s messianic view of the Tsar found their way into popular culture as well. Sergei Eisenstein’s 1945 film *Ivan the Terrible*, for instance, begins with the coronation of Ivan IV. In this scene, there is a lengthy quote from Filofei himself, and the Boyars are introduced as villains that Ivan (read: Stalin) must overcome to complete his mission from God.⁵⁵ In 1947, the 800th anniversary of the founding of Moscow was a perfect opportunity to push the resurgence of the Third Rome myth through propaganda.⁵⁶ One example is an article written by the Archpriest Khariuzov in that year, which stated:

⁵³ Duncan, *Russian Messianism*, 57

⁵⁴ Duncan, *Russian Messianism*, 59, Gleb P. Iakunin, “Moskovskaia Patriarkhiia I ‘kul’t lichnosti’ Stalina”, *RV* No. 2 (1978), 113, 126-127

⁵⁵ Briley “Sergei Eisenstein: The Artist in Service of the Revolution,” *The History Teacher* 29, no. 4 (1996), 533

⁵⁶ Duncan, *Russian Messianism*, 59

“Moscow is a beacon, a beacon not only for us Orthodox, but also for those seeking true, unclouded civil, national and religious freedom. Moscow is a beacon for all of toiling humanity, for all who seek religious and social truth.”⁵⁷

This resurgence of religious interpretations of messianism and the Third Rome did not last long, though, once again fading into obscurity with the death of Stalin in 1953.

Four decades later, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a massive identity crisis for the Russian people, sparking further evolution of Russian messianism and the Third Rome. In his 1993 novel *The Life of Insects*, Viktor Pelevin quips that Russians wondered if Moscow was still “*Tretii Rim*” (“the Third Rome”) or if it had become part of “*tretii mir*” (“the third world”).⁵⁸ Jardar Østbø argues the continued relevance of these myths, stating, the “myth of the Third Rome has not found one final form,” but it exists “as a key element in the ‘reinvention’ of Russia in the post-Soviet context.”⁵⁹ Dmitri Sidorov similarly argues:

Being essentially about the nature of the Russian Empire and the country’s geographical identity, the concept seemingly has always been emerging at turning points of Russian history: the establishment of an independent Muscovy state, the end of the Russian Empire, and World War II. Therefore it is understandable that the trauma of the fall of the Soviet Empire has caused not only the current renaissance of geopolitical imperial thought in the area, but specifically a resurgent interest in the concept of the Third Rome.⁶⁰

One of the most relevant facets of Russian messianism to form and evolve in post-Soviet Russia is the idea of *Russkii Mir*, or the “Russian World.” *Russkii Mir* was first developed in the

⁵⁷ Referenced in Duncan, *Russian Messianism*, 59

⁵⁸ Referenced in Edith Clowes, *Russia on the Edge*, 1

⁵⁹ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 2

⁶⁰ Sidorov, “Post-Imperial Third Romes,” 326

1990s to confront the political need to make sense of the millions of Russian-speaking people who were suddenly citizens of other countries.⁶¹ This initial conceptualization of the “Russian diaspora” was a positive one, portraying these Russians abroad as natural agents of globalization who could help bring Russia to the forefront of the new globalized world.⁶² In the 2000s the idea of *Russkii Mir* changed as it became instrumentalized. It was no longer seen as a beneficial phenomenon that would passively aid Russia. It was now viewed as a tool the state wielded to enhance its “soft power” abroad.⁶³ Lastly, the most recent evolution of the meaning of *Russkii Mir* occurred in the wake of the “conservative turn” of Russian politics in Putin’s third presidential term and the Ukraine crisis of 2014. This current understanding of the Russian World suggests that it is a civilizational entity with definable borders. In his assessment of the current version, Mikhail Suslov notes:

This location might well spill over the state borders of the Russian Federation—as happened with the annexation of Crimea—but the new concept ushers in the era of conservative retreat from the global presence of the “Russian World” into the location of “our civilizational platform.”⁶⁴

The current interpretation of *Russkii Mir* and its use by the Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin in their messianic narratives will be discussed later in this paper.

III. CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN MESSIANISM AND THE THIRD ROME

Messianic Narrations of the Church and State

Russian messianism is one of the areas in which the close ties between the Church and State are visible. The “mission” in the view of the Russian Orthodox Church does not always

⁶¹ Mikhail Suslov, “Russian Conservatism as an Ideology: The Logic of Isolationism,” 94

⁶² Suslov, “Russian Conservatism as an Ideology,” 94

⁶³ Suslov, “Russian Conservatism as an Ideology,” 94

⁶⁴ Suslov, “Russian Conservatism as an Ideology,” 94

line up perfectly with the “mission” in the view of the Russian state, but there is usually overlap between the two. According to Curanović’s analysis of Russian messianism, there are “three potential candidates for the role of the ‘chosen one’: the state, the Church, and the nation.”⁶⁵ She argues that in most situations both the Church and the state identify the state as the “chosen one,” as the “mission” is considered to be linked to power status.⁶⁶ The main exception she notes is that the Church sees itself as the chosen one in strictly religious contexts, such as “promoting God’s truth” or “strengthening the spiritual revival of Russia.”⁶⁷

There is a variety of interpretations of “mission” within the Russian Orthodox Church. However, there are common themes among many of these perspectives. There are two primary components of the ROC’s view of mission in its messianic narrative—the internal mission of preserving Russia’s civilizational sovereignty and the external mission of fulfilling Russia’s moral obligations to the world. Curanović examines the Church’s view of its own messianic narrative in her 2018 article “Russia’s Mission in the World: The Perspective of the Russian Orthodox Church.” In it she argues:

taking a closer look at the concept of mission reveals the usually hidden flow of ideas about Russia between the Church and the state and thus provides an insight into the shaping and reproduction of Russian identity.”⁶⁸

It seems that the relationship between the Church and state in Russia can be traced back to the early 1990s. Boris Yeltsin needed an additional source of legitimacy; Patriarch Aleksii II offered

⁶⁵ Curanović, “Russia’s Mission in the World,” 257

⁶⁶ Curanović, “Russia’s Mission in the World,” 257

⁶⁷ Curanović, “Russia’s Mission in the World,” 258

⁶⁸ Curanović, “Russia’s Mission in the World,” 253-254

to help because the Orthodox Church felt an impending existential crisis due to the popularity of growing new religious movements.⁶⁹

The first of the main themes of mission within the Church is the internal mission of preserving civilizational sovereignty. In response to Barack Obama's speech at the UN in 2013, Metropolitan Hilarion argued against the idea of American exceptionalism, stating that there could be no such thing as a chosen nation because Jesus redeemed the sins of the entire world. However, he immediately contradicted this argument by stating that throughout history there have been certain morally superior nations (*narod-bogonosets*) entrusted with missions from God, and that Russia is one of these "God-bearing nations."⁷⁰ He unconvincingly addressed the hypocrisy of these assertions by claiming that America's economic advantage excluded it from consideration as a chosen nation.⁷¹ Patriarch Kirill has attributed Russia's status as a major world power to the fact that it has always strived for a higher purpose: "For the majority of our people, life without God, faith, and higher goals is senseless."⁷² There are extreme forms of the internal mission of preserving sovereignty. One of these is called "Atomic Orthodoxy," an interpretation developed and promoted by Egor Kholmogorov in response to this quote from Putin:

Both topics are related because both the traditional faith of the Russian Federation and the nuclear shield of Russia are the components that strengthen the Russian State and create necessary conditions for internal and external security of the country. This clearly means how the state has to treat both of them today and in the future.⁷³

⁶⁹ Curanović, "Russia's Mission in the World," 255

⁷⁰ Curanović, "Russia's Mission in the World," 256

⁷¹ Curanović, "Russia's Mission in the World," 257

⁷² Curanović, "Russia's Mission in the World," 257

⁷³ Quoted in Engström, "Contemporary Russian Messianism," 369

This version maintains the necessity of combining Orthodoxy with a nuclear arsenal, so that Russia is strong enough to carry out its messianic purpose.⁷⁴ This internal version of mission also provides a lens through which the Church views history; for instance, demonstrating the purpose the atheist Soviet Union served in preserving Russia's ability to fulfill its Christian purpose in the future.⁷⁵

An aspect of contemporary messianism that appears in the ROC's narrative is the idea of "*Russkii Mir*" ("Russian World"). It is frequently cited by Patriarch Kirill and other high-ranking hierarchs of the Church.⁷⁶ At a basic level, this form of messianism argues that Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus always have been and always will be one people, and it is Russia's mission to reunite them politically and spiritually. Victoria Hudson expands on the concept in her 2018 article:

From the perspective of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian World is interchangeable with the notion of Holy Rus': a transnational cultural collective of people united by a common Russian Orthodox faith regardless of native language or ethnicity, sharing a 'way of life that has been passed down to us through the centuries by such great saints of the Russian Land.' Given that Orthodoxy has traditionally formed an important pillar of Russian nationhood, the Russian Orthodox Church's conceptualization of the Russian World tacitly undergirds Kremlin attempts to rebuild an ideational backbone; a meaningful narrative supporting Moscow's aspirations to be a leading nation capable of attracting others into its civilizational orbit.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Curanović, "Russia's Mission in the World," 257

⁷⁵ Curanović, "Russia's Mission in the World," 257

⁷⁶ Curanović, "Russia's Mission in the World," 258

⁷⁷ Victoria Hudson, "The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate as a Potential 'Tool' of Russian Soft Power in the Wake of Ukraine's 2013 Euromaidan," *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 9 (November 2018), 1358

Russkii Mir is a tool used by both the ROC and the Kremlin to legitimize Russia's attempts to expand its sphere of influence. In recent years it has also been used to call in to question Ukraine's right to independence from Russia, as will be discussed later in this paper.

Of course, merely preserving the Russian civilization is not enough. The second primary aspect of mission is Russia's moral obligation to the rest of the world, the purpose that the Russian civilization must survive to fulfill. The one element missing from the ROC's messianic narrative that might be expected is the actual coming of the Messiah; instead, the focus is always on the exceptional role that Russia must play in the world.⁷⁸ The moral obligations Russia has to the rest of the world in the eyes of the Patriarch include acting as a role model (demonstrating a society based on solidarity and traditional values), promoting dialogue between civilizations, achieving permanent world peace, and creating a fair, multipolar world order.⁷⁹ In a 2013 speech Patriarch Kirill touches on some of these objectives:

Russia as a country-civilization has something to teach the rest of the world. It is our experience in shaping fair and peaceful relations. There were neither nations-lords nor nations-slaves in [Kievan] Rus'. Russia has never been a prison of nations; here there were no nations of the first or second rank. Wasn't precisely this the reason for a strong national resistance toward fascism, which proposed an opposite vision of international order? Apart from this, we as a civilization, have had a great experience in preserving a multipolar order. We have a great tradition of self-limitation, so important in the face of the future prospect of a deficit of resources and an ecological crisis. It is also the idea of

⁷⁸ Curanović, "Russia's Mission in the World," 257

⁷⁹ Curanović, "Russia's Mission in the World," 258

traditional values which prevents the destruction of the concept of the family and the relations between women and men established by God.⁸⁰

Kirill's reference to Kievan Rus' in this speech is significant because he is implying that Russia has been providing the blueprint of the perfect civilization for a millennium, and that the rest of the world must still learn to follow its example. His mention of a multipolar order seems to echo Aleksandr Dugin, one of the theorists discussed below.

Ostap Kushnir hypothesizes in his article that "religious self-identification and messianic narrations are unalienable constituents of Russian domestic and foreign policies," and that they must therefore "always be considered by political scholars and practitioners when interpreting and predicting the Kremlin's advancements."⁸¹ It is important for those with Western backgrounds to keep these in mind, as it is easy to falsely view Russian political decisions through the lens of Western secularism, in which the Church and state have a more distinctive dividing line.

In his article "Contemporary Russian Messianism under Putin and Russian Foreign Policy in Ukraine and Syria," Charlie Lewis examines in detail Putin's direct link to the messianic narratives of the contemporary Russian government, and how they have changed over the decades since he first ascended to the presidency. In Lewis's view, Putin is responsible for giving "new life to the concept of Russian messianism" and has created a new malleable and

⁸⁰ Patriarch Kirill (2013), translated in Curanović, "Russia's Mission in the World," 258

⁸¹ Ostap Kushnir, "Messianic Narrations in Contemporary Russian Statecraft and Foreign Policy," *Central European Journal of International & Security Studies* 13, no. 1 (2019), 39

instrumental form of it by “building upon the four intertwining pillars of messianism, nationalism, Eurasianism, and memory.”⁸²

Central to Putin’s contemporary messianism is the Orthodox Church. Lewis states that in the state’s messianic narrative, Orthodoxy is a

political religion, emphasizing the connection of the Russian Church with the war and ‘resistance to evil by force’, which improves the instrumental capacity of the church for the state and aides [sic] justification of potential military action.⁸³

The conjoining of Orthodoxy to the state ideology bolsters Putin’s level of influence, a fact which even he has acknowledged.⁸⁴ These ties to the Church also potentially improve Russia’s credibility and influence abroad among conservative supporters of “Christian and traditional European values.”⁸⁵ Lewis elaborates:

The idea of Russia as a unique civilizational leader can influence discourse on security, stability, societal justice and identity and promote continuity, solidarity and othering of enemies, as well as Russianness as an ethnicity or as a multi-ethnic national identity depending on what is convenient for the current narrative.⁸⁶

This fluid and contradictory rhetoric fits the view of Putin as a pragmatist who does not follow an ideology but instrumentalizes whichever ideology has the best chance to keep the regime in power.⁸⁷ Putin’s use of Orthodoxy for political purposes offers flexibility through a purported source of credibility and justification, regardless of the government’s current narrative or activities in foreign affairs.

⁸² Charlie Lewis, “Contemporary Russian Messianism under Putin and Russian foreign policy in Ukraine and Syria,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 98, no. 3 (2020), 531-532

⁸³ Lewis, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 536

⁸⁴ Lewis, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 536

⁸⁵ Lewis, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 536

⁸⁶ Lewis, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 536

⁸⁷ Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist*, 24

To further promote his narrative and ties to the Church, Putin has increasingly relied on public “media figures” since the beginning of his third presidential term. Many of these figures, including Aleksandr Dugin, Natalia Narochnitskaia, Father Tikhon, and Aleksandr Prokhanov belong to an organization called the Izborsky Club (a prominent neoconservative think tank funded by the Kremlin).⁸⁸ The Izborsky Club does not have a formalized doctrine, but it is comprised of 27 of the most prominent Russian conservative intellectuals, who generally adhere to “various schools of nationalist, Eurasianist and messianist thought” and the belief that “the post-Soviet identity has to encompass both the technocratic Soviet element and the mystical Orthodox one”⁸⁹

The second pillar of the state’s contemporary messianic narrative is neo-Eurasianism. Eurasianism is the idea that Russia belongs to neither Europe or Asia; it is a unique civilization whose mission is to create its own separate center of power and culture. One of the overarching themes of Eurasianist thought is the prediction of the eventual downfall of Western civilization and the belief that it is time for Russia to become “the world’s prime exemplar.”⁹⁰ Eurasianist messianic thought first became popular in conjunction with the Slavophile movement. Both Eurasianism and Slavophilism share an emphasis on the conflict between “Holy” Russia and pseudo-Christian Europe. This classical Eurasianism generally disappeared by the 1930s, but the ideas began to make a return to contemporary political discourse under the new title of neo-Eurasianism in the 1990s, advocated by none other than Aleksandr Dugin.⁹¹ Paul Pryce explains the significance Dugin had on the development of neo-Eurasianism:

⁸⁸ Engström, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 361

⁸⁹ Lewis, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 537, Engström, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 361

⁹⁰ Lewis, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 537

⁹¹ Lewis, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 537

The transition from classical Eurasianism to neo-Eurasianism was facilitated by the rise of one figure in particular in the Russian political arena: Alexander Dugin...Dugin took up the task of modernizing Eurasianism and defining its ideas in a context relevant to Russia in the 1990s. Despite having only a tenuous connection to classical Eurasianism at best, Dugin positioned himself as the successor to Berdyaev and the various émigré thinkers of the early 20th century, providing some semblance of continuity between classical Eurasianist thought and the neo-Eurasianism Dugin would come to espouse.⁹²

Dugin may not have adopted classical Eurasianism in much more than name, but he strategically did so to add to his perceived legitimacy.

The core components of neo-Eurasianism in its current form promoted by Dugin are an idealization of medieval Muscovy, an emphasis of the crucial need for Orthodox Christianity in Russian society, an emphasis of the uniqueness of Russian civilization, and a deep belief in patriarchal values.⁹³ Furthermore, it rejects any possible partnership between Russia and the West, and it scoffs at the idea that “Western liberal values could have any place in Russian society.”⁹⁴ Lewis asserts that all of these characteristics “closely tie neo-Eurasianism to the messianist ideological position of Putin and his government post-2011, and Putin ‘has seized on some of them to further’ his message.”⁹⁵ One of the reasons neo-Eurasianism is so helpful to Putin’s narrative is its geographic component, as it “gives the concepts of uniqueness and the ‘special path’ of messianism a greater degree of specificity.”⁹⁶ At the same time, while it may

⁹² Paul Pryce, “Putin’s Third Term: The Triumph of Eurasianism?” *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 13, no. 1 (2013), 30

⁹³ Pryce, “Putin’s Third Term,” 30

⁹⁴ Pryce, “Putin’s Third Term,” 30

⁹⁵ Lewis, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 538

⁹⁶ Lewis, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 538

seem contradictory at first, this geographic component that promotes specificity is by its nature vague. That is,

Eurasia can be Europe and Asia, neither Europe or Asia, the space between Europe and Asia, or perhaps specific parts of both Europe and Asia. It can be ethnic, national or civilizational...Eurasia can theoretically mean almost anything to anyone.”⁹⁷

There is strength in this ambiguity, which offers Putin the flexibility to continuously adapt neo-Eurasianism to fit and support the government’s messianic narratives as they evolve in response to world events.

The third pillar of Putin’s messianic narratives is nationalism. As in the case of neo-Eurasianism, there is variety within Russian nationalism which makes it adaptable. Nationalist rhetoric has been a staple in Putin’s political toolset at least since his second presidential term, seen in situations like his speeches at the 2007 Munich Security Conference and the 2008 Bucharest NATO-Russia summit.⁹⁸ Some of the nationalist ideas employed by Putin have included those surrounding ethnic Russians outside of Russia, the Russian sphere of influence, and *Russkii Mir*.⁹⁹ One of the advantages to using nationalism as a tool to support messianic narratives is that it can apply to a massive and diverse base of people, and can be “mobilized and weaponized using broad catch-all ideas,” negating the impact of differing opinions within this base.¹⁰⁰ A prime example of Putin’s use of nationalist ideas is his increasing employment of the term *russkii* instead of *rossiskii*. Traditionally *russkii* refers to ethnic Russian identity and *rossiskii* to state Russian identity. It has been claimed that this increasing usage of *russkii* is merely a reflection of the gradual change within Russian society towards the erasure of the

⁹⁷ Lewis, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 538

⁹⁸ Lewis, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 539

⁹⁹ Lewis, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 539

¹⁰⁰ Lewis, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 539

difference between the two terms, but it has also been contended that it is “impossible to ignore the ethnic connotations of the word against the background of ‘increasingly frequent appeals to Russian history.’”¹⁰¹ Because both interpretations can be argued as equally valid, Putin’s use of *russkii* has the practical effect of leading to a “proliferation of both state and ethnic nationalism depending on which interpretation an individual connects with.”¹⁰² In this sense, it seems to be a win-win situation for Putin, as both interpretations increase the resonance of his messianic narrative.

This situation is not merely a happy accident for Putin’s government. It seems more likely that this balancing act of multiple opposing factions of nationalist thought—in a way which benefits the official narrative—is done in a calculated manner. This phenomenon is referred to by March as “managed nationalism,” and he argues that Putin “permits forms of nationalism that do not fundamentally challenge the authoritarian state, which gives an inbuilt advantage to illiberal and even extremist forms,” but stops any potentially destabilizing movements.¹⁰³ As Lewis sees it:

Putin has become adept at using the fact that ‘no single Russian nationalism exists’ to his advantage, by instrumentalizing the different groups and ideas to feed into the proliferations of his concept of contemporary Russian messianism and help them take root in society.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Lewis, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 539

¹⁰² Lewis, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 539

¹⁰³ Luke March, “Nationalism for Export? The domestic and foreign-policy implications of the New ‘Russian Idea,’” *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 3 (2012), 404

¹⁰⁴ Lewis, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 541

He takes advantage of the conflicting definitions of terms like *Eurasian* and *Russianness*, appearing aligned with as many different groups as possible.¹⁰⁵ This strategy allows him to win over a wide array of opinionated supporters with conflicting viewpoints.

The final pillar of Putin's contemporary Russian messianism outlined by Lewis is the politicization of memory.¹⁰⁶ The Kremlin was using this powerful tool long before Putin became president, but it is a tool that he has used meticulously and successfully. According to Lewis, "Putin has spent his tenure as Russia's leader cultivating an image of himself as the heir to Russia's great and tumultuous past and its saviour for the future."¹⁰⁷ He uses the authority he has given himself over the narrative of Russian history to "remove or vilify the elements of Russian history that are contradictory to the state narrative of the past and present."¹⁰⁸ As will be discussed in more detail below, Putin also frequently references history (often out of logical context) in his speeches in order to legitimize his decisions and actions.¹⁰⁹

One of the figures that Putin has been trying to weave into his narrative of collective memory is Joseph Stalin. There are two main reasons for this. First, Putin is attempting to create associations between his desired image as a strong leader and the memory of Stalin. Second, Putin values Stalin's memory for his connection to the Great Patriotic War.¹¹⁰ In her article "Triumphant Memory of the Perpetrators: Putin's Politics of re-Stalinization," Dina Khapaeva explains that Putin reanimated the myth that "Russians single-handedly rescued civilization from the global evil of fascism and secured world peace under Stalin's leadership [as] the fundamental

¹⁰⁵ Lewis, "Contemporary Russian Messianism," 541

¹⁰⁶ Lewis, "Contemporary Russian Messianism," 541

¹⁰⁷ Lewis, "Contemporary Russian Messianism," 542

¹⁰⁸ Lewis, "Contemporary Russian Messianism," 542

¹⁰⁹ Lewis, "Contemporary Russian Messianism," 542

¹¹⁰ Lewis, "Contemporary Russian Messianism," 543

myth of post-Soviet Russian society.”¹¹¹ She suggests that he uses this myth to present Russia as a “messianic nation, that sacrificed itself for the happiness of mankind...[so] any crimes committed in the name of this global victory are considered justified.”¹¹² The use of the Great Patriotic War as a principle myth is effective because it is capable of uniting nearly all of Russian society.¹¹³ One of Putin’s main avenues for promoting his desired collective memory of the Great Patriotic War has been Victory Day celebrations:

This trend toward making Victory Day an annual occasion for celebrating Russia in all its incarnations—Russia as a state, a nation, and a people, and Putin as the embodiment of all of them—has become a fundamental feature of the current regime.¹¹⁴

The main advantage that Putin derives from promoting this narrative of collective memory regarding Stalin and World War II is that if the populace accepts it, he can use it to justify any actions he may deem necessary for the greater good.¹¹⁵ In recent years the foundational memory of the Great Patriotic War has been used to mobilize the population against a new enemy, a pragmatic turn seen especially after the 2014 Ukraine Crisis.¹¹⁶

Putin’s active attempt to control the collective memory over World War II and Stalin is perhaps most easily seen in a law passed in 2014, which criminalizes the “dissemination of knowingly false information on the activities of the USSR during the Second World War.”¹¹⁷ The law is actively enforced, with the introduction of “unified” history textbooks in schools and the fining of private citizens for publishing articles that do not fit the official narrative.¹¹⁸ For

¹¹¹ Dina Khapaeva, “Triumphant memory of the perpetrators: Putin’s politics of re-Stalinization,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 49, no. 1 (2016), 65

¹¹² Khapaeva, “Triumphant memory of the perpetrators,” 65

¹¹³ Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist*, 45

¹¹⁴ Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist*, 45

¹¹⁵ Lewis, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 543

¹¹⁶ Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist*, 61

¹¹⁷ Khapaeva, “Triumphant memory of the perpetrators,” 66

¹¹⁸ Lewis, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 543

instance, in 2016 an man was fined in Perm' for publishing an article that claimed World War II began with the German and Soviet invasion of Poland.¹¹⁹ However, there are limits to how far the Kremlin will take the official narrative of Stalin and World War II. In his analysis, Lewis suggests that an incident where the Duma refused to rename Volgograd as Stalingrad is evidence that the narrative being pushed is merely a tool, and not an ideology that the administration actively believes in.¹²⁰ At the very least, it is evidence that there is a line the government will not cross in support of the ideology.

Four Myths of the Third Rome

Vadim Tsymburskii is one of the prominent modern advocates of the Third Rome mythology. Of the four theorists primarily discussed in this thesis, he arguably has had the least influence on Putin's government due to his death in 2009. However, he is still worth discussing because of his importance in the 1990s and early 2000s and his unique version of the myth. Tsymburskii earned a doctorate in Classical Philology from Moscow State University (MGU) in 1986. From then until 2009 he was employed by the Soviet (and Russian) Academy of Sciences. His postings within the Academy included the Institute of USA and Canada, the Institute of Oriental Studies, and the Institute of Philosophy.¹²¹ He was a prolific writer and contributed to the academic journals *Polis*, *Pro et Contra*, *The Social Sciences and the Present*, *Business and Politics*, *Eurasian Herald*, *Intellectual Russia*, and *Russian Journal*, among others.¹²² He is also credited as one of the three ideological sources of the Young Conservative movement, alongside

¹¹⁹ Lewis, "Contemporary Russian Messianism," 543

¹²⁰ Lewis, "Contemporary Russian Messianism," 543

¹²¹ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 81

¹²² Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 82

Sergie Kiziakov and Dmitri Galkovski.¹²³ Tsymburskii offers his isolationist “Island Russia” metaphor to explain the Third Rome.¹²⁴

Tsymburskii’s use of the name “Island Russia” seems to echo the work of British geographer Halford Mackinder, known for his “Heartland” and “World Island” theories. He agrees with the need to base Russian identity on a geopolitical model rooted in Russian history, but he rejects Mackinder’s representation. He believes it is useless. Because Mackinder’s model does not accurately conform to Russian historical space, it cannot provide reasonable guidance for Russia’s response to the territorial break-up of the Soviet Union.¹²⁵

One of the main foundational structures that Tsymburskii uses to build his arguments in favor of the “Island Russia” project is something he refers to as the “*limitrophe*.”¹²⁶ *Limitrophe* is a term borrowed from French and derived from the Latin word *limitrophus*, which originally referred to the provinces on the border of the Roman Empire. It was first used in the Russian context in the 1920s as a disparaging way to describe the states formed from the outskirts of Tsarist Russia, including the Baltic states and Finland.¹²⁷ These *limitrophe* as defined by Tsymburskii are “inter-civilisational cultural spaces that lack certain civilisational identity and could be invaded by neighbouring *civilizational platforms*.”¹²⁸ Essentially, they are the contested lands between large civilizations, who fight to gain influence and control there. In his writings, Tsymburskii is primarily interested in the region he calls the “Great *Limitrophe*,” the lands between Catholic Western Europe and Orthodox Russia.¹²⁹ The nations within this *limitrophe* don’t have a clear allegiance to one side or the other; for instance, Poland is Slavic but Catholic,

¹²³ Pavlov, “The Great Expectations of Russian Young Conservatism,” 157

¹²⁴ Sidorov, “Post-Imperial Third Romes,” 331

¹²⁵ Bassin, “Mackinder and the Heartland Theory,” 113

¹²⁶ Suslov, “Russian Conservatism as an Ideology,” 96

¹²⁷ Definition and etymology in Wiktionary, <https://ru.wiktionary.org/wiki/лимитроф>, and Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/limitrophe>

¹²⁸ Sidorov, “Post-Imperial Third Romes,” 331

¹²⁹ Sidorov, “Post-Imperial Third Romes,” 331, Suslov, “Russian Conservatism as an Ideology,” 96

and Romania is Romance but Orthodox.¹³⁰ His view of geopolitics hinges on the idea of “civilization,” a status which transcends that of the “nation”:

A civilization/high culture is in my understanding a geo-cultural community that by virtue of its historical and religious/ideological experience discovers the ability to regard itself as the main part of humanity and tries to uphold this vision with an adequate geopolitical construction.¹³¹

His model of Russia as a civilization guarantees that it can never become part of the West, and that it is an equal rival to the West. The *limitrophe* states are lesser; they constitute a type of “gray matter” which can only be defined in relation to the civilizations that they border.¹³² The importance of the *limitrophe* states in the formulation of his ideas is reminiscent of the political myth of foreign encirclement and the related Russian preoccupation with borders.

Tsyburskii’s approach to the Third Rome myth in many ways tends to be more optimistic than others’ viewpoints.¹³³ This is especially true regarding his perspective on the diminished size of contemporary Russia’s borders compared to those of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union. Neo-Eurasianists and expansionists like Dugin tend to bemoan the loss of territory and stress the imperative of regaining it as quickly as possible. Tsyburskii, on the other hand, adopts the view offered by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his article “Kak nam obustroit’ Rossiuu”:

¹³⁰ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 86

¹³¹ “[Я] понимаю под цивилизацией-высокой культурой такое геокультурное сообщество, которое в силу своего исторического, в том числе религиозно-идеологического, опыта обнаруживает готовность видеть в самом себе Основное Человечество и пытается поддержать это видение адекватным ему геополитическим строительством.” Vadim Tsyburskii, *Ostrov Rossiia. Geopoliticheskie I khronopoliticheskie raboty 1993-2006*. 2007, 134, translated in Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 88

¹³² Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 86

¹³³ Sidorov, “Post-Imperial Third Romes,” 331

And today it sounds with a thousandfold meaning: we have no strength for the outskirts, neither economic nor spiritual strength. We have no strength for Empire! – and we don't need it, let it off our shoulders: it crushes us, and sucks us out, and hastens our death.¹³⁴

Like Solzhenitsyn, Tsymburskii sees the loss of empire and influence in the outskirts (*limitrophe*) as a good thing. He believes the combination of Russia's "exit from Europe and loss of dominance in the *Great Limtrof* could lead to realization of the 'Island Russia' project."¹³⁵ This project, at its core, focuses on "Russia's own civilizational platform and its final settlement, especially of Siberia and the Far East."¹³⁶ To this end Tsymburskii even suggests the possibility of transferring the Russian capital from Moscow to the Urals, an idea which would scandalize Dugin and his notions of the "Muscovite wheel."¹³⁷ In a way, his project is a strategy for survival.

Trying to lend credibility to his Island Russia idea, Tsymburskii suggests that despite Russia's landlocked geography, its early inhabitants had an islander worldview.¹³⁸ He argues this point by pointing to the region's harsh climate. He states that the earliest Russian people initially settled in island-like locations, surrounded by dangerous forests or steppe, which had to be traversed to reach any neighboring "islands."¹³⁹ With this in mind, he goes against the more standard view of Russia as being a boundless territory. The German historian and philosopher Oswald Spengler claimed to have identified what he called "prime symbols," or worldviews unique to each civilization. For instance, he wrote that the prime symbol of Western civilization

¹³⁴ 'А уж сегодня это звучит с тысячекратным смыслом: *нет у нас сил* на окраины, ни хозяйственных сил, ни духовных. *Нет у нас сил* на Империю! – и не надо, и свались она с наших плеч: она размозжает нас, и высасывает, и ускоряет нашу гибель.' Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Kak nam obustroit' Rossiui," (1990), Suslov, "Russian Conservatism as an Ideology," 87

¹³⁵ Sidorov, "Post-Imperial Third Romes," 331

¹³⁶ Sidorov, "Post-Imperial Third Romes," 331

¹³⁷ Sidorov, "Post-Imperial Third Romes," 331

¹³⁸ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 92

¹³⁹ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 92

was “infinite space,” and the symbol of Russian civilization was “the plane without limit” (with a focus specifically on vast, horizontal space).¹⁴⁰ Tsymburskii adopts Spengler’s prime symbols but modifies his assessment of Russia. Tsymburskii asserts that the prime symbol of Russia is not the “plane without limit”; rather, it is a “demarcated, protruding ‘locus’ on this plane, an island-like formation.”¹⁴¹ He proceeds to defend this argument by discussing historical uses of the word *ostrov* beyond its basic, modern definition of “island.”¹⁴² His understanding of Russia’s prime symbol is directly connected to his understanding of the Third Rome:

Have you noticed what the ‘Third Rome’ is, how Filofei, its author, structured this idea?

In Europe at that time there were rumours of a coming worldwide flood, people popularizing this showed up in Russia, but Filofei’s response was that the flood had already happened, and that the flood was unbelief. And the last country, the island country, was Russia, which remained over the flood.¹⁴³

Tsymburskii faces some difficulties in reconciling his Third Rome and island prime symbol with the Soviet period. The Soviet Union was, after all, a state known for its massive expansion and desire to spread communism to the rest of the world—seemingly in direct opposition to Tsymburskii’s ideals of isolationism and particularism. He does find a way to repurpose his “islander” interpretation to the Soviet context, though:

Therefore, it is logical that the Bolsheviks’ successes in gathering Russia, which for the purposes of propaganda were presented as the promise of the world’s revolutionary

¹⁴⁰ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 175, 201

¹⁴¹ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 93

¹⁴² Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 93

¹⁴³ ‘Обращали ли вы внимание, что такое «третий Рим», как структурировал эту идею ее творец Филофей? В то время в Европе ходили слухи, что грядет всемирный потоп, появлялись ляди, которые популяризировали это в России, на что Филофей ответил, что потоп уже произошел и что потоп – это неверие. И последняя страна, страна-остров, - это Россия, которая стоит над потопом.’ Mikhail Remizov and Vadim Tsymburskii, “‘Ostrov Rossiia’ vs ‘ostrov Rossia’ Interv’iu Vadima Tsymburskogo Mikhailu Remizovu – Rossia bol’she ne evropeiskaia derzhava,” 2001, translated in Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 94

renewal, invoke, in the view of the keenest ideologists, a direct analogy between the Third International and the Third Rome, which the publicist V.N. Murav'ev probably was the first to formulate in his letter to Trotskii...and which later was popularized by Berdiaev and others. Since in the Soviet leaders' texts, the new Russia was 'the fatherland of proletarians from all countries' – from its first years of existence it was depicted as 'as socialist island' encircled by enemies – a meta-ideological field appeared, where the oldest treatment of the Third Rome, the 'island' in a flooded and hostile world, was indirectly regenerated through the chain 'Third Rome – Third International – insular country'.¹⁴⁴

Perhaps even more difficult to reconcile, though, is his island prime symbol theory. Based on his arguments discussed above, the "island" should be a consistently positive symbol in the Russian collective consciousness. Therefore, it is difficult to explain powerful contradictions like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, which portrays the Soviet prison camp system as a network of emerging islands, isolated from the rest of Soviet society.¹⁴⁵ He handles these contradictions by refusing to accept them as "anti-Third Rome" or "anti-island."¹⁴⁶ Instead, he "presents them as criticism of *distorted versions* of the Third Rome myth, not of the (original, 'island') Third Rome myth."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ 'Потому закономерно, что успехи большевиков в собирании России, пропагандистски преподносимые как залог мирового революционного обновления, вызывают у наиболее чутких идеологов прямую аналогию «Третий Интернационал-Третий Рим», как будто раньше всех сформулированную публицистом В.Н. Муравьевым в 1920 г. в письме к Троцкому...а позже популяризированную Бердяевым и другими. Поскольку же в текстах советских руководителей новая Россия – «отечество пролетариев всех стран» - с первых лет существования изображается как окруженный врагами «социалистический остров», то возникает метаидеологическое поле, где опосредованно, через цепочку «Третий Рим – Третий Интернационал – страна-остров», как бы регенерируется древнейшая трактовка Третьего Рима – «острова» в «потопленной» и враждебной вселенной.' Tsymburskii 2007, p 363, translated in Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 98

¹⁴⁵ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 100

¹⁴⁶ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 100

¹⁴⁷ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 100

Tsymburskii's work takes a pessimistic, apocalyptic turn in his discussion of contemporary world events and what he sees as the arrival of the "Fourth Rome"—a title he gives to NATO under the leadership of the United States.¹⁴⁸ He identifies the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia as a "dividing line" in world history, which he views through a religious and cultural framework.¹⁴⁹ More specifically, he sees the bombing as the beginning of the Apocalypse, which will usher in the era of the Fourth Rome.¹⁵⁰ He argues that in this fundamentally new apocalyptic era of history, previously unprecedented events are now all but inevitable. For instance, he links the 2001 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States to the 1999 bombings, stating that they could only be possible in a "post-Kosovo world."¹⁵¹ He suggests that the West itself should be blamed for the terrorist attacks in his eschatological analysis of the West as the Fourth Rome:

We are living through the initial stages of the formation of 'the Fourth Rome', i.e. the universal Babylon, and we do not know how much time its imperial cycle will take. In our lifetime, the formation of an open space for the circulation of goods and services called forth an opposite urge to agglomerate a sweeping global space for the use of private terrorist violence, transgressing all the sovereign borders of centuries past. In its own way, this is 'Babylon's shadow'. The centre of the world responds logically by making the planet into a single legal space, where 'the fourth Rome' reserves for itself the right to, if the need arises, to exercise imperialist violence everywhere, as well as to sanction the use of violence to vassal subjects of its liking. Thus, from the very beginning of 'the fourth Rome', it is clear that there are factors and agents of destruction at work

¹⁴⁸ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 101, Sidorov, "Post-Imperial Third Romes," 332

¹⁴⁹ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 101

¹⁵⁰ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 102

¹⁵¹ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 102

that it cannot get rid of before they finish this job, crowning it with ‘the rebellion of the ten horns’. We are living in a political world in the making that sooner or later will be annihilated.¹⁵²

Tsyburskii’s interpretation of contemporary events indicates his belief that this Western Fourth Rome is destined to failure, due to its “insistence on universal human rights, the universal value of Western-style democracy and the need for an even more globalized economy.”¹⁵³

Egor Kholmogorov, the representative of the next version of the Third Rome mythology in our discussion, is the youngest of the four (born in 1975) and is by far the least educated. He studied History for one year at MGU, before transferring to the Moscow Patriarch’s Russian Orthodox University. He did not complete his degree here either.¹⁵⁴ He began working as a Christian writer and publicist in 1994, before becoming a prominent member of the Young Conservative movement in the early 2000s.¹⁵⁵ He was the founder and frequent contributor of several websites over the course of this decade, including *Russian Doctrine* and *Russian Observer*, and has written for a slew of others.¹⁵⁶ One of his most prominent outlets has been his blog on the site *LiveJournal*, which currently has over 26 thousand journal entries written by him

¹⁵² ‘Мы живем при начале формирования "четвертого Рима", он же универсальный Вавилон, и мы не ведаем, сколько времени уйдет на его имперский цикл. При нас формирование открытого пространства циркуляции товаров и услуг отозвалось встречным стремлением обобщить в планетарном размахе, перешагивая все суверенные границы прежних веков, пространство применения приватного террористического насилия. Это, в своем роде, "тень Вавилона". Закономерным ответом мирового Центра станет обращение планеты в единое правовое поле, где "четвертый Рим" закрепит за собою право как осуществлять при необходимости в любой точке акты принуждающего имперского насилия, так и выдавать ярлыки на насилие импонирующим ему вассальным субъектам. Итак, с самого начала "четвертого Рима" обозначается работа противодействующих ему факторов и агентов деструкции, которых ему не избыть, пока они не завершат этой работы в увенчивающем ее "восстании десяти рогов". Мы живем в становящемся политическом мире, который рано или поздно будет уничтожен.’ Tsyburskii 2007, p. 540, translated in Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 105

¹⁵³ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 106

¹⁵⁴ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 181

¹⁵⁵ Pavlov, “Russian Young Conservatism,” 163

¹⁵⁶ Pavlov, “Russian Young Conservatism,” 163

and almost 250 thousand comments from other users.¹⁵⁷ From 2005 to 2007, he was part of a team of Orthodox writers who published a book called *The Russian Doctrine*, which outlined an ideological platform and political program for Russia to gain world leadership. The book was launched by the ROC's Department for External Relations, which was then headed by Kirill.¹⁵⁸ Despite his relative youth and lack of academic credentials, as early as 2009 Kholmogorov was identified by Marlene Laruelle as "an ideologist close to the Kremlin."¹⁵⁹ When Putin's political party United Russia began its "Russian project" in 2007, Kholmogorov was made editor of the project's website.¹⁶⁰ In February 2012, he was selected as a "political expert" for a closed-door meeting with Putin, which he described in an entry on his *LiveJournal* blog.¹⁶¹ Kholmogorov has continued to be vocal since then, proving to be a popular writer, "firing Russians up with his patriotism".¹⁶² As of yet he has had limited influence on the Putin regime, but he is still worth discussing because of his ties to the ROC and his representation of the Third Rome that uniquely makes no claim at scholarship.

Kholmogorov is a self-proclaimed "Orthodox Nationalist" and proponent of "pragmatic imperialism."¹⁶³ As such, it follows that his preferred form of the myth emphasizes both expansionism and Orthodoxy. He is also one of the more difficult mythologizers to analyze, because he is prone to self-contradiction and "ideological turncoatism."¹⁶⁴ However, these tendencies are one of the factors that make him more interesting to discuss. In his quest to please both the Russian government and the more radical nationalists, he is rather successfully able to be "sufficiently provocative and innovative to get noticed, but sufficiently mainstream to be

¹⁵⁷ Egor Kholmogorov, <https://holmogor.livejournal.com/profile>, accessed 5/7/2022

¹⁵⁸ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 184

¹⁵⁹ Laruelle, *In the Name of the Nation*, 198

¹⁶⁰ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 185

¹⁶¹ Egor Kholmogorov, "Разбирая Путина," <https://holmogor.livejournal.com/2012/02/07/>

¹⁶² Pavlov, "Russian Young Conservatism," 172

¹⁶³ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 181

¹⁶⁴ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 181

accepted.”¹⁶⁵ His constant efforts to placate both sides cause his writings to be often confusing and occasionally impenetrable, but almost always politically interesting.

As Kholmogorov self-identifies as a nationalist, it is important to understand the way he defines the term. He understands that it frequently carries connotations of hatred, violence, and intolerance in popular use. He, on the other hand, sees these connotations as the result of misunderstandings and mistakes, and indeed sees nationalism as the solution to these issues.¹⁶⁶ In his view, nationalism is a voluntary phenomenon which includes all who wish to see the nation survive:

‘A nation is the totality of people living on a certain territory and that are or want to be citizens of one state, and that are united by a common history and dedication to continue this history, i.e. by common plans for the future.’ That is...in the case of Russia, the nation consists of those who live and want to go on living in Russia in the future, who link their fate with her fate, and for the sake of this fate want to decide the affairs of this country and state without hints from foreign forces.¹⁶⁷

Despite his claims that nationalism is voluntary, this freedom of choice only extends so far. He does not, for instance, grant it to Ukrainians or Belarusians, whom he classifies as Russians regardless of how they see themselves.¹⁶⁸ His stance is similar to the one given by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who also categorizes Ukrainians and Belarusians as belonging to the Russian nation. The key difference, though, is that Solzhenitsyn offers the Ukrainians and Belarusians the

¹⁶⁵ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 181

¹⁶⁶ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 187

¹⁶⁷ ‘Нация - это совокупность людей живущих на определенной территории, являющихся или желающих быть гражданами одного государства, объединенных общей историей и решимостью продолжать эту историю дальше, то есть общими планами на будущее. То есть в случае России Нация - это те, кто живет и хочет дальше жить в России, которую свою судьбу связывает с её судьбой и кто именно во имя этой будущей судьбы желает самостоятельно, без подсказок из-за рубежа, определять дела страны и государства. Это те, у кого нет и быть не может никакого другого государства кроме России.’ Egor Kholmogorov, *Russkii natsionalist*, 2006, p. 36, translated in Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 188

¹⁶⁸ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 188

option of voting to leave at the local level.¹⁶⁹ In Kholmogorov’s model of nationalism, a hierarchy of groups exists within each nation that is organized by their relative closeness to the main group.¹⁷⁰

In addition to his strong support of nationalism, Kholmogorov is a champion of imperialism. In a similar manner to his treatment of nationalism, he sheds all negative connotations in his discussions of Empire.¹⁷¹ In his writings he cites empire as the most Christian form of government—he sees Christianity as being inseparable from the Roman Empire.¹⁷² He suggests that there has always been a “mystical unity” between Rome and the Church because they were both “born” at the same time.¹⁷³ Even further, he claims that Christ placed the emperor on an equal footing with God.¹⁷⁴ Like Dugin, he places a good deal of emphasis on the concept of *katechon* in order to stress the importance of empire.¹⁷⁵ At the same time, Kholmogorov sees the Russian empire as the only acceptable one—Western Empire is an oxymoron in his view.¹⁷⁶ He establishes the idea of Russia as the only legitimate empire as axiomatic so that he can use it as reasoning for other arguments without having to justify it. He suggests that the West has been obsessed with the idea of empire since the reign of Charlemagne, and that Nazi imperialism was not a deviation from Western values. Instead, it was a brief moment in history when the West had removed its mask and revealed its true colors:

Germany, Europe’s technological and cultural leader, fell into a shamanic trance, took off the mask of decency, and for some years the whole world could see the genuine, rapacious grin of the Western worldview that is now safely wrapped up in the veils of the

¹⁶⁹ Solzhenitsyn, “Kak nam obustroit’ Rossiiu”

¹⁷⁰ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 189

¹⁷¹ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 189

¹⁷² Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 189

¹⁷³ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 189

¹⁷⁴ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 189

¹⁷⁵ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 189

¹⁷⁶ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 192

UN, OSCE, IMF, and humanitarian conventions and interventions...It took some years for the schism of faith, the schism of civilizations, the schism of empires to take shape: or rather – the schism from Empire, because however hard the West tried, it did not succeed in creating a full-fledged Empire. The theft was not to be realized. And then again, twice during the 20th century, in two world wars, Russia, the heir to Rome and Byzantium, had to crush the new pretenders to create an Anti-Roman Empire – first Kaiser Wilhelm’s, and then the Nazi Führer’s Third Reich.¹⁷⁷

In Kholmogorov’s assessment, the Holy Roman Empire, the Third Reich, and the United States are all faces of the same Western Anti-Empire; that is, the “bad, unnatural, and false empire” that is diametrically opposed to the Russian “good, natural, and real empire.”¹⁷⁸

One of the other components of Egor Kholmogorov’s Third Rome is the idea that Orthodox geopolitics should aim to create the “infrastructure of salvation.” In other words, Russia should try to control as much territory as possible, because only Russia will be able to provide a hope for salvation when the Antichrist finally arrive.¹⁷⁹ For him, the emergence of political Orthodoxy is an inevitable and undeniable process which is tightly related to the “restoration of the future” (i.e. the restoration of Russia’s eschatological fate).¹⁸⁰ Kholmogorov describes this restoration process through an analogy relating history to a skeleton with broken

¹⁷⁷ ‘Технологический и культурный лидер Европы – Германия, впад в шаманский транс, сбросил маску благопристойности, и весь мир увидел на несколько лет подлинный хищнический оскал западного мировоззрения, ныне вновь надежно укутанный за пеленами ООН, ОБСЕ, МВФ, гуманитарных конвенций и интервенций...Несколько столетий оформлялся раскол вер, раскол цивилизаций, раскол империй: точнее – раскол с Империей, ибо как ни тщился Хапад, полноценной Империи ему создать так и не удалось, краже так и не дано было свершиться. И вот вновь, дважды за XX век, в двух мировых войнах, России – наследнице Рима и Византии пришлось сокрушить новых претендентов на создание Антиримской Империи – сперва кайзера Вильгельма, а затем «Третий Рейх» нацистского фюрера.’ Kholmogorov, *Russkii proekt: restavratsiia budushchego*, 2005, translated in Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 193

¹⁷⁸ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 194

¹⁷⁹ Suslov, “Russian Conservatism as an Ideology,” 86

¹⁸⁰ Sidorov, “Post-Imperial Third Romes,” 330

bones or dislocated joints (situations where history has strayed from the correct path).¹⁸¹ In this metaphor, he asserts that it is

the conservatives' duty to become reactionaries and give (sometimes painful) manual therapy or even re-break a fracture that has grown incorrectly. The point is not to reduce this 'skeleton' to a child's size again, but rid it of disabilities and give it the properties it would have had, had it not been for these disabilities.¹⁸²

The end result of the “restoration of the future” would be an established “Christian, imperial supranational order.”¹⁸³ The goal of his political Orthodoxy is not necessarily the establishment of an Orthodox state, though that may occur during the restoration process.¹⁸⁴ In his opinion, the restoration of “the infrastructure of salvation”—he claims that ideally there should not be a single place in Russia where one cannot see a church—is a much more meaningful goal.¹⁸⁵

Possibly the most famous (or infamous) of the modern Russian nationalist proponents of the Third Rome mythology is Aleksandr Dugin. He is one of the so-called “godfathers of post-Soviet conservatism,” alongside Aleksandr Prokhanov and Sergei Kurginyan.¹⁸⁶ Dugin is an eclectic and logorrheic writer who has been active since the early 1990s. His work is often contradictory and illogical, but he justifies this through the conscious abandonment of rationalism and the scientific method in favor of a more medieval, mystical mindset. One of his early attempted projects was to “rehabilitate” fascist ideology in Russia; unsuccessful, however, he has shifted to the less direct promotion of doctrines that take elements of fascism.¹⁸⁷ He was

¹⁸¹ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 194

¹⁸² Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 195

¹⁸³ Sidorov, “Post-Imperial Third Romes,” 330

¹⁸⁴ Sidorov, “Post-Imperial Third Romes,” 330

¹⁸⁵ Sidorov, “Post-Imperial Third Romes,” 330

¹⁸⁶ Engström, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 359

¹⁸⁷ Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist*, 116

initially a strong supporter of Vladimir Putin after his ascendancy to the presidency and was frequently featured on prime-time national television in the early 2000s.¹⁸⁸ His 1997 book *Osnovy geopolitiki*, (*Foundations of Geopolitics*) has been adopted by military academies as a requirement for geopolitical instruction.¹⁸⁹ In 2008 he was appointed professor and the head of the Center for Conservative Studies at the Faculty of Sociology of Moscow State University; Østbø claims that this was “an event which could be said to mark the final leg in his journey from the ‘lunatic fringe’ to the centre of the Russian political-intellectual landscape.”¹⁹⁰ Dugin is frequently referred to as “Putin’s brain” or “Putin’s advisor” in the Western media, but this overstates his influence. Even he sees his influence as indirect:

My influence is much more indirect rather than direct, though I do act as a consultant. My ideas are being re-written by the Kremlin’s political strategists and start living on their own. It does not really matter how they function. I am a man of ideas, so I do not care...I have been doing this for the last 25 years. It does not matter how this influence is effected, but the fact of influence is undeniable.¹⁹¹

Dugin was one of the main promoters of “Novorossia” during the 2014 Ukraine Crisis and was featured prominently on Kremlin-controlled media. However, he became critical of the Kremlin when Russia did not recognize the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk in May 2014. He quickly lost favor of the Kremlin and was fired from his position at the university because of his radicalism during the Ukraine Crisis.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 112

¹⁸⁹ Bassin, “Mackinder and the Heartland Theory,” 105

¹⁹⁰ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 113

¹⁹¹ Aleksandr Dugin in a 2010 interview, quoted in Engström, “Contemporary Russian Messianism,” 360

¹⁹² Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 114

Dugin's brand of Third Rome is comprised of elements of neo-Eurasianism, Expansionism, Mysticism, Traditionalism, and Orthodoxy.¹⁹³ One of Dugin's primary inspirations in his development of neo-Eurasianism was Halford Mackinder. In *Foundations of Geopolitics* Dugin identifies Mackinder's 1904 "Pivot of History" as the "most important geopolitical text in the history of the discipline."¹⁹⁴ Dugin was also heavily influenced by the Soviet historian and geographer Lev Gumilev, who he has described as his most important Russian mentor.¹⁹⁵

A guiding force in Dugin's thought process is a view of world history and politics through the lens of extreme bipolarity: the "never-ending, irreconcilable battle between the two diametrical opposites—sea and land."¹⁹⁶ Dugin associates sea- and land-geography with the archetypes of Carthage and Ancient Rome, respectively. According to him, societies following the Carthaginian marine archetype are predisposed to "a liberal society of tradesmanship, individualism, equality, and man's alienation from nature" while land geography predisposes people to a society "of heroism and hierarchy grounded on sacrality and sacrifice...The people of land civilization are bound to the soil, not alienated from their environment."¹⁹⁷ In this explanation of world politics, Dugin argues that Russia follows the "Roman line" in world history, succeeding the Byzantine Empire. In the same vein, the United States follows the "Carthaginian line" of history, bearing all of Carthage's vices.¹⁹⁸

Dugin's reliance on anti-modernist Traditionalism has led to a rather unusual interpretation of geography and geopolitics. In his opinion, modern geography is simply a

¹⁹³ Sidorov, "Post-Imperial Third Romes," 335

¹⁹⁴ Dugin, *Osnovy Politiki*, 49, quoted in Bassin, "Mackinder and the Heartland Theory," 106

¹⁹⁵ Bassin, "Lev Gumilev and the European New Right," *Nationalities Papers* 43, no. 6 (2015): 840-865, 841

¹⁹⁶ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 117

¹⁹⁷ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 116

¹⁹⁸ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 119

watered-down version of sacral geography (which he claims is the only real geography). He explains his understanding of sacral geography in his 1991 article “Predslovie”:

Sacral geography...studies the deep secrets and logics of the history of peoples and nations, but in their archetypical, spiritual sense, not the factual sense. In a way we can say that sacral geography is ‘mystical geography’ or ‘real geography’. Like all traditional branches of knowledge, by the way, it studies the world of causes not the world of effects.¹⁹⁹

Dugin asserts that there is a metaphysical dimension to space. That is, geographical features such as continents, countries, mountains, rivers, and the like all have a spiritual dimension similar to the *dukh* possessed by their inhabitants. Further, this sacral, metaphysical dimension of space is directly connected to the people living there, just as the land is connected to the people in a physical sense.²⁰⁰ This spiritual understanding of geography is a cornerstone of many of Dugin’s beliefs, because he can use it as a sort of evidence to argue against the current state of any national borders throughout the world as he sees fit. In this way his belief in sacral geography is conducive to his support of the Third Rome political mythology, because it is a basis of argument that can be as flexible as he needs it to be.

In Dugin’s estimation, Russia has had three separate sacral geographies throughout history, and they correspond to the periods of its three capitals: Kyiv, Moscow, and St. Petersburg.²⁰¹ He holds that by its nature the Kievan geography was too weak, leading to an easy defeat by the Mongol-Tatar army. For him, this renders the Kievan sacral geography

¹⁹⁹ ‘Сакральная география...изучает глубинные тайны и закономерности истории народов и наций, но не в их фактическом, а в их архетипическом, духовном аспекте. В некотором смысле, можно сказать, что сакральная география является «тайной географией» или «подлинной географией», изучающей, как, впрочем, и все традиционные науки, не мир следствий, но мир причин.’ Aleksandr Dugin, *Misterii Evrazii*, 1991, <http://arcto.ru/article/68>. Translated by Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 123

²⁰⁰ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 123

²⁰¹ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 125

irrelevant.²⁰² The metaphysical Moscow, on the other hand, constitutes the pinnacle of Russian potential. For Dugin, it is Moscow, and Moscow alone, that can hold the honor of being the “Third Rome” and the center of “Holy Russia.”²⁰³ He asserts that all Russians are Muscovite at their core:

Russian national psychology is deeply Muscovite, centered on Moscow. This factor is caused by the cultural type of what we call the ‘Russian human.’²⁰⁴

Moscow as the Third Rome is the “heart of Russia” and its “mystical nerve.” He “frames the sacral geographical model of the Third Rome as the ‘original Russia’, and consequently not only as the best form of organization, but the *only* possible way for the country to exist.”²⁰⁵

One of the key characteristics of Dugin’s version of the Third Rome that distinguishes it from many of his contemporaries’ is that he places a secondary emphasis on the role of Orthodoxy (this is not to say that he disregards Orthodoxy completely). Unlike most of the other Third Rome proponents that discussed in this paper, Dugin emphasizes ancient, pagan Rome in his idealizations.²⁰⁶ This can be seen in the discussion of his thoughts of the battle between the lineages of Rome and Carthage above.

While Dugin does not give Christianity and the Byzantine Empire the primary position in his version of the Third Rome mythology, he is far from dismissive of them. He expresses his idealization of the Byzantine Empire with a particularly acerbic dose of aggression:

Our formula is: the West is evil, Byzantium is good. Everything bad that is written about Byzantium is a lie...Every Russian should know that Byzantium is pure good. Anyone

²⁰² Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 125

²⁰³ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 125

²⁰⁴ ‘Русская национальная психология является глубоко московской, москвоцентричной. Этим фактором обусловлен культурный тип того, кого мы называем «русским человеком». Dugin, *Osnovy Geopolitiki*, 1997, Translated by Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 125

²⁰⁵ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 126

²⁰⁶ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 121

who claims otherwise is an enemy... We do not have space for nuances now. If you criticize Byzantium, you are an enemy of the Russian people.²⁰⁷

Dugin has an enormous admiration for Byzantium as a worthy successor to Rome. His staunch opposition to nuance here does seem contradictory, though, when one considers his nuanced views concerning Christianity. The religion plays a key role in the “mission” of the Third Rome, but he is selective about the acceptable forms of Christianity. There is a wide array of Christians who Dugin considers to be apostates because they do not fall in line with his views on a variety of issues.

The mission of Moscow as the Third Rome is to defend the world from the Antichrist by acting as the *katechon*, or “he who restrains,” from the New Testament of the Bible.²⁰⁸ There has been much speculation and dispute about who or what this *katechon* actually is over the centuries. Dugin, however, has no doubt that the term refers to the Roman Empire.²⁰⁹ The *katechon* prophecy indicates that this restraining force would be in place for 1000 years, before the eventual coming of the Antichrist to Earth. Dugin proposes that the Byzantine Empire, which existed for roughly a millennium, is the obvious candidate for the *katechon*.²¹⁰ The downfall of the Byzantine Empire would of course herald the beginning of the apocalypse. Dugin explains this by way of a mystical transfer of the *katechon* role from Byzantium to Muscovite Russia:

It was logical to postpone for some time the final coming of the son of destruction.

Having taken over the eschatological function, Holy Rus', Moscow-Third Rome should

²⁰⁷ ‘Наша формула: Запад – зло, Византия – добро. Все, что написано о Византии плохого – ложь... Каждый русский должен знать, что Византия – чистое добро. Всякий, кто утверждает нечто иное – враг... Теперь же нам не да нюансов. Критикуешь Византию – враг русского народа.’ Dugin, *Russkaia Veshch*, 2001, <http://arcto.ru/article/127>, translated by Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 127

²⁰⁸ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 129

²⁰⁹ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 130

²¹⁰ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 130

prolong the full-fledged ecclesiastical *aeon*, the period of the ‘millennial kingdom’, ‘for a short period’.²¹¹

Despite stating that it was “logical” to postpone the coming of the Antichrist via this mystical transfer, Dugin does not actually provide any reasoning for this extension of the 1000 years that have already passed. Inheriting the Byzantine Empire’s mission in the world implies that Russia must be the successor to the Second Rome. One important distinction in Dugin’s view of this phenomenon, though, is that the Third Rome is not simply a later version of the First Rome, or a “weaker reflection or copy” of it. Rather, it is a completely new, better version.²¹² As Østbø puts it, “the last Rome (in time) has become the first (closest to Heaven). Dugin’s myth of the Third Rome here does not seem to be one of claiming legacy, but of a holy empire that eclipsed its predecessors.”²¹³

Dugin’s view of Russia as *katechon* and the Third Rome is conditional, and at one point in history it temporarily lost these honors. He attributes the end to the Third Rome as *katechon* to Patriarch Nikon and his reforms that were approved at the Council of 1666-1667 (ironically the same council at which Nikon himself was put on trial and defrocked).²¹⁴ Nikon had been pushing toward a unification of the world’s Orthodox Churches under the auspices of the Russian Orthodox Church, and toward the creation of a proper theocracy in Russia. In principle, Dugin agrees with Nikon’s motivations. However, he believes that Nikon’s fatal error was being so eager to accomplish these goals that he was willing to compromise and accept the “primacy of

²¹¹ ‘логично было отодвинуть окончательный приход сына погибели еще на некоторый срок, а Святая Русь, Москва-Третий Рим, переняв эсхатологическую функцию, должна была продолжить на «малое время» полноценный еkklesiastический эон, период «тысячелетнего царства».’ Dugin, *Tampliry proletariata*, 1997, translated by Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 131

²¹² Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 132

²¹³ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 133

²¹⁴ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 134

Greek texts and rituals over their differing Russian counterparts.”²¹⁵ Nikon’s concessions ran counter to Dugin’s “conviction that Russia is always right...All other nations are apostates, and *they* would have to make the necessary concessions, not Russia.”²¹⁶ As Dugin sees it, Nikon’s push to create a theocracy had backfired: “The council of 1666-1667 made a decisive step from Nikon’s incompletely Orthodox theocracy to the completely non-Orthodox worldly empire of a Protestant type.”²¹⁷ He concludes that this marked the definitive end of Moscow the Third Rome as the *katechon*:

This was the most definite end of the ‘katechon’, of Holy Rus’, of the Third Rome. From this moment on it was impossible to speak of the Russian State as fully Orthodox and traditional. The schism affected all aspects of its religious and social life.²¹⁸

This may have been the beginning of the end in Dugin’s eyes, but the final nail in the coffin is the reign of Peter the Great.

Aleksandr Dugin’s understanding disapproval of Patriarch Nikon is pales in comparison to his absolute disdain for Peter the Great. As Østbø explains it:

Peter the Great (or Peter I, as Dugin prefers to call him) is perhaps the individual from Russian history Dugin detests the most...Peter I and St. Petersburg stand for virtually everything Dugin hates: westernizing, belief in progress, desacralization and above all: sea power. The city’s very geographical position is enough to stir up his hatred. Dugin does not even recognize Petersburg as a new ‘pole’ in Russia’s sacral geography, as Peter

²¹⁵ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 133

²¹⁶ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 134

²¹⁷ ‘От не совсем православной теократии Никона собор 1666 года сделал решительный шаг к совсем неправославной светской империи полупротестантского типа’ Dugin, *Tamplery proletariata*, 1997, translated in Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 133

²¹⁸ ‘Это был самый настоящий конец «катехона», Святой Руси, Третьего Рима. С этого момента о Русском Государстве невозможно было говорить как о вполне православном и традиционном. Раскол затронул все стороны ее религиозного и социального бытия.’ Dugin, *Absolutnaia rodina*, 1999, translated in Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 134

I and the governing aristocracy had only contempt for the Russian people and its
'national psychology, legends and deep sacral-geographical views'.²¹⁹

To drive home the magnitude of Dugin's ire toward Peter I, Østbø cites a 2005 interview in which Dugin answered the question of what he would like to demolish by stating that he would like to use a hoisting crane to remove "the head of [the sculptor] Zurab Tssereteli" and would then "use the same crane to remove the monument of Peter."²²⁰ Dugin's feelings about the matter are so strong that he "hardly recognizes the historical fact of St. Petersburg being a Russian capital:"

Saint Petersburg is the capital of post-Third-Rome Rus'. That is, this capital, in a sense, somehow does not, cannot exist. 'A Fourth Rome will never be'. Saint Petersburg affirms the quality, structure and meaning of Third Russia. It is no longer a national state, no longer a soteriological ark. It is a strange, gigantic chimerea, a *post mortem* country, a people living and developing in a system of coordinates that is located on the other side of history. Piter is the city of 'Nav', of the other side.²²¹

This refusal to acknowledge the existence of St. Petersburg as a capital of Russia seems to fit He suggests that the only way the Third Rome was kept alive (and by association the *katechon*) following the schism at the Council of 1666-1667 and the desacralization by Peter I was through

²¹⁹ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 135

²²⁰ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 135

²²¹ 'Санкт-Петербург столица такой Руси, которая приходит после Третьего Рима, т.е. этой столицы, в некотором смысле, как бы не существует, не может существовать. «Четвертому Риму не быть». Санкт-Петербург утверждает Третьего Россию, по качеству, структуре, смыслу. Это уже не национальное государство, не сoteriological ковчег. Это странная гигантская химера, страна *post mortem*, народ, живущий и развивающийся в системе координат, которая находится по ту сторону истории. Питер—город «нави», обратной стороны.' Dugin 1997, translated by Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 136

the persistence of the Old Believers.²²² Not surprisingly, Dugin himself publicly adopted a form of the Old Belief which is recognized by the ROC.²²³

Dugin paradoxically argues that the formation of the overtly atheist Soviet Union was the point in history when Russia returned to its holy mission and the Third Rome:

The Soviet period represents an attempt to find a new, relevant and modern, but still recognizable Messianist ideal of the Third Rome... This time Moscow becomes ‘the proletarian Rome’. But it remained Rome.²²⁴

His argument leans heavily on his ideas about sacral geography, and the fact that the capital once again returned to Moscow. He sees this relocation not as an action undertaken by the Soviet regime, but rather as a “manifestation of the Russian collective unconscious.”²²⁵

Not only was the capital transferred to Moscow, but the unconscious structuralization of the psychological space was resurrected on a new level... The Third Rome became the capital of the Third International, and the idea of universal salvation through the true Faith, having stayed unchanged only within Holy Rus’, was exchanged for the mission of building Communism in the whole world, starting from the unique historical experience of the Russian socialist state. The supposedly even more rationalistic and ‘progressive’ Communist rule actually awakened the sleeping archetypes... The myth of the Bolshevik Revolution, the socialist Fatherland and a new Communist order dovetailed perfectly with the ancient layers of the collective unconscious.²²⁶

²²² Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 137

²²³ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 137

²²⁴ ‘Советский период представляет собой попытку найти новый актуальный и современный, но все же такой узнаваемый мессианский идеал Третьего Рима... На сей раз Москва – становится «Римом пролетарским». Но все же именно Римом.’ Dugin, 1997, Translated in Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 139

²²⁵ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 140

²²⁶ ‘Не просто столица была перенесена в Москву, но была на новом уровне возрождена бессознательная структурализация психологического пространства... Третий Рим стал столицей Третьего Интернационала, а идея всеобщего спасения через истинную Веру, сохранившуюся нетронутой только в пределах Святой Руси,

His assertion that the collective Russian unconscious was the guiding force of the Communist Party's actions is a convenient way to avoid reconciling the Party's self-proclaimed goals and motivations with his narrative of the Third Rome. Essentially the Party's atheistic tendencies and goal of spreading communism throughout the world (a goal showing strong influence from the West), become insignificant because the Party is not the true actor in this situation. Furthermore, the expansion of the Soviet Union into a Eurasian empire nestles comfortably with the rest of Dugin's narrative. Specifically, he ties it to his discourse on the age-old struggle between the first Roman Empire and Carthage.²²⁷

The final contemporary mythologizer of the Third Rome who will be discussed in this paper is Nataliia Narochnitskaia. She is a prolific writer referred to by Laruelle as the "high priestess of Political Orthodoxy."²²⁸ Of the four theorists discussed in this paper, Narochnitskaia is the one with the closest ties to both the Kremlin and the ROC. In 1971, she earned a degree in International Relations from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. In the 1980s she worked at the Secretariat-General of the United Nations in New York, and from 1989 to 2003 she was a senior researcher at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations at the Russian Academy of Sciences.²²⁹ In 1993 she was one of the founding members of the World Russian Council, the international organization headed by the Patriarch of the ROC.²³⁰ She earned her doctoral degree from the Moscow State Pedagogical University in 2002. In 2003

была заменена на миссию построения коммунизма во всем мире, отправляясь от уникального исторического опыта русского социалистического государства. По видимости еще более рационалистическое и «прогрессистское» коммунистическое правление, на самом деле, пробудило спавшие архетипы... Миф большевицкой Революции, социалистического Отечества и нового коммунистического порядка идеально наложился на древние пласты коллективного бессознательного.' Dugin, 1997, translated in Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 140

²²⁷ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 139

²²⁸ Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism*, 143

²²⁹ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 151

²³⁰ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 153

she was elected deputy of the State Duma for *Rodina*, and during her term she served as deputy head of the Duma Committee for International Affairs, member of the Russian delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and Chair of the Committee for the Study of the Practice and Implementation of Human Rights and Civil Liberties.²³¹ Since 2007 she has been on the board of trustees of the Kremlin's Russian World Foundation, and since 2008 she has been head of the Paris office of the Kremlin-supported think tank the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation (IDC). She was appointed to the President's Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests when it was organized by Medvedev in 2009.²³² This is especially significant when one considers the high degree of political import given to history within the current administration of the Russian government. Like Dugin, she frequently makes appearances on television and radio, and is a prolific writer.²³³ Her fundamental work is the book *Russia and the Russians in World History*, which was first printed in 1996 and has been revised and updated several times since then. It is primarily a biased review of the history of Russia's international relations from an Orthodox perspective and is representative of the emergence of neo-Panslavism.²³⁴

Narochnitskaia's resurrection of Pan-Slavism, a movement originally created in the 19th century by Nikolai Danilevskii, is in many ways similar to Dugin's resurrection of Eurasianism. However, neo-Panslavism has not become nearly as popular as neo-Eurasianism in contemporary Russian conservative channels. The ideology of neo-Panslavism centers on the "Eastern Question," or the territory of the post-Byzantine space between the Baltic Sea and the Black

²³¹ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 152-153

²³² Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 154

²³³ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 155

²³⁴ Sidorov, "Post-Imperial Third Romes," 333

Sea.²³⁵ According to neo-Panslavist thought, the West is inherently expansionist due to its ideology rooted in Puritanism, and is obsessed with conquering this post-Byzantine space. In response, Russia's mission is not to follow the West's expansionist example, but to coexist alongside these states and support their independence from the clutches of the West.²³⁶

In Østbø's analysis of Narochnitskaia's corpus, he argues that there are three main theses that she persistently addresses throughout the bulk of her writing:

- “Throughout history, the countries of the West, especially the Anglo-Saxon ones, have remained heretical or godless, their policy towards Russia generally guided by hostility, fear and the desire to conquer and annihilate Russia.
- Russia, although with numerous flaws and wrongdoings, was a protector of the true faith up to the 1917 revolution, and its policies have historically been far more justifiable morally than those of the West. The expansion of the Russian state beyond ‘Russian soil’ was generally undertaken in self-defence and/or can be justified by international law.
- Dominant images of Russia in the West (as barbaric, inherently expansionist and anti-democratic) are stereotyped and essentially false, partly because the most important research on Russia is not objective. It is rooted in heretical and inhumane thought and misunderstandings and is closely linked to geopolitics – to the desire to conquer and annihilate Russia.”²³⁷

One of the characteristics that stands out about Narochnitskaia's work is this rigid persistence of themes. She has been able to consistently fit subsequent publications into the framework created

²³⁵ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 171

²³⁶ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 172

²³⁷ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 157-158

in *Russia and the Russians in World History*, without the abundant logical contradictions found in Dugin and Kholmogorov.²³⁸

Unlike many of her counterparts, Narochnitskaia does not attach much value to Muscovy in the development of her version of the Third Rome myth. On the contrary, she suggests that the concept of Moscow's Byzantine heritage was "promoted by the West (the Pope of Rome and Holy Roman emperor) to make Russia its ally in the fight with Ottoman Turkey," because it would be easier to spread Catholicism to the East if Russia was weakened in such a war.²³⁹ As far as she is concerned, Filofei's original Third Rome was purely an eschatological idea with no territorial component.²⁴⁰ Furthermore, she points out that the first source discussing the Third Rome after Filofei (the official document establishing the Moscow Patriarchate in 1589) used the term to describe "Great Russia," not Moscow.²⁴¹ Narochnitskaia also argues that the Third Rome was essentially an unknown concept until the nineteenth century, meaning that it likely held no sway over the tsars up to that point.²⁴² She similarly disagrees with the notion of the Third Rome's popularity among the Slavophiles, suggesting that it is unfounded.²⁴³

Narochnitskaia uses the arguments above to distinguish between the "true" Third Rome (the one originally created by Filofei) and the "false" Third Rome (the distorted version of Filofei's that emphasizes territorial factors).²⁴⁴ She identifies the false Third Rome as the source of Western misinterpretation of Russian history; she refers to the version of the Third Rome generally present in Western scholarship as the "myth of *filofeistvo*."²⁴⁵ Her assertion is that this "backbone of the Western interpretation of Russian and Soviet history" led to the popularization

²³⁸ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 156

²³⁹ Sidorov, "Post-Imperial Third Romes," 334

²⁴⁰ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 163

²⁴¹ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 163

²⁴² Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 165

²⁴³ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 165

²⁴⁴ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 166

²⁴⁵ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 166

of a stereotype that the Third Rome myth formed the ideological basis of Muscovy's rise to power and that Russia has been strongly imperialist ever since the Muscovite period.²⁴⁶ She suggests that this stereotype was a tool used by the West to discredit the Soviet Union during the Cold War:

After the Second World War and Russia's acquiring the role of a great power, the 'totalitarian' and 'imperialist' treatment of '*filofeistvo*' was launched in the works of Berdiaev and Toynbee... The authority of the latter was appealed to in order to buttress this interpretation that became part of the arsenal of the Cold War, when the idea was presented as the harbinger of 'Soviet expansionism' and attributed to the notorious 'Byzantinism' that was given a particularly negative meaning.²⁴⁷

Narochnitskaia's rejection of the imperialist, territorial element of other versions of the Third Rome myth naturally lends itself to her Pan-Slavist approach to the myth. Sidorov sums up the basic premise of this Pan-Slavist take on the Third Rome:

True unity that could bring growth and independence to Europe should be based on recognition of the universally equal values of our experiences. The future lies in constructively merging all cultural components of Europe (including the Slavic and Orthodox). Therefore, the Russian 'challenge' is essentially an 'appeal'. The future of Russia is Europe's future too.²⁴⁸

One of the key differences between the Pan-Slavist view and the Russian nationalist views discussed above is that Pan-Slavists "recognize certain values of other civilizations, their right to

²⁴⁶ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 166

²⁴⁷ 'После Второй мировой войны и обретения СССР роли великой державы выдвинулась «тоталитаристская» и «империалистическая» трактовка «филофейства» в работах Н. Бердяева и А. Тойнби... Авторитет последнего призван был подкрепить эту интерпретацию, которая вошла в арсенал холодной войны, когда идея выдавалась за провозвестницу «советского экспансионизма» и возводилась к пресловутому «византинизму», наделенному сугубо негативным содержанием.' Narochnitskaia, *Velikie voiny XX stoletii*, 2003, 142, translated in Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 167

²⁴⁸ Sidorov, "Post-Imperial Third Romes," 334

existence, and do not consider Pan-Slavic civilization as universalist.”²⁴⁹ The basic goal of Pan-Slavism is the development of a Slavic-Orthodox world led by Russia and coexisting alongside other civilizations.²⁵⁰ While Russia’s influence is key, it is important to distinguish from expansionist nationalist ideologies like those of Dugin and Kholmogorov, which do not desire coexistence with these civilizations but rather their subordination to Russia.

Tsymburskii, Kholmogorov, Dugin, and Narochnitskaia are by no means the only theorists promoting the Third Rome myth within the conservative Russian ideological landscape. However, they do cover a variety of major perspectives, including isolationism, expansionism, neo-Eurasianism, fascism, neo-Panslavism, and Political Orthodoxy. They also represent a variety of approaches to discussing the myth, such as academic writing, publicism, and pseudo-academic writing. They have differing levels of influence on the Kremlin and the ROC, but they all contribute to the ideological pool that the pragmatic Russian government and Church can draw from when looking for additional sources of legitimacy. Two of the most influential theorists not covered in this paper are the neo-Eurasianist Aleksandr Panarin and ultranationalist Aleksandr Prokhanov, who both overlap with Dugin in their ideologies. Similarly, the former Young Conservative Boris Mezhuev shares much of his ideology with Kholmogorov.

IV. RUSSIAN POLITICAL MYTHOLOGIES IN CONTEMPORARY EVENTS

2008: South Ossetia and Abkhazia

In August 2008, Russia demonstrated one of its most notable uses of political mythologies to justify its actions abroad since the fall of the Soviet Union. In this case, the

²⁴⁹ Sidorov, “Post-Imperial Third Romes,” 334

²⁵⁰ Sidorov, “Post-Imperial Third Romes,” 334

Kremlin used these myths to rationalize its efforts to expand its influence into territories that formerly belonged to the Soviet Union. Russia intervened in the conflict in Georgia and established an occupation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia which it has maintained for more than a decade.²⁵¹ As with the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, it can be argued that preventing Georgia from joining NATO was a motivating factor.²⁵²

The tensions between South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and the rest of Georgia were not new in 2008. They had been simmering since the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the two regions had expressed the desire to remain with Russia rather than the new independent state of Georgia when the splintering occurred.²⁵³ Russia's desire to regain influence in its former territory and the separatists' desire to gain leverage against the Georgian government naturally led to cooperation between them.²⁵⁴ The rising tensions in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and Russia's ostensible role as "peacekeeper" in the region since the early 1990s had been policy tools in the hands of Russian officials.²⁵⁵ Russian companies heavily invested in the region, and the Russian military equipped the separatists.²⁵⁶ Most conspicuously, Russia provided citizenship and passports to the residents of the separatist republics to justify future military intervention under the guise of protecting Russian citizens.²⁵⁷

²⁵¹ Everett Price and Alex Tiersky, "The Russian Occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia," *Helsinki Commission Report* (July 2018), 1

²⁵² Price and Tiersky, "The Russian Occupation," 1

²⁵³ Scott Littlefield, "Citizenship, Identity and Foreign Policy: The Contradictions and Consequences of Russia's Passport Distribution in the Separatist Regions of Georgia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 8 (October 2009), 1461

²⁵⁴ Littlefield, "Citizenship, Identity and Foreign Policy," 1462

²⁵⁵ Littlefield, "Citizenship, Identity and Foreign Policy," 1462

²⁵⁶ Littlefield, "Citizenship, Identity and Foreign Policy," 1462

²⁵⁷ Littlefield, "Citizenship, Identity and Foreign Policy," 1462

In late July 2008, the Russian military conducted major training exercises near the Georgian border with more than 8,000 troops.²⁵⁸ According to the Helsinki Commission's Report on the Occupation of Georgia and its aftermath:

Many analysts regard the steady escalation of these Russian provocations in the first part of the year as a Russian-orchestrated effort to goad Georgia into a conflict that would lead to Tbilisi's loss of these territories.²⁵⁹

In August of that year, the tensions in the region escalated into war. When hostilities broke out between Georgian and South Ossetian separatist forces on August 7, Russia used it as the pretext to stage a massive military intervention.²⁶⁰ The following day Russia advanced into Abkhazia, creating a second front in the war.²⁶¹ Russian forces effectively cut off the Georgian capital of Tbilisi from the western regions of the country, leading Georgian forces to retreat from South Ossetia. Most of the combat ended by August 12, and France moderated a ceasefire agreement that took effect on August 16, with Russia occupying roughly 20 percent of Georgia's territory.²⁶² However, Russia has not implemented the terms of the ceasefire agreement, which included both sides pulling their forces back to pre-conflict positions.²⁶³ In fact, Russia has done the opposite, slowly advancing the edge of its occupied territory further into Georgia over the course of the decade following the conflict in a display of "creeping annexation."²⁶⁴

Overall, the actions taken by the Russian Federation during the 2008 war in Georgia fit neatly with the Kremlin's messianic narrative. One of the most common themes in official Russian statements about the military intervention and occupation was that they were done in

²⁵⁸ Price and Tiersky, "The Russian Occupation," 1

²⁵⁹ Price and Tiersky, "The Russian Occupation," 2

²⁶⁰ Price and Tiersky, "The Russian Occupation," 2

²⁶¹ Price and Tiersky, "The Russian Occupation," 2

²⁶² Price and Tiersky, "The Russian Occupation," 3

²⁶³ Price and Tiersky, "The Russian Occupation," 3

²⁶⁴ Price and Tiersky, "The Russian Occupation," 3

response to human rights violations (painting Russia as the savior of the people there).²⁶⁵ When Dmitri Medvedev signed decrees on August 26, 2008, recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, he gave a statement that vilifies Georgia and praises Russia as a protector of the people. His statement begins:

You without doubt know about the tragedy in South Ossetia. The nighttime artillery attack of Tskhinvali by Georgian troops led to the deaths of hundreds of our peaceful citizens. Russian peacekeepers, who carried out their duty to defend women, children and elderly people to the end, died.²⁶⁶

The pointed use of the phrase “*our* peaceful citizens” stands out, recalling the tactic of granting them Russian passports to construct a sense of legitimacy, mentioned above. It is also worth noting the language he uses to describe the Russian soldiers, which portrays them as martyrs, arguably fitting in with the messianic narrative. Medvedev also paints Georgia as a clear villain throughout the statement:

Tbilisi counted on a blitzkrieg, which would hand the world a fait accompli: the most inhumane means to achieve their goal of taking over South Ossetia at the price of exterminating a whole people...A peaceful solution of the conflict was not part of Tbilisi’s plans. The Georgian leadership has been methodically preparing for war...Saakashvili chose genocide to solve his political tasks. Thus he killed with his own hands all hopes for the peaceful coexistence of Ossetians, Abkhazians, and Georgians in one state.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁵ Price and Tiersky, “The Russian Occupation,” 3

²⁶⁶ Dmitri Medvedev “Medvedev’s Statement On Russia’s Recognition of South Ossetia, Abkhazia,” trans. Reuters, *RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty*, August 26, 2008, https://www.rferl.org/a/Medvedevs_Statement_On_Russias_Recognition_Of_South_Ossetia_Abkhazia/1193986.html

²⁶⁷ Medvedev, “Russia’s Recognition of South Ossetia, Abkhazia”

The accusations of Georgia cold-bloodedly planning and orchestrating a genocide leave no room for moral grey area. Throughout the statement, between the sections decrying the monstrosities planned and carried out by Georgia, Medvedev intersperses sections praising Russia:

Our country has become a mediator and peacekeeper which was looking for political settlement...Russia has shown restraint and patience. We have more than once called for a return to the negotiating table...Russia calls on other states to follow its example. This is a difficult choice, but this is the only chance to save peoples' lives.²⁶⁸

It is clear Medvedev wishes to present the image that Russia has been level-headed throughout the war in Georgia, with no motivation other than to broker peace and save people's lives. In this representation of events, Russia only used violence as a last resort, and only as much violence as was needed to accomplish its messianic, humanitarian mission. The emphasis on restraint brings to mind Kirill's 2013 description of Russia's moral mission in the world, in which he indicates Russia's tradition of great restraint as something it needs to teach the rest of the world (see above).

The Kremlin's version of events, questionable at best in the immediate aftermath of the war, falls apart when considering the circumstances of Russia's long occupation of the region and the continuation of the frozen conflict. Even if the dubious claims made by Russia concerning human rights issues were true, Russia used its veto power to prevent European and United Nations organizations from providing humanitarian aid in the region.²⁶⁹ Furthermore, there is evidence that Russia itself was carrying out "systematic discrimination and harassment" against ethnic Georgians in the region.²⁷⁰ In an extreme example, a Georgian man who was detained by local security forces in South Ossetia died after a week in custody. When his body

²⁶⁸ Medvedev, "Russia's Recognition of South Ossetia, Abkhazia"

²⁶⁹ Price and Tiersky, "The Russian Occupation," 3

²⁷⁰ Price and Tiersky, "The Russian Occupation," 4

was released, it was “missing several internal organs and bearing marks of torture.”²⁷¹ The perpetrators were not held responsible, calling into question the reality of Russia’s interest in human rights violations.²⁷² In January 2021, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Russia was guilty of a large number of human rights violations in Georgia after the war. The court ruled that Russia

exercised effective control over Georgia’s separatist regions after the hostilities and was responsible for ill-treatment and acts of torture against Georgian prisoners of war, arbitrary detentions of Georgians and inhuman and degrading treatment of 160 detained Georgian civilians, who were held in crowded confinement for more than two weeks in August 2008.²⁷³

Russia’s Ministry of Justice maintains that the direct involvement of Russian troops in these incidents was never proven.²⁷⁴

One of the unique aspects of Russia’s occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia is that it is one of the few circumstances in which the Kremlin and the ROC do not seem to be cooperating at first glance. While the Russian government has been working to keep the region in frozen conflict and separated from Georgia politically, the ROC has been pushing for Ossetian and Abkhazian churches to remain under the umbrella of the Orthodox Church of Georgia (OCG), rather than transferring to the Moscow Patriarchate.²⁷⁵ In fact, the OCG and ROC have been maintaining “one of the most important diplomatic channels between Russia and Georgia”

²⁷¹ Price and Tiersky, “The Russian Occupation,” 4

²⁷² Price and Tiersky, “The Russian Occupation,” 4

²⁷³ Sophiko Megrelidze “Europe’s court condemns Russia over 2008 war with Georgia,” *AP News*, January 26, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/europe-georgia-salome-zurabishvili-moscow-russia-854c37a67adc9cda0920a00e931efc09>

²⁷⁴ Megrelidze, “Europe’s court condemns Russia”

²⁷⁵ Kristina Conroy, “Semi-Recognized States and Ambiguous Churches: The Orthodox Church in South Ossetia and Abkhazia,” *Journal of Church and State* 57, no. 4 (Autumn 2015), 621

and trying to mediate between the two sides.²⁷⁶ It is an intriguing case study, especially in light of the ROC's staunch opposition to the 2019 schism in Ukraine and its vocal support of Russia's current invasion of Ukraine. In Kristina Conroy's article on the subject, she argues that despite initial impressions the Church's actions in South Ossetia "rather than serving as a rare example of the ROC defying the Kremlin's wishes, illustrates how the ROC and the Russian state are pursuing mutual interests in the South Caucasus."²⁷⁷ In a way, the actions of the Church and the state parallel each other, with each of them attempting to act in an ostensible mediator role with *de facto* authority, rather than taking power officially.²⁷⁸ Maintaining control in this unofficial capacity allows each of them to preserve a certain level of international legitimacy, and they are able to promote the messianic narrative that their involvement is simply a humanitarian matter of saving the defenseless.

A primary goal for the ROC is to expand its influence in Russia and internationally, so its refusal to welcome the churches in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and its cooperation with the OCG can seem counterintuitive.²⁷⁹ Conroy asserts:

In what is seen by some analysts as a great act of restraint against its own wishes, the ROC has maintained that Abkhazia and South Ossetia belong to the canonical territory of the OCG. In fact, these actions are in the ROC's best interest.²⁸⁰

The reasoning she provides for this assertion is sound. The refusal to accept the churches of these regions demonstrates the ROC's "desire to act canonically and legitimately in the eyes of the wider Orthodox world."²⁸¹ As will be discussed below, the ROC has had a much stronger interest

²⁷⁶ Conroy, "Semi-Recognized States and Ambiguous Churches," 621

²⁷⁷ Conroy, "Semi-Recognized States and Ambiguous Churches," 623

²⁷⁸ Conroy, "Semi-Recognized States and Ambiguous Churches," 634

²⁷⁹ Conroy, "Semi-Recognized States and Ambiguous Churches," 634

²⁸⁰ Conroy, "Semi-Recognized States and Ambiguous Churches," 634

²⁸¹ Conroy, "Semi-Recognized States and Ambiguous Churches," 634

in expanding its influence into Ukraine. With this goal in mind, it makes sense that the ROC would not want to gain a reputation of expansionism or imperialism, which would risk the ire of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople and delegitimize its actions in Ukraine. Furthermore, a positive relationship with the OCG is in the ROC's best interest, as the OCG is older and therefore plays a "pivotal position" in the ROC's rivalry with Constantinople.²⁸² Finally, the ROC fears that union between North and South Ossetia carries too great a risk of inducing separatist attempts from inside the ROC.²⁸³

2014: Crisis in Ukraine

In November of 2013, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich suddenly and unexpectedly backed away from negotiations with the European Union about a long-anticipated association agreement (AA).²⁸⁴ These talks had been in the works since March 2007, and the accords were initialed (but not yet signed and ratified) in March 2012.

Yanukovich's fateful decision came in the wake of his meeting with the Kremlin earlier in the month, in which Putin pressured him to avoid integration with Europe and steered him toward instead joining the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan Customs Union.²⁸⁵ Russia attempted to entice Ukraine by offering a \$15 billion loan and a massive, 25 percent cut in gas prices in exchange for suspending AA talks with the EU.²⁸⁶ In the analysis of Menon and Rumer, Yanukovich's decision was primarily the result of deep-rooted systemic corruption:

Yanukovich's turn away from the AA was thus above all an act of self- and system-preservation. The irony is that it ended up provoking a revolt that brought him and his government down. It also undid Russia's gains by reviving Ukraine's alignment with the

²⁸² Conroy, "Semi-Recognized States and Ambiguous Churches," 635

²⁸³ Conroy, "Semi-Recognized States and Ambiguous Churches," 636

²⁸⁴ Rajan Menon and Eugene Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine* (Cambridge, MIT Press: 2015), 53

²⁸⁵ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 51

²⁸⁶ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 51

West. That realignment...reignited the gravest crisis that has occurred between Russia and the West since the Cold War.²⁸⁷

In their view, the enticements offered by the Kremlin alone were not enough to influence Yanukovich's decision. Rather, the tipping point was the set of stipulations required by the EU to ratify the deal—stipulations that would cut off primary sources of wealth for Yanukovich and the lobbies backing him.²⁸⁸ These conditions included a variety of radical reforms and the obligatory release of Yulia Tymoshenko, who was a major political threat to him.²⁸⁹

Within days after Yanukovich's decision to step back from the EU association agreement, mass protests erupted across Ukraine, the largest demonstrations the country had seen since the Orange Revolution a decade earlier. On November 24, an estimated 100,000 people gathered in the streets of Kyiv to protest.²⁹⁰ This public response was one of the most shocking aspects of the situation; in the years leading up to it, the Ukrainian people had fallen into a deep state of political apathy.²⁹¹ Increasing police violence towards the protesters, most notably an attempt to storm an encampment on Kyiv's Maidan Square on December 10, fueled domestic and international condemnation of Yanukovich.²⁹² In January 2014, Yanukovich's government passed new legislation attempting to limit the ability of civilians to protest against the Ukrainian government.²⁹³ This legislation had the opposite of its intended effect, however. It gave new life to the protests, leading to another violent crackdown by the authorities and further casualties.

²⁸⁷ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 52

²⁸⁸ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 51

²⁸⁹ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 49

²⁹⁰ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 79

²⁹¹ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 78

²⁹² Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 79

²⁹³ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 80

The laws were repealed by the end of the month in conjunction with the Prime Minister's resignation.²⁹⁴

In February 2014, after talks between Yanukovich and the opposition had apparently been making progress, there was another wave of violence in Kyiv resulting in several hundred more casualties.²⁹⁵ Many of the fatalities were caused by sniper fire aimed at the protesters.²⁹⁶ This new, unexpected wave of violence shocked the government into agreeing to a truce endorsed by the EU and approved by Russia on February 21.²⁹⁷ The following day, Yanukovich disappeared without explanation and the Ukrainian parliament voted to remove him from office.²⁹⁸ He resurfaced at a press conference in Russia on February 27, declaring that he was still the President of Ukraine.²⁹⁹ Despite this claim, he did not in fact return to power.

The sudden and unexpected disintegration of the Yanukovich administration was a major source of concern for Russia, as it represented a loss of Russian influence in the country and a risk that Ukraine would gravitate towards Europe.³⁰⁰ In order to preserve a foothold there, Russia utilized local separatism, one of the tools that it had successfully implemented in Georgia in 2008. According to the analysis of Menon and Rumer, Russia's goal was to create

permanent frozen conflicts that became Russian outposts for protecting and projecting Russian power and influence. Crimea, with a major Russian military base, majority Russian population, many retirees from the Soviet Armed Forces and the Russian Navy, and a history of difficult relations and separatist aspirations in the 1990s, was a prime

²⁹⁴ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 80

²⁹⁵ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 80

²⁹⁶ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 80

²⁹⁷ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 80

²⁹⁸ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 81

²⁹⁹ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 81

³⁰⁰ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 81

target for inflicting a wound that would undermine Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and create a pressure point to influence Ukraine's behavior.³⁰¹

Russia moved swiftly. Pro-Russian demonstrations began in the region on February 23, and Ukraine no longer controlled Crimea by March 1.³⁰² Following the annexation of Crimea, Russia continued to apply pressure to Ukraine by sustaining the frozen conflicts in Donetsk and Luhansk. While it was not willing to expend the resources and public support to annex these regions in the immediate aftermath of the Crimea referendum, it provided enough military aid and resources to maintain a stalemate in the region until its invasion in February 2022.³⁰³

On March 18, 2014, Putin gave a speech addressing the Russian annexation of Crimea following the events of the Crisis. The rather lengthy speech gives a wide variety of justifications for the annexation. There is no overt mention of Russian messianism or the Third Rome, but his rationalizations could fit the rhetorical framework of these mythologies. The majority of his points either promote the greatness of Russia and Orthodoxy or decry the evils of the West in some manner. The speech begins with an appeal to history and Orthodoxy:

Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptized. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. The graves of Russian soldiers whose bravery brought Crimea into the Russian empire are also in Crimea. This is also Sevastopol – a legendary city with an outstanding history, a fortress that serves as the birthplace of Russia's Black Sea Fleet. Crimea is Balaklava and Kerch, Malakhov

³⁰¹ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 83

³⁰² Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 83

³⁰³ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 86

Kurgan and Sapun Ridge. Each one of these places is dear to our hearts, symbolizing Russian military glory and outstanding valor.³⁰⁴

By opening the speech in this way, Putin likely hopes to stir up nationalist sentiment. The references to Russia's historical link to Ukraine could evoke one of the cyclical views of messianism mentioned above—the vision of a better future by undoing the interference of the West and returning to the past. He continues by explaining that Crimea's original attachment to Ukraine was illegitimate, to make the argument that Russia's annexation of Crimea following the Ukraine crisis was simply a matter of Russia (the victim of an unfortunate turn in world history) taking back what was rightfully hers. As he puts it, "It was only when Crimea ended up as part of a different country that Russia realized that it was not simply robbed, it was plundered."³⁰⁵ This quote shows contradiction in Putin's rhetoric, as he frequently refuses to admit that Ukraine is actually a country.

The next step in Putin's speech is aimed at vilifying the protesters on the Maidan, portraying their motivations as unequivocally negative:

However, those who stood behind the latest events in Ukraine had a different agenda: they were preparing yet another government takeover; they wanted to seize power and would stop short of nothing. They resorted to terror, murder and riots. Nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites executed this coup. They continue to set the tone in Ukraine to this day.³⁰⁶

This section of the speech could be intended to set the stage for the use of the myth of Russian messianism. Announcing the presence of these evil forces at work in Ukraine naturally leads to

³⁰⁴ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>

³⁰⁵ Putin, "Address," March 18, 2014

³⁰⁶ Putin, "Address," March 18, 2014

the need for Russia to act as savior to free the Ukrainian people (especially the Crimeans in this situation) from their clutches. Putin follows this setup with messianist rhetoric, portraying Russia as a savior:

Those who opposed the coup were immediately threatened with repression. Naturally, the first in line here was Crimea, the Russian-speaking Crimea. In view of this, the residents of Crimea and Sevastopol turned to Russia for help in defending their rights and lives, in preventing the events that were unfolding and are still underway in Kiev, Donetsk, Kharkov and other Ukrainian cities. Naturally, we could not leave this plea unheeded; we could not abandon Crimea and its residents in distress. This would have been betrayal on our part.³⁰⁷

The language in this section serves to evoke the savior idea and portray the annexation as Russia's honorable duty.

Putin's vilification does not end at the protesters, however. He also includes a rather lengthy section about the faults and untrustworthiness of the West:

However, what do we hear from our colleagues in Western Europe and North America? They say we are violating norms of international law. Firstly, it's a good thing that they at least remember that there exists such a thing as international law – better late than never...Our western partners, led by the United States of America, prefer not to be guided by international law in their practical policies, but by the rule of the gun. They have come to believe in their exclusivity and exceptionalism, that they can decide the destinies of the world, that only they can ever be right. They act as they please: here and

³⁰⁷ Putin, "Address," March 18, 2014

there, they use force against sovereign states, building coalitions based on the principle “If you are not with us, you are against us.”³⁰⁸

Not only does this tactic attempt to discredit the nations opposing the annexation by accusing them of hypocrisy, but it could also further accentuate the mythology of Russian messianism. It shows Russia as a nation apart, a nation who stands alone against the selfish actions of the West, reminiscent of the idea of *katechon*. It also pushes another overarching message of “imminent beleaguering by the West,” a message that Russia is in danger of hostile foreign encirclement.³⁰⁹ Also, the reference to the belief in American exceptionalism brings to mind the idea that Russian messianism is by nature at odds with American messianism, and that the two mythologies cannot peacefully coexist. Putin suggests that the West is intentionally trying to stand in the way of Russia’s mission:

We understand what is happening; we understand that these actions were aimed against Ukraine and Russia and against Eurasian integration.³¹⁰

The reference to Eurasian integration evokes Dugin’s Eurasian Third Rome. Even though Putin’s speech following the annexation of Crimea does not explicitly name messianism or the Third Rome, it uses rhetoric reminiscent of the myths.

Following the events of the 2014 Ukraine crisis, the Third Rome mythologizers examined above incorporated the annexation of Crimea into their own versions of the myth. Of the three who remain alive, Kholmogorov addressed it first and most explicitly. He published an article a week before the referendum took place, praising the annexation as a crucial victory that restored Russia to its former glory as the Third Rome:

³⁰⁸ Putin, “Address,” March 18, 2014

³⁰⁹ Bo Petersson, “Putin and the Russian Mythscape: Dilemmas of Charismatic Legitimacy,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 245

³¹⁰ Putin, “Address,” March 18, 2014

The land that was part of the Roman and Byzantine Empires is returning to Russia. Hence, Moscow is today legitimately the Third Rome. In their books, Byzantine writers called the Russians the ‘Scythotauri’, that is ‘Crimean Scythians’. And today we have become convinced that we are entitled to this name. Crimea is the cradle of our Christian faith. Crimea is the everlasting glory of the Black Sea Fleet and the defense of Sevastopol’. Crimea is the great deeds of the Hero-cities of Sevastopol’ and Kerch’, the deed of the martyrs of Adzhimushkai quarry.³¹¹

It is difficult to miss the similarities between this article and the rhetoric with which Putin opens his speech on the subject of Crimea. The main apparent difference between the two is that Kholmogorov overtly mentions the Third Rome, whereas Putin does not.

Dugin and Narochnitskaia were less direct in their associations between Crimea and the Third Rome, but both made public appearances discussing the Third Rome in the months following the annexation. There was a conference held in Moscow in the months following the annexation devoted solely to the topic of the Third Rome.³¹² Both Dugin and Narochnitskaia presented at this conference. While their presentations were not noticeably different from the rest of their work, the circumstances of the conference itself are immensely important and suggest the desire of the Russian government to create associations between Crimea and the Third Rome. The conference was part of an exhibition organized by the Ministry of Culture and the Moscow Patriarchy and curated by Archimandrite Tikhon (often rumored to be Putin’s spiritual

³¹¹ ‘В состав России возвращается земля, входившая в Римскую и Византийскую Империи. И стало быть Москва сегодня по праву – Третий Рим. Византийские писатели называли русских в своих книгах «тавроскифами», то есть «крымскими скифами». И сегодня мы убедились, что носим это название по праву. В Крыму – колыбель нашей христианской веры. В Крыму бессмертная слава Черноморского флота и обороны Севастополя. В Крыму – подвиг Городов Героев Севастополя и Керчи, подвиг мучеников Аджимушкайских каменоломен.’ Kholmogorov 2014, translated in Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 233

³¹² Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 235

advisor).³¹³ Furthermore, the exhibition was opened by President Putin and Patriarch Kirill. In Østbø's view, this "demonstrated with all clarity that it was intended to showcase the 'official' version of Russian history."³¹⁴ He sees it as an indication that the main effect the Euromaidan crisis and annexation of Crimea had on the Third Rome mythology is that it is now entering the mainstream.³¹⁵

The Izborsky Club, of which both Dugin and Narochnitskaia are members, was also vocal during the Ukraine Crisis and its immediate aftermath. The Club positioned itself as the main platform supporting the Donbas insurgency and forming the "red" interpretation of *Novorossia*.³¹⁶ In a July 2014 interview, Aleksandr Prokhanov, one of the founders of the Izborsky Club, bragged

All the current military elites of Novorossiia are authors of my newspapers, *Den'* and *Zavtra*. Aleksandr Boroday is my preferred author, he wrote crucial articles from the Chechen front. Igor Ivanovich Strelkov is also one of my authors. Pavel Gubarev, I call him often, he reads my newspapers, books, articles, we totally share the same viewpoints, he is a comrade. These people are like my younger brothers.³¹⁷

In June 2014 the Izborsky Club even agreed to advise in the creation of a constitution for the Donetsk Republic and provided them with a draft.³¹⁸

2019: Orthodox Schism in Ukraine

On 6 January 2019, an event with potentially massive repercussions rocked the Orthodox Christian world. Bartholomew, the Patriarch of Constantinople granted *tomos* to Epiphanius, the

³¹³ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 236

³¹⁴ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 236

³¹⁵ Østbø, *The New Third Rome*, 237

³¹⁶ Laruelle, "The Three Colors of Novorossiia" 58

³¹⁷ Quoted in Laruelle, "The Three Colors of Novorossiia," 58

³¹⁸ Laruelle, "The Three Colors of Novorossiia," 59

Metropolitan of Kyiv. This action granted autocephalous, or self-governing, status to the newly created Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU).³¹⁹ This highly controversial decision was purportedly made for the sake of unity, but it has proven to be quite divisive not only within the borders of Ukraine, but also in the Orthodox world as a whole. The potential for unity still exists, but there are several hurdles which must be overcome first in order to repair the relationships between churches in Ukraine, Russia, and Constantinople. It is unclear as of now if this schism in the Orthodox Church will be permanent, but if it is not, the road to mending it is a long and difficult one, especially as the lasting ramifications of the current war in Ukraine have yet to be seen.

Orthodox Christians in Ukraine are no strangers to discord within the Church. When the process of gaining autocephaly began in 2018, there were three separate active Orthodox Churches operating there: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church- Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP), the Ukrainian Orthodox Church- Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC). Of these churches, the only canonical church in the greater Orthodox world was the UOC-MP. The oldest of the three was the UAOC, which was founded in 1917 and essentially became a church in exile from 1930 until 1989, when the church was able to resume legal operation in Ukraine.³²⁰ The UOC-MP was created in 1990 by the Russian Orthodox Church as an independent church within the Moscow Patriarchate.³²¹ The UOC-KP was established in 1992 after the head of the UOC-MP at the time, Metropolitan Filaret, tried and failed to gain autocephaly for the Ukrainian church. The ROC defrocked him when he refused to leave his post, so Filaret founded the UOC-KP with the support of the

³¹⁹ Liik, Kadri, Momchil Metodiev, and Nicu Popescu. "Defender of the Faith? How Ukraine's Orthodox Split Threatens Russia," *European Council on Foreign Relations* (2019), 2

³²⁰ "Что нужно знать о расколе православной церкви на Украине," *Коммерсантъ*. October 19, 2018. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3485919>

³²¹ "Что нужно знать о расколе православной церкви на Украине," *Коммерсантъ*.

Ukrainian government. Patriarch Filaret was excommunicated and anathemized by the ROC in 1997.³²²

The Euromaidan Crisis of 2014 pushed the already rocky relationship between the UOC-KP and UOC-MP into outright hostility. It was a significant turning point in Ukrainian public opinion, and both churches became mired in the politics of the situation. The UOC-MP responded to the situation by doing its best to avoid any overt political statements concerning the conflict. Public opinion towards the UOC-MP was in rapid decline, and any statement it made was bound to be subject to intense political scrutiny due to its link to Moscow. A priest of the UOC-MP, Mykolai Kanylevych, stated in an interview that in its official documents the church:

purposely refrained from naming the essence of the current military conflict as either ‘Russian aggression’ or a ‘civil war’ because ‘there are different opinions about what is going on in East Ukraine and the church does not want to take sides, making itself an enemy for one group of citizens of our country or the other.’³²³

However, he made statements later in the same interview about opposition to the Ukrainian government in Donbas which strongly implied acceptance of the “civil war” view over the “Russian aggression” view.³²⁴

The UOC-KP, on the other hand, attempted to capitalize on the shift in the Ukrainian people’s view of the churches. Patriarch Filaret of the UOC-KP adopted a strategy of overwhelmingly aggressive hostility towards the UOC-MP, the ROC, and the Kremlin. He even

³²² “Что нужно знать о расколе православной церкви на Украине,” *Коммерсантъ*.

³²³ Denys Shestopalets, "The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, the State and the Russian-Ukrainian Crisis, 2014–2018," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 20, no. 1 (January 2019), 48

³²⁴ Shestopalets, "The Ukrainian Orthodox Church," 48

went so far as to draw comparisons between Vladimir Putin and Adolf Hitler and the policies of Nazi Germany in the 1930s.³²⁵ According to one view of the situation:

While strongly forefronting these representations of Russia to confirm the patriotic nature of his church in the eyes of the general public, Patriarch Filaret also extensively used them for undermining and discrediting his major competitor, the UOC-MP... While the official speakers of the UOC-MP discarded the necessity for the church to give any explicit evaluations of the political situation, in Patriarch Filaret's view, naming the aggressor publicly was the church's duty and part of its social function of 'upholding the truth.'³²⁶

In later interviews, Patriarch Filaret conceded that the "secessionists are indeed Ukrainian citizens who fight against Ukrainians;" however, he maintained that Russia played a key role in the movement through direct intervention in Ukrainian affairs, and that any claim that the conflict was a civil war was invalid.³²⁷ It is not surprising that President Poroshenko and the Verkhovna Rada requested *tomos* for the UOC-KP from the Ecumenical Patriarch, considering that UOC-KP was fully aligned ideologically with the Ukrainian government.³²⁸

On October 11, 2018, the Ecumenical Church of Constantinople canceled the 1686 act which had assigned the territory of Ukraine to the Moscow Patriarchate. As a direct result of this decision:

³²⁵ Shestopalets, "The Ukrainian Orthodox Church," 52

³²⁶ Shestopalets, "The Ukrainian Orthodox Church," 52

³²⁷ Shestopalets, "The Ukrainian Orthodox Church," 53

³²⁸ Shestopalets, "The Ukrainian Orthodox Church," 53

From a canonical point of view, this means that the UOC-MP no longer exists in Ukraine today. Now all bishops in Ukraine, according to this decision of the synod, are *de facto* bishops of the Ecumenical throne.³²⁹

This decision upset a balance of power that had existed in the Orthodox Church for 332 years, removing Ukraine from the hierarchical structure of the Russian Orthodox Church and placing it directly in that of the Ecumenical Church of Constantinople. Furthermore, it turned the religious situation in Ukraine on its head overnight. It did not create a new schism within Ukraine; rather, it reversed the status of churches in the country. Previously the UOC-MP had been canonical and the UOC-KP was considered to be non-canonical and in schism. After this action, the new OCU became canonical and the UOC-MP became schismatic. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew undertook this procedure following an official request in April 2018 by Ukrainian president Poroshenko, which was supported by the Ukrainian parliament and members of the UOC-KP and the UAOC.

Perhaps the most common argument in favor of the Constantinople Patriarchate's move to create the new autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine is the idea that for every one nation, there should be one Orthodox Church. Proponents of this way of thinking believe that in the long term this new church will bolster Ukrainian unity, national identity, and independence from Russia. Their hope is that eventually all parishes of the UOC-MP will leave and join the new OCU instead, and that eventually there will truly only be one Orthodox Church in Ukraine. It is understandable that this issue has such a hold in Ukrainian self-perceptions of national cultural identity, as the Orthodox Church has had a strong presence in Kyiv since the baptism of

³²⁹ 'С канонической точки зрения это означает, что сегодня в Украине УПЦ МП больше не существует. Все архиереи теперь в Украине согласно этому решению синода де-факто являются архиереями Вселенского престола.' my translation. Svyatoslav Khomenko, "Константинополь: Московского патриархата на Украине больше нет." BBC News Русская Служба, November 2, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-46067226>

Prince Vladimir in 988. Unity and independence within the church is therefore frequently viewed as a representation of unity and independence in the society overall.

In hindsight the granting of autocephaly to Ukraine seems inevitable. The situation prior to 2018, in which there were three competing Orthodox churches in the country was likely unsustainable. Perhaps the hostility that arose from the events of 2018-2019 could have been avoided if Moscow had granted autocephaly to Ukraine personally without giving the Ecumenical Patriarch the chance to intervene. After all, Patriarch Kirill “inherited that situation with the three churches, but for ten years he did nothing—just pretended that [they] were united, that the problem did not exist.”³³⁰ If the autocephaly had been granted by Moscow, much of the enmity could have been avoided, and the bond between the OCU and the ROC could very well have been strengthened significantly.

The aftermath of the schism does not seem to fully support the optimistic view mentioned above. Rather than increasing unity within Ukraine, the process seems to have contributed to strife within the nation and within the international whole of the Orthodox Church. During the lead-up to the schism, the UOC-MP “became the subject of unprecedented intimidation campaigns,” and “with the decisive move towards autocephaly in 2018, the pressure on the UOC further intensified.”³³¹ For instance, between 2015 and 2019 there were about seven hundred “negative and intimidating publications in various mass-media outlets” about the UOC.³³² From 2014 to 2018 there were about fifty instances of “illegal and violent seizures” of the UOC’s buildings.³³³

³³⁰ Liik, Metodiev, and Popescu, “Defender of the Faith,” 10

³³¹ Sergei Mudrov, “The Autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church: A New Dividing Line for Ukraine?” *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 27, no. 2-3 (September 2019), 272

³³² Mudrov, “The Autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church,” 272

³³³ Mudrov, “The Autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church,” 272

Furthermore, the events of 2018-2019 set a dangerous precedent regarding the separation of church and state. The issues related to this topic were readily apparent even from the outset. After all, the events were not precipitated by the clergy of the Ukrainian church; rather, they were initiated by Ukrainian President Poroshenko's request to Constantinople for autocephaly. According to S.A. Mudrov:

The 2018 path towards autocephaly was accompanied by confrontation and uncooperative language, while the reasoning in favour of autocephaly lacked specifically religious arguments. In fact, the reasoning has been overwhelmingly secular: a surprise to those who wished to see religious enterprise in an independent Church rather than the fulfilling of politicians' dreams.³³⁴

Poroshenko claimed that the issue of autocephaly was one related to "our national security and defense in the hybrid war, because the Kremlin considers the Russian Church as a key instrument to exert influence in Ukraine."³³⁵ He continued to emphasize, "The issue of Tomos and Autocephaly...is a matter of our independence,...our national security,...our statehood. This is a matter of the entire global geopolitics."³³⁶ It is abundantly clear that Poroshenko, one of the primary catalysts of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine's acquisition of *tomos*, was concerned with the geopolitical outcome and not the religious ramifications. One critical perspective suggests that this move did not even provide the independence Poroshenko was seeking. In this view, Ukraine merely replaced one source of foreign influence (Moscow) with another (Constantinople).

³³⁴ Mudrov, "The Autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church," 273

³³⁵ Petro Poroshenko, "President: Tomos Is, in Fact, Another Act of Declaration of Ukraine's Independence." *Religious Information Service of Ukraine*, October 12, 2018. https://risu.ua/en/president-tomos-is-in-fact-another-act-of-declaration-of-ukraine-s-independence_n93658

³³⁶ Poroshenko, "Tomos"

The newly emerging church was named “The Orthodox Church of Ukraine” instead of “The Ukrainian Orthodox Church” in order to emphasize the idea that the church is a part of the global organization of the Orthodox Church which happens to be located in Ukraine, and is not an extension of the state or national identity.³³⁷ However, the circumstances surrounding its creation do not support this somewhat unrealistic view. The Ecumenical Patriarch stated that the deciding factor in his act of granting *tomos* was that the Ukrainian Parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, voted in favor of supporting President Poroshenko’s request. Bartholomew took this vote as a sign that the Ukrainian people were finally united in their desire for a unified church unaffiliated with Moscow. Regardless of the Patriarch’s intentions, the Ukrainian President and Parliament are both state entities with a vested interest in the church. The circumstances are especially questionable, considering that the Ukrainian church itself had asked for autocephaly seven times prior to this, and had been denied on each occasion.³³⁸

The circumstances surrounding the Ecumenical Patriarch’s actions raise questions about whether he was truly focused solely on the welfare of the Orthodox Christians in Ukraine. Instead, he may have been heavily influenced by the increasingly poor relations between Constantinople and Moscow. A prime example of this deterioration is Patriarch Kirill’s refusal to attend the Pan-Orthodox Council in Crete in 2016.³³⁹ The planning for this council began in the 1960s, and Moscow did not announce its intention to boycott it until the last minute. The Russian Orthodox Church claimed it was not attending because not enough of the other churches would be present, but it never gave any clear reason beyond this. There is speculation that the decision was influenced by the secular authority of the Kremlin.³⁴⁰ Relations between Constantinople and

³³⁷ Khomenko, “Константинополь: Московского патриархата на Украине больше нет.”

³³⁸ Liik, Metodiev, and Popescu, “Defender of the Faith,” 12

³³⁹ Liik, Metodiev, and Popescu, “Defender of the Faith,” 12

³⁴⁰ Liik, Metodiev, and Popescu, “Defender of the Faith,” 13

Moscow were further strained because of growing anti-Westernism in Russia. The Moscow Patriarchate has portrayed the Ecumenical Patriarchate as a “Western institution” because of its international network, and President Putin has accused the United States and Constantinople of working together to support the Ukrainian government and the push for church independence.³⁴¹

In August of 2018, Kirill visited Bartholomew in Istanbul to dissuade him from granting autocephaly to Ukraine.³⁴² According to one report, the meeting “seemed more of an attempt to bulldoze Constantinople into submission than a charm offensive. It proved wholly counterproductive.”³⁴³ Interactions between the two patriarchs at this meeting were tense throughout. Kirill refused to partake in any drinks offered by his hosts; they “seem to have interpreted this as a fear of being poisoned and took offence.”³⁴⁴ The Ecumenical Patriarch took further offense to accusations that he had been bribed by President Poroshenko, stating “If you can’t prove it, you are doing the Mother Church an injustice and consequently will be cursed by Her.”³⁴⁵ Overall this meeting between patriarchates was unsuccessful. When the Ecumenical Patriarch carried out his plan to grant independence to the Ukrainian church in January 2019, the ROC responded by severing all ties with Constantinople.³⁴⁶

The Russian Orthodox Church has taken such a keen interest in the Ukrainian autocephaly issue for several reasons. At the time *tomos* was granted, the UOC-MP comprised about one-third of all the parishes under the umbrella of the ROC.³⁴⁷ And even though the UOC-MP was not initially included in the formation of the OCU, since the granting of autocephaly

³⁴¹ Liik, Metodiev, and Popescu, “Defender of the Faith,” 13

³⁴² Liik, Metodiev, and Popescu, “Defender of the Faith,” 13

³⁴³ Liik, Metodiev, and Popescu, “Defender of the Faith,” 13

³⁴⁴ Liik, Metodiev, and Popescu, “Defender of the Faith,” 13

³⁴⁵ Liik, Metodiev, and Popescu, “Defender of the Faith,” 13

³⁴⁶ Tony Wesolowsky, “Prayers Answered? Ukrainian Orthodox Church Marks One Year of Independence from Moscow,” *RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty*, 2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukrainian-orthodox-church-marks-one-year-of-independence-from-moscow/30393633.html>

³⁴⁷ Liik, Metodiev, and Popescu, “Defender of the Faith,” 20

many parishes of the UOC-MP have chosen to leave the ROC and join the OCU. In the first year of autocephaly, more than 500 parishes switched from the UOC-MP to the OCU.³⁴⁸ A 2021 study determined that the UOC-MP's share of Orthodox Christians in Ukraine had dropped from 23.6 percent to 12 percent, while the OCU's had increased from 13.2 percent to 24.4 percent.³⁴⁹ To have such a large appendage severed after three centuries is no small matter, and the fact that Constantinople undertook this action without first consulting the ROC rubbed salt in the wound. The aftermath of the situation will undoubtedly involve a worsening of Moscow's relations with both Constantinople and Kyiv.

The Russian Orthodox Church's dismay at losing parishioners in Ukraine runs deeper than the mere numbers, however. The UOC-MP has been a major conduit for Kirill to promote *Russkii Mir*, one of his most commonly used faces of the Russian messianism mythology:

The UOC(MP) has thus been often seen as a well-spring of Russian cultural influence in Ukraine, and is envisaged in having a significant part to play in promoting the sense of the shared spiritual heritage of Holy Rus' and belonging to the Russian World.³⁵⁰

The blow to the legitimacy of the UOC-MP in conjunction with the loss of churches which joined the new OCU represented damage to Russia's main avenue of promoting its political myths in Ukraine. Granted, the effectiveness of this approach was questionable even before the granting of *tomos* to the OCU; fresh memories of the 2014 crisis, the annexation of Crimea, and the frozen conflict in Donbas

³⁴⁸ Wesolowsky "Prayers Answered?"

³⁴⁹ "Specifics of Religious and Church Self-Determination of Citizens of Ukraine: Trends 2000-2021," *Razumkov Centre*, 2021

³⁵⁰ Hudson, "The Ukrainian Orthodox Church," 1358

amplified patriotic and nationalistic voices decrying the Moscow Patriarchate as an illegitimate imperial outpost whose lingering presence as a societal opinion-former and spiritual hub is inappropriate to an independent Ukraine.³⁵¹

Finally, the formation of the autocephalous OCU constitutes a major attack on the messianic myth itself, as its existence can be seen as “dissonant with the concord (*soglasie*) between fraternal peoples supposedly integral to the notion of the Russian World.”³⁵²

The granting of autocephaly to Ukraine in 2019 certainly has the potential to bring more unity to the nation eventually, but due to the circumstances under which it took place, it is likely to bring more conflict for the foreseeable future. Instead of resolving the religious dispute that has been simmering in Ukraine for decades, *tomos* simply brought it to the forefront. The current war in Ukraine will likely strain relations between the churches even further, but it is too early to tell what the war’s long-term effects will be. Over time, if the current trend of parishes leaving the UOC-MP to join the OCU continues, the percentage held by the OCU may reach a great enough number to create a certain level of unity in practicality. It is unlikely that the UOC-MP will ever disappear completely, though, without agreements being reached at a Pan-Orthodox level. Until some sort of resolution is reached, this schism will continue to have a markedly negative impact on foreign relations between Ukraine and Russia.

2022: Russian Invasion of Ukraine

In February 2022, Russia escalated the frozen conflict in Donbas into a full-scale military invasion.³⁵³ On February 22, Russian troops were moved into Donetsk and Luhansk under the guise of a “peacekeeping” operation, and on February 24 Putin announced “the beginning of a

³⁵¹ Hudson, “The Ukrainian Orthodox Church,” 1360

³⁵² Hudson, “The Ukrainian Orthodox Church,” 1360

³⁵³ “Conflict in Ukraine,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 28, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine>

full-scale land, sea, and air invasion of Ukraine targeting Ukrainian military assets and cities across the country.”³⁵⁴ At the time of writing, the war is still ongoing and has caused over 900 civilian deaths and millions of refugees.³⁵⁵ It is too soon to fully analyze the war, but it has direct relevance to this paper, as both Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill have justified it with these political mythologies. Putin delivered speeches on February 21 and 24, on the days preceding the “peacekeeping” movement to Donbas and the invasion itself, respectively. In each of these speeches, Putin echoes much of the rhetoric seen in Medvedev’s August 2008 speech and Putin’s own March 2014 speech.³⁵⁶ Patriarch Kirill has expressed his full support of the war in Ukraine, similarly using these political myths as justification in his sermons.³⁵⁷

Putin begins the first of these speeches with allusions to the messianic idea of *Russkii Mir*, stating:

I would like to emphasize again that Ukraine is not just a neighboring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space. These are our comrades, those dearest to us – not only colleagues, friends and people who once served together, but also relatives, people bound by blood, by family ties. Since time immemorial, the people living in the south-west of what has historically been Russian land have called themselves Russians and Orthodox Christians.³⁵⁸

He continues with a lengthy discussion of Soviet history, suggesting that the formation of Ukraine’s territory was illegitimate and it should never have been separated from Russia,

³⁵⁴ “Conflict in Ukraine”

³⁵⁵ “Conflict in Ukraine”

³⁵⁶ Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” *Official Website of the President of Russia*, February 21, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>, Vladimir Putin, “Transcript: Vladimir Putin’s Televised Address on Ukraine,” *Bloomberg*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-24/full-transcript-vladimir-putin-s-televised-address-to-russia-on-ukraine-feb-24>

³⁵⁷ Jeanne Whalen, “Russian Orthodox leader backs war in Ukraine, divides faith,” *The Washington Post*, April 18, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/18/russian-orthodox-church-ukraine-war/>

³⁵⁸ Putin, “Address by the President,” February 21, 2022

echoing his sentiments from his speech following the annexation of Crimea.³⁵⁹ Once again, he refers to Ukraine's independence in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse as "injustices, lies and outright pillage of Russia."³⁶⁰ In fact, almost the entire first half of this speech is comprised of arguments that Ukraine has never been truly, legitimately independent from Russia; this is especially conspicuous considering the alleged purpose is to introduce a "peacekeeping" operation. He also echoes his accusations in the 2014 speech that:

Ukrainian society was faced with the rise of far-right nationalism, which rapidly developed into aggressive Russophobia and neo-Nazism. This resulted in the participation of Ukrainian nationalist and neo-Nazis in the terrorist groups in the North Caucasus and the increasingly loud territorial claims to Russia...The nationalists who have seized power have unleashed a persecution, a real terror campaign against those who opposed their anti-constitutional actions.³⁶¹

This section serves the same rhetorical purpose it did in the previous speech: to establish an adversary that Russia must overcome to act as savior for the people of Ukraine. In this vein, Putin also paints the picture of the persecution of Russians:

The policy to root out the Russian language and culture and promote assimilation carries on. The Verkhovna Rada has generated a steady flow of discriminatory bills...People who identify as Russians and want to preserve their identity, language and culture are getting the signal that they are not wanted in Ukraine...Kiev continues to prepare the destruction of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate...The

³⁵⁹ Putin, "Address by the President," February 21, 2022

³⁶⁰ Putin, "Address by the President," February 21, 2022

³⁶¹ Putin, "Address by the President," February 21, 2022

Ukrainian authorities have cynically turned the tragedy of the schism into an instrument of state policy.³⁶²

His mention of the schism is intriguing, especially in the light of the multitude of accusations mentioned above of Russia attempting to use the UOC-MP as a political tool to push the ideas of *Russkii Mir*. He spends the next section of his speech discussing the rapid foreign encroachment carried out by NATO. He concludes the speech with a reiteration of the evils of the west:

The so-called civilized world, which our Western colleagues proclaimed themselves the only representatives of, prefers not to see this, as if the horror and genocide, which almost 4 million people are facing, do not exist. But they do exist and only because these people did not agree with the West-supported coup in Ukraine in 2014 and opposed the transition towards the Neanderthal and aggressive nationalism and neo-Nazism which have been elevated in Ukraine to the rank of national policy. They are fighting for their elementary right to live on their own land, to speak their own language, and to preserve their culture and traditions.³⁶³

His claims of genocide here are reminiscent of Medvedev's 2008 speech justifying Russia's involvement in Georgia. The ideas of Russian messianism are on display here, with the juxtaposition of a undeniably evil threat and the defenseless civilians who merely wish to protect their right to Russianness. He concludes with the official recognition of the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk, the action that Aleksandr Dugin had been pushing for so vehemently in the interest of rebuilding the Third Rome.³⁶⁴

In Putin's more concise speech of February 24 announcing Russia's intent to invade Ukraine (which he refers to simply as a "special military operation"), he once again spends a

³⁶² Putin, "Address by the President," February 21, 2022

³⁶³ Putin, "Address by the President," February 21, 2022

³⁶⁴ Putin, "Address by the President," February 21, 2022

sizeable section discussing the impending dangers of NATO and the United States' "Empire of Lies."³⁶⁵ In this one, though, he makes even stronger comparisons of the West and the current Ukrainian government to Nazi Germany in World War II. As such, he suggests that the invasion is not optional:

The [Soviet Union] was not prepared to counter the invasion by Nazi Germany, which attacked our Motherland on June 22, 1941, without declaring war. The country stopped the enemy and went on to defeat it, but this came at a tremendous cost. The attempt to appease the aggressor ahead of the Great Patriotic War proved to be a mistake which came at a high cost for our people. In the first months after the hostilities broke out, we lost vast territories of strategic importance, as well as millions of lives. We will not make this mistake the second time. We have no right to do so.³⁶⁶

This call for immediate action against the enemy to save countless Russian lives is once again a use of Russian messianism as justification. Furthermore, the direct comparison of the West to Nazi Germany evokes Kholmogorov's assertion that the Third Reich was simply a rare occasion in which the West showed its true colors, a foundational aspect of his version of the Third Rome myth. Putin makes a point to mention that:

for eight years, for eight endless years we have been doing everything possible to settle the situation by peaceful political means... They did not leave us any other option for defending Russia and our people, other than the one we are forced to use today. In these circumstances we have to take bold and immediate action. The people's republics of Donbass have asked for help.³⁶⁷

³⁶⁵ Putin, "Televised address on Ukraine," February 24, 2022

³⁶⁶ Putin, "Televised address on Ukraine," February 24, 2022

³⁶⁷ Putin, "Televised address on Ukraine," February 24, 2022

He then once again uses the term “genocide” to describe the situation in Donetsk and Luhansk.³⁶⁸ Both of these sentiments again mirror Medvedev’s speech about South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which emphasized Russia’s great restraint, and eventual action only to act as savior and stop the “genocide” there.

Patriarch Kirill has made the Russian Orthodox Church’s support of Russia’s war in Ukraine quite public in the months since the initial invasion. Like Putin, he has been promoting the *Russkii Mir* doctrine of Russian messianism, “warning about the ‘external enemies’ attempting to divide the ‘united people’ of Russia and Ukraine.”³⁶⁹ For instance, in the days following the invasion, Kirill said, “God forbid that the current political situation in fraternal Ukraine, which is close to us, should be aimed at ensuring that the evil forces that have always fought against the unity of Rus and the Russian Church gain the upper hand.”³⁷⁰ In a sermon on April 3, Kirill said:

Most of the countries in the world are now under the colossal influence of one force, which today, unfortunately, opposes the force of our people...All of our people today must wake up, wake up, understand that a special time has come, on which the historical fate of our people may depend.³⁷¹

This statement is reminiscent of the eschatological portions of many versions of the Third Rome myth, especially Tsymburskii’s theory of NATO and the US as the Fourth Rome. It also brings to mind the bipolarity of Dugin’s interpretation of the myth, in which the Western, Carthaginian pole is in direct opposition to the Eurasian, Roman pole. In addition to his speeches and sermons

³⁶⁸ Putin, “Televised address on Ukraine,” February 24, 2022

³⁶⁹ Whalen, “Russian Orthodox leader backs war in Ukraine”

³⁷⁰ Kirill, “Слово Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла в Неделю о Страшном Суде после Литургии в Храме Христа Спасителя,” *Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchate*, February 27, 2022, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5904390.html>

³⁷¹ Kirill, cited in Whalen, “Russian Orthodox leader backs war in Ukraine”

supporting the war effort, he has been publicly blessing the generals leading the war efforts in Ukraine.³⁷² According to Whalen, this public support of the war has been causing the schisms in the Orthodox Church to deepen, with an open appeal by more than 320 priests in Ukraine accusing Kirill of heresy and asking for a tribunal to depose him.³⁷³ One of the charges specifically levied against Kirill in this appeal was his role in the creation of the *Russkii Mir* doctrine. Some of the priests involved in the appeal have stated their hope that Kirill will even be excommunicated and declared anathema, despite its unlikelihood.³⁷⁴

V. CONCLUSION

In recent years the Russian government, both under the leadership of Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev, and the Russian Orthodox Church have used the political myths of Russian messianism and the Third Rome to justify their actions on the world stage. They use these tools directly in speeches and official documents, and indirectly through associations with extremely vocal proponents of these ideas. These myths can be employed in speeches even when they are not specifically mentioned; often, their main themes and ideas are simply included matter-of-factly, surrounded by intense and frequently violent language. Generally speaking, these myths are used pragmatically, as the Russian government under Putin has no specific ideology that it follows. There is a vast landscape of Russian conservative thinkers with varying degrees of influence in the Kremlin and the Church who contribute to the pool of political myths Putin and Kirill can draw from as they see fit.

The use of these political myths is apparent in the events of the Russo-Georgia War of 2008, the Ukraine crisis and annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church

³⁷² Whalen, “Russian Orthodox leader backs war in Ukraine”

³⁷³ Whalen, “Russian Orthodox leader backs war in Ukraine”

³⁷⁴ Whalen, “Russian Orthodox leader backs war in Ukraine”

schism of 2019, and the ongoing war in Ukraine. In a way the mythologies can be viewed as a thread tying these globally significant events together. Russia's instigation of a frozen conflict in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and its complementary messianic narrative justifying its lingering presence in the region are arguably a blueprint for its frozen conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk and accompanying messianic rhetoric. The ROC's policy towards the churches in South Ossetia and Abkhazia can be seen as an attempt to avoid the very type of intervention from the Ecumenical Patriarchate that it faced in Ukraine in 2019. The current war in Ukraine reverberates with echoes of all three of these events, seen through the ways in which these political myths have adapted over the past two decades, with frequent references to the events spread throughout Putin's recent speeches and Kirill's recent sermons.

The Third Rome and Russian messianism are important tools to understand when studying the operation of contemporary Russian statecraft, and they are only becoming more relevant. They seem to be appearing with increasing frequency, in line with the progressively conservative stance the Kremlin has been taking since Putin's return to the presidency in 2012. The Third Rome has been becoming more mainstream than ever, with proponents like Aleksandr Dugin making appearances to discuss it on national television. The relationship between the Kremlin and the ROC seems to be tightening as well, adding a second layer of legitimacy to the propagation of these myths. Their close-knit relationship has been instrumental in pushing Patriarch Kirill's *Russkii Mir* version of Russian messianism as one of the common justifications of the current war in Ukraine.

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