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A “God-Bearing Nation”: Religious Aspects of the Russian Concept of State Authority

Abstract: In the context of Russia’s confrontation with the West, especially after the beginning of the war against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, one can be surprised by the extent of support that President Putin enjoys in the Russian society. The author hypothesizes that this phenomenon cannot be explained with the help of political factors only. The article aims to demonstrate the ideological significance of Russian Orthodox tradition in the process of forming and reaffirming the Russian concept of state authority. After outlining the main issues related to the ideological legitimization of authority in Russia, two religiously rooted concepts are discussed: the “Third Rome” and “God-bearing.” These concepts also explain why the Russian Orthodox Church has almost unequivocally supported Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine.

Keywords: Russia, Russian Orthodoxy, religious historiosophy, Third Rome, anti-occidentalism

Introduction

Numerous cultural and historical factors contributed to shaping modern Russian concepts of state authority. They distinguish Russia and not allow it to be assigned either to the European or Asian cultural space. Both at the time of the Russian intellectual renaissance of the 19th century, related to the Slavophile movement,¹ as well as in the modern neo-imperial thought² this cultural “unclassifiability” of Russia was considered a proof that the Rus’ (from the Kyivan Rus’ until the Russian Empire, and through the Soviet period until

¹ Zen’kovskiy, *Istoriya*, I, 203–204.

² Dugin, *The Rise*, 48–50.

the contemporary Russian Federation) created a separate, independent civilization. This civilization includes, among many sociocultural elements, the way in which a society is perceived, the relation of an individual and the state as well as the interpretation of sources and aims of state authority. Nowadays, at the time of increasing political and cultural confrontation between Russia and the West, the issue of Russian interpretation of political values and aims deserves our careful consideration.

In his article, written from a historic-doctrinal perspective, Philip Pomper shows the main elements of the Russian tradition of state power. He rightly points out that

The Russian tradition of state power prominently displayed these features: 1) a combination of customary and personal exercise of power that worked behind façades of law codes, institutions, and constitutions; 2) relatively long-term power projects that had the imprimatur of a dynasty and/or an ideologically inspired cause, but were also the personal projects of autocrats and oligarchs; 3) periodic “revolutions from above” and reactions to them; 4) religious or secular ideologies that gave the Russian (or Soviet) state and people both a unique identity and a sacred or historic mission; 5) elite monopolies of the most valuable assets at any given historical moment, especially of skilled military and administrative personnel crucial for the power projects; of commodities valuable in foreign trade; and of various forms of tribute and tax revenues; 6) the idea of service, whether to the Tsar, state, people, or Party and its power project.³

Despite significant changes that affected the Rus' and Russia over the centuries, especially in the structural and political dimension, the interpretation of authority, which is characteristic of Russia and distinguishes it from European states, forms the ideological *continuum*. Moreover, the extent of structural and political changes (both as a result of internal processes – such as the Time of Troubles, the reforms of Peter the Great, the February and October Revolutions

³ Pomper, “The Evolution,” 61.

of 1917, or the fall of the USSR – as well as external ones) and the fact of transferring the center of the Rus' statehood from Kyiv to Moscow allows for a just question regarding the unchanging character of the main elements of the Rus' and Russian interpretation of authority over the centuries. Pomper himself raises this question and tries to provide some answers by referring to Edward Keenan's theory.⁴ According to Keenan, what we are dealing with in Russia is the "replication of the cultural equivalent of genes."⁵ Such an approach, however, which explains the replication of certain political positions via the automatic mechanism similar to inheriting genes, ignores the significance of religion in its sociopolitical aspect, which is fundamental for the Rus' and Russian state ideology. In Pomper's opinion, "Keenan's notion of a self-regenerating political culture perhaps expresses a *deformation professionnelle* common to Slavacists, who believed in a 'Russian soul' or some other unchanging Slavic essence."⁶

It is worth noting, in the context, that the Rus' understood in a broad sense represents only that part of all Slavic nations which is included in the group of Eastern Slavs due to its linguistic and cultural proximity. The Rus' worldview is not, by any means, shared by other Slavic groups, shaped in a different political and religious tradition. This is the reason why the author hypothesizes in the present article that among all the elements of Rus' tradition of authority, which Pomper mentions, religion is of primary importance. We refer to specific Rus' and Russian Orthodoxy here, which is distinctly different from Byzantine Orthodox traditions.

While supporting the argument stating that Orthodoxy in its political and social layer underwent a transformation in Russia under the Tatar influence, and as such it shaped the Russian social system including its concept of authority, the present article complements this hypothesis with an additional aspect. Even nowadays, in the reality of Russia being a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state, in the conditions of formal separation of State and Church, Russian

⁴ Pomper, "The Evolution," 64.

⁵ Keenan, "Muscovite," 119.

⁶ Pomper, "The Evolution," 66.

Orthodoxy still gives the ideological foundation for forming such a concept of political authority which distinctly separates Russia from the Western countries.

1. Toward a Re-legitimization of Political Authority in Russia

In March 2018 much stir was created in the Russian public sphere by the documentary “The World Order 2018” (*Miroporyadok 2018*). It is based on interviews with President Putin conducted by a propagandist Vladimir Solov’yev. Putin, while presenting his vision of international position of the Russian Federation and especially its relation to the countries of the West under the conditions of increasing conflict, also emphasizes the cultural and sociopolitical uniqueness of Russia. The foundations of this uniqueness are social and cultural conservatism as well as conviction that the mission bestowed on Russia is special. President Putin evokes the metaphysical understanding of Russia, which is based on the mystical and religious roots of its sociopolitical system. He even says that Russia’s uniqueness proves that it is ruled by God and without God’s actions Russia’s existence cannot be comprehended.⁷ Probably, this opinion should not be overestimated nor understood seriously. However, for modern observers of Russian political life, who represent the conservative wing of Putin’s supporters, what can be seen in the statements of the president of the Russian Federation is not his personal religious belief but, most of all, historiosophic conviction according to which it is the religious roots that are responsible for the stability and identity of Russian social and political structure.⁸ These roots, which have been conceptualized in two ideas – the “Third Rome” and “God-bearing” (*bogonosnost*) – are supposed to give Russia, both in contemporary political reality as well as in the course of Russia’s

⁷ Putin quotes the continuously repeated in Russian religious and political thought opinion of Burkhard Christoph von Münnich (1683–1767; known in Russia as Khristofor Antonovich Minikh), who was German and a field marshal in the Russian army.

⁸ Kobyakov *et al.*, *Russkaya*, 152–156.

history, the advantage over other countries. The policy of President Putin, aiming to strengthen Russia as well as to show and intensify its uniqueness, can be perceived in this approach as the synthesis of these two Russian historiosophic concepts. At the same time, however, both concepts are not of equal political significance.

1.1. Main Features of the Evolution of Russian Political Discourse in Putin's Era

While the sacral legitimization of authority has had a long tradition in Russia, it seemed at the beginning of the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union that it would not play a significant role in Russian political life. Notably, the failure of communist ideology, which connected the origins of Soviet authority with the worker-peasant alliance, allowed people to assume that the Russian Federation, which was built on the ruins of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, could accept Western standards of political life. Such were also the assumptions of numerous Western observers.⁹ In 1993 the conflict between President Yeltsin and the Supreme Soviet,¹⁰ which was eventually resolved by the army storming the building of Parliament, intensified the doubts as to Russia's ability to employ Western patterns of political authority. Nonetheless, both in Yeltsin's era as well as in the first years of Vladimir Putin's presidency, it was commonly accepted that Russia, with all its uniqueness, could become a part of the Western world in which the legitimization of authority comes from the mandate being the result of free and democratic elections.¹¹

It is significant that from the present perspective, marked by Russia's conflict with the Western world, Russian far-right circles

⁹ Hanson, "The Uncertain," 67–81; Goode, "Redefining," 1055–1075.

¹⁰ The Supreme Soviet formed the remaining from the Soviet political system parliament (standing legislature) of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and later the Russian Federation. Only after the constitutional reform was it replaced by a new Parliament combined of the lower house – the State Duma and the upper house – the Federation Council.

¹¹ Makarkin – Oppenheimer, "The Russian," 1459–1474; Mileski, "Identifying," 177–187.

are willing to negatively assess numerous early decisions of Vladimir Putin and Dmitriy Medvedev. Putin's early declarations, when he promised to make Russia a modern Western-modeled democracy or when he included Russia in the European cultural circle,¹² are being criticized.¹³ Similar, or perhaps even stronger, criticism was directed toward the actions of Dmitriy Medvedev, especially at the time of his presidency (2008–2012). Medvedev's declarations regarding the necessity to comprehensively modernize Russia were considered unacceptable from the perspective of Russia's political interest and, what is more, its cultural identity and mission that it has to fulfill in the world. Medvedev was not forgiven either for his actual support of the NATO intervention against Libya, which was under the rule of Muammar Gaddafi an ally of the USSR and Russia.¹⁴

An important change in the rhetoric of Russian political elites could be seen already during the second term of Putin's presidency. The turning point was the speech Putin delivered in Munich on 10 February 2007 (the "Munich speech") during the Munich Security Conference. President Putin openly and harshly criticized the unipolar character of contemporary world politics and the hegemony of the West in the international arena.¹⁵ His declarations were put into practice with the outbreak of the Georgian war (2008), whose consequence was the separation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia and the creation of, theoretically, independent states.¹⁶ These actions are an element of Russia's policy of destabilization of the Caucasus region.¹⁷ This Russian move was noticed primarily in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe, the evidence of which was the speech of the President of Poland Lech Kaczyński delivered in Tbilisi on 12 August 2008, under the conditions of a real danger posed by the Russian army.¹⁸ The Russo-Georgian war as well as

¹² Chadayev, *Putin*, 114.

¹³ Dugin, *Geopolitika*, 495–496; Evans, "Putin's Legacy," 901–902.

¹⁴ Dugin, *Geopolitika*, 480; Katz, "Can Russian-US Relations," 133.

¹⁵ Putin, "Speech"; Monaghan, "An enemy," 717–733.

¹⁶ Dugin, "After Tskhinvali," 61–70; Welch Larson – Shevchenko, "Russia says no," 269–279.

¹⁷ Matsaberidze, "Russia vs. EU/US," 77–86.

¹⁸ Zajaczkowski, "Trading," 168–234.

Russia's actions toward Ukraine after the "Revolution of dignity" in 2013–2014, including the annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, and finally the open military aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 can be considered the continuation of the direction that was set in the "Munich speech."¹⁹

1.2. The Ideological Background of the Russian Authority Structures

In the recent statements of President Putin as well as other representatives of Russian political elites, the aim to radically separate themselves from the Western world is a dominant sentiment, be it in the sociocultural, political, or axiological dimension. Such aspirations have to necessarily lead to the reinterpretation of the very foundations of political authority in Russia.²⁰ While Russia remains, in government declarations, a democratic country, it cannot be expected to follow a Western pattern of democracy. This is the reason why the legitimization of authorities, although they are still on many levels chosen during the process of general election, cannot appeal to Western standards. The tightening of the policy toward the West is accompanied by the transformation in the very interpretation of authority in Russia. This harsh rhetoric of Russian authorities was accompanied by a systemic and ideological transformation. Strong anti-Occidentalism, which resembles and even surpasses the propaganda employed in the Soviet Union, is supplemented with new accents regarding the authority. The systemic changes that took place during the presidency of Vladimir Putin are also accompanied by ideological changes. The rapid centralization of the state and dismantling of federal state structures²¹ cannot be explained without this ideological background.

Formally, Russia remains a federal state which combines various structural entities (oblasts, krais, republics, autonomous districts, federal cities). The rule behind this variety, which is the ethnic criterion, has remained unchanged since the time of the Russian

¹⁹ Chadayev, *Putin*, 41.

²⁰ Umland, "Russia's new," 19–40; Laqueur, "After the Fall," 71–77.

²¹ Sakwa, "Putin's Leadership," 887–888; Spina, "Decentralisation," 450.

Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. Nonetheless, the core of this structure, which consisted of the wide autonomy of the federal entities, has been abolished.²² Contrary to what some observers state,²³ one cannot claim that the centralization of authority and the gradual dismantling of the federal state structure are a sign of developing dictatorship. Such an approach can be a result of misunderstanding Russia, its state tradition, and an attempt to make it fit into Western patterns of political life. The centralization of authority was characteristic of the greatest periods in Russia's history – both in terms of its importance in the international arena as well as internal order. A high voter turnout in the presidential election in 2018 and an excellent result of Vladimir Putin also indicate the acceptance of the Russians for the changes in the way Russia is governed. Moreover, the Russians seem to expect a more centralized state.²⁴ This attitude stems from their limited trust in local authorities so typical for Russian society. There is a saying still used in Russia, which dates back to the Tsarist period: “The tsar is good – the boyars are bad” (*Tsar khoroshiy, boyare plokhiye*).²⁵

Abandoning the tendencies of the 1990s to make Russia more democratic and Western does not mean the return to the times of the Soviet Union by any means. While the anti-Western ideology of Russian authorities can, to an extent, resemble Soviet ideology, these similarities are superficial. President Putin and his administration base the anti-Western and isolationist course of their contemporary policy on Russian imperial ideology.

2. The “Third Rome”: Russian Uniqueness and Sense of Mission

The development of the Russian concept of state authority has been relatively frequently linked in the literature, although

²² Oliker *et al.*, *Russian*, 15–16; Reuter, “The Politics,” 306.

²³ Gel'man, “Introduction,” 423–424.

²⁴ Alexseev – Hale, “Rallying,” 192–220.

²⁵ Starodubtsev, “Legitimnost',” 101.

mainly Western,²⁶ to the sanctioning of this authority, and even its sacralization by the Orthodox Church. It was to confer the Russian leaders the mandate to rule in an absolute way that was not subject to any social control, even by the Church. The essence of such understanding of authority would be the idea of Moscow—the Third Rome²⁷ and related distinctly Russian approach to the rule of the *symphonia* between State and Church.²⁸ It would lead to the state assuming the full control over all aspects of social life.

2.1. The Roots of the Third Rome Concept

The roots of the Third Rome concept can be found in the fall of Constantinople,²⁹ in particular, in the conviction prevalent in certain Greek circles that this fall was not as much the result of the inevitable defeat in the war with the Ottoman Empire, but rather it was caused by abandoning Orthodox faith due to political and religious dialogue with Rome and Catholicism. Most of all, this fall was to be a punishment for the Union of Florence in 1439. Following the First Rome, which was supposed to immerse in “heresy” and abandon Orthodoxy, and the Second Rome,³⁰ which fell to the Turks and was punished for the union with Rome, Moscow was supposed to be the Third and Last Rome – the center of the conservative authority enjoying God’s full blessing and fulfilling God’s mission until the end of the world and the Last Judgement.³¹ Such an approach, although in a secularized manner, is currently supported by the representatives of Russian neo-imperial movement such as Aleksandr Dugin.³² After setting aside strictly religious aspects, this approach serves to support these anti-Western ideas according to which Russia’s mission in the world

²⁶ Lanne, “The Three Romes,” 10–11.

²⁷ Dugin, *Eurasian Mission*, 32.

²⁸ Knox, “The Symphonic Ideal,” 575–596; Trepanier, *Political Symbols*, 18.

²⁹ Hunter, *God on Our Side*, 102.

³⁰ Strictly speaking, in Christian terminology, Constantinople was called not the “Second” but the “New Rome.” Andrusiewicz, *Trzeci Rzym*, 18.

³¹ Zen’kovskiy, *Istoriya*, I, 51–55; Fagan, *Believing in Russia*; Knox, *Russian Society*, 41–42.

³² Pain, “The imperial syndrome,” 46–74.

is supposed to be accomplished through the confrontation with the West.³³

The actual significance of the Third Rome concept, for contemporary Russia in particular, raises serious doubts. The roots of the idea of the transfer of the Byzantine Empire (*translatio imperii*) onto the Duchy of Moscow should be considered political rather than religious. At the foundations of the events that were to legitimize the leaders of Moscow as the heirs of the Byzantine Empire, there is no evident religious, or even messianic, idea or will to oppose the “fallen” West. It can be further confirmed by the fact that in symbolic events, which were aimed to emphasize the relationship between Moscow and Constantinople, the polemical anti-Occidental aspect was not highlighted despite it being present. Anton Kartashev rightly points out that this direction of policy was also chosen by Ivan III (1462–1505). The symbol of this policy was the marriage to Zoe Palaiologina, a cousin of the last Byzantine emperor. This symbolic gesture was politically oriented.³⁴ This marriage indicated the bond between Moscow and Constantinople, existing since the adoption of Christianity by the Kyivan Prince Vladimir the Great and expressed in adopting Byzantine patterns of the sociopolitical organization.³⁵ According to Anthony D. Smith, Ivan III “sought to legitimise his primacy in the Russian-speaking territories by adopting some of the Byzantine ritual and regalia, and by publicising the Russian realm as the sole remaining bastion of Christian Orthodoxy.”³⁶ However, John Meyendorff,³⁷ referring to Nikolay M. Karamzin, points out that marriage to a cousin of the last emperor was by any means a formal expression of *translatio imperii*. It did not have any formal or legal mandate and, therefore, could not have any such consequences. Moreover, contrary to the subsequent anti-Occidental

³³ Dugin, *The Fourth Political Theory*, 30; Richters, *The Post-Soviet*, 44.

³⁴ Trepanier, *Political Symbols*, 38–39; Meyendorff, *Rim-Konstantinopol-Moskva*, 162; Garrard – Garrard, *Russian Orthodoxy*, 166–167.

³⁵ Trepanier, *Political Symbols*, 25–26; Hunter, *God on Our Side*, 101.

³⁶ Smith, “Hierarchy,” 26.

³⁷ Meyendorff, *Rim-Konstantinopol-Moskva*, 175.

interpretations of this event, it also opened the Duchy of Moscow onto Western Europe.³⁸

One cannot ignore yet another fact connected with the political and religious legitimacy of the Duchy of Moscow. Moscow did not exist yet at the time of adopting Christianity in the Rus' territory. From the 12th century (accepting 1147 as the year of establishing Moscow by Prince Yuriy Dolgorukiy) onwards it did not play any greater part in politically divided Rus' lands. Over the centuries, until the Tatar invasion, the center of the Rus' cultural, political, and religious life was Kyiv. Emphasizing the relationship with Constantinople was also important as far as the policy of Moscow leaders was concerned. This policy aimed to acknowledge Moscow as the capital of the Rus' lands and the Duchy of Moscow as the rightful heir of the Kyivan Rus'.³⁹

The Third Rome concept appeared in the Moscow Church in a specific religious and political context.⁴⁰ In principle, this concept was supposed to allow for the leaders' support for the Church by indicating their mission that transgressed political matters. When this idea reached Metropolitan Zosima in 1492, it did not serve the purpose to sacralize authority, but it aimed to demonstrate the continuity and sustainability of Orthodoxy, which had not been shaken even by the fall of Constantinople.⁴¹ Ivan III was presented as the new Emperor Constantine, a governor of the new city of Constantinople, namely Moscow.⁴² The sacralization and the full development of the Third Rome concept followed the approach of the monk Filofey (Philoteus, ca. 1465–1542) and Joseph of Volotsk (Ivan Sanin, 1439–1515). Filofey's position can be considered mystical and apocalyptic.⁴³ The Orthodox Church, taking the Woman of the Book of Revelation⁴⁴ as an example, escaped Old Rome and fled to New

³⁸ Zen'kovskiy, *Istoriya*, I, 38–39.

³⁹ Dugin, *Eurasian Mission*, 32; Alpern Engel – Martin, *Russia*, 22–28.

⁴⁰ Curanović, *Przeznaczeni*, 101.

⁴¹ Składanowski, *Cywilizacja*, 118–119.

⁴² Meyendorff, *Rim-Konstantinopol-Moskva*, 176; Kartashev, *Ocherki*, II, 407.

⁴³ Dugin, *Geopolitika*, 282–283.

⁴⁴ "The woman escaped into the desert, where God had prepared a place for her to be looked after for twelve hundred and sixty days [...] she was given a pair of the great eagle's wings to fly away from the serpent into the desert,

Rome and then followed to the Rus', to Moscow.⁴⁵ Filofey did not mean to sacralize authority. By identifying Moscow with the Third, that is the Last Rome, he wanted to summon its leader to repent and to support Orthodoxy when faced with the approaching Parousia of Christ and the Last Judgment.⁴⁶ Joseph of Volotsk, on the other hand, presented strictly political consequences of the Third Rome concept, although also subordinate to the concern about the fate of the Church in the Kyivan Rus'.⁴⁷ From his perspective, indicating the Moscow prince as the leader of the Church was to motivate him to give the Church substantial support in religious conflicts.⁴⁸

2.2. The Significance of the Third Rome Concept

In Kartashev's⁴⁹ assessment, the teachings of Joseph of Volotsk and their support by the Orthodox hierarchy in the Moscow Rus' turned out to be extremely destructive for the Church. It led to the appearance and consolidation of the opinion that the Prince of Moscow was not only the protector of the Church, but he also possessed the highest jurisdiction in church matters. This idea was a transformation of the Byzantine idea of the *symphonia* between State and Church. In the *symphonia* concept Church and State were supposed to collaborate closely, never oppose each other, and always remain closely linked.⁵⁰ There was also a conviction, characteristic for Byzantine Christianity, that the emperor, as a protector of the Church, was God's Anointed One.⁵¹ Nonetheless, the emperor's authority over the Church as well as his influence on the life of the state and society

to the place where she was to be looked after for a time, two times and half a time" (Rev 12:6, 14).

⁴⁵ Kartashev, *Ocherki*, II, 409.

⁴⁶ Trepanier, *Political Symbols*, 56; Meyendorff, *Rim-Konstantinopol-Moskva*, 190.

⁴⁷ Zen'kovskiy, *Istoriya*, I, 54–55.

⁴⁸ Trepanier, *Political Symbols*, 41.

⁴⁹ Kartashev, *Ocherki*, II, 410–411.

⁵⁰ Knox, *Russian Society*, 111–113; Papkova, *The Orthodox Church*, 6–7; Zen'kovskiy, "Tserkov' i gosudarstvo," 224.

⁵¹ Saltykov, "Pravoslavnoye mirovozzreniye," 3–5.

were never considered unconditional and unlimited. The condition of the legitimacy of authority was Christian orthodoxy of a ruler. The leader that abandoned said orthodoxy was considered a tyrant. The proof that the Byzantine Church was not unconditionally obedient to the leaders is the witness of the great hierarchs and theologians – such as St. John Chrysostom, St. Maximus the Confessor, or St. Theodore the Studite – who in the name of Christian orthodoxy opposed the rulers and, consequently, suffered persecutions.⁵²

According to Kartashev, the political use of the Third Rome concept in Russia would result in creating the model of mutual relations in which the Church was entirely subordinate to the state leaders. Attempts to promote other models of mutual relations, for example, through the development of theological concepts of the superiority of the priesthood over imperial power, proved unsuccessful.

In vain did they try in Russian church literature, simultaneously with the teaching about the authority of state institutions, place the authority of the priesthood above the authority of the ruler. The rulers of Moscow firmly grabbed the weapon given to them by the representatives of the Orthodox Church themselves and started to wield it more and more boldly to achieve their own goals. Since that time the history of relations between the Church and state authorities has forever and wholly been characterized by the supremacy of the state over the Church.⁵³

⁵² Meyendorff, *Rim-Konstantinopol-Moskva*, 172–173; Zen'kovskiy, "Tserkov' i gosudarstvo," 225.

⁵³ Kartashev, *Ocherki*, II, 411. „Напрасно поэтому в русской церковной литературе делались, параллельно с [...] яркой теорией авторитета государственной власти, попытки поставить авторитет священства выше царства. Московские государи уже крепко забрали в свои руки оружие, данное им самими же представителями Церкви, и начинали все смелее пользоваться им в своих видах. С этих пор история взаимоотношений властей церковной и государственной уже навсегда и вполне решительно склонилась к перевесу государства над Церковью” (my own translation).

Kartashev⁵⁴ notices that although the Russian Church decided to canonize Joseph of Volotsk, criticism was voiced against him in the Russian literature as early in the 18th century. Some voices accused him of contributing to granting the rulers absolute power, including the power over the Church.

While not ignoring the significance of the Third Rome concept, one has to bear in mind that it was not a deciding factor in subordinating the Church to the state and creating Russian absolutism (*samoderzhaviye*) as a result of its religious sanctioning. Still, even nowadays it has been voiced by certain Russian Orthodox and nationalist circles that Filofey's teaching was prophetic. These opinions, however, do not speak of the sacralization of authority but they are trying to emphasize a close connection between Russian statehood and Orthodoxy.⁵⁵

Kartashev, who is so critical toward the consequences of short-sightedness of supporting the Third Rome concept by the Russian Orthodox hierarchy, notices that radical subordination of the Church to the state and, consequently, strengthening the position of a leader by granting them the control over all the aspects of social life, was not the result of sacralizing influence of Orthodoxy but quite the opposite – of Russia's secularization. This secularization had its roots in Protestantism.⁵⁶ It appeared in Peter the Great's policy toward the Church, in particular after the death of Patriarch Adrian in 1700 when the tsar prevented the election of his successor.⁵⁷ According to Kartashev,⁵⁸ the Occidental, secular, anti-theocratic spirit of the absolute supremacy of State over Church was characteristic for this period in Russian history that was in principal European in nature. Peter the Great led an active policy of secularization modeled on the Western European patterns,⁵⁹ although the radical and violent

⁵⁴ Kartashev, *Ocherki*, II, 411.

⁵⁵ Saltykov, "Pravoslavnoye mirovozzreniye," 5.

⁵⁶ Zen'kovskiy, *Istoriya*, I, 62–66; Garrard – Garrard, *Russian Orthodoxy*, 171.

⁵⁷ Alfeyev, *Pravoslaviye*, II, 154; Knox – Mitrofanova, "The Russian Orthodox Church," 40.

⁵⁸ Kartashev, *Ocherki*, II, 323–324.

⁵⁹ Chadayev, *Putin*, 120; Zen'kovskiy, "Tserkov' i gosudarstvo," 228.

character of the said policy implied the influence of Eastern political traditions present in the Rus' duchies from the Tatar conquest.⁶⁰

Attempts to fully subordinate the Church had a political aim. The rulers rejected religious foundations of their own authority and, consequently, any possibility of being controlled by the Church. The state became, similarly to some Protestant countries of Western Europe, the source of its own authority, which organized the entirety of the social life of the nation. Georges Florovsky⁶¹ speaks directly about the reforms of Peter the Great as the Russian Reformation which destroyed or at least marginalized the Rus' religious and social traditions. It led to the transformation of the Byzantine concept of state authority under the influence of Protestant ideas. These ideas also managed to penetrate, to a certain extent, Russian Orthodoxy itself, which in the 18th and 19th centuries adapted for the most part to the new reality of social organization and the relation with the state that was primarily based on subordination and relative, limited autonomy.⁶² Instead, Orthodoxy enjoyed a privileged position in the Russian Empire,⁶³ which until the end of the 19th century already had a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious character.

In contemporary Russian political and historiosophic reflection, the concept of the Third Rome is significant not only for the interpretation of the Rus' and Russia history as well as the evolution of the State–Church relations. The subordination of Church to political objectives of State,⁶⁴ which we find in this concept and which sacralizes the authority, is important also for the modern attempts to define the direction of Russia's further political and ideological development. This is why far-right Russian intellectuals are so attached to the concept of the Third Rome or its ideological continuations.⁶⁵ This idea, however, is not characteristic of all the representatives of contemporary Russian conservatism. It is certainly not looked at

⁶⁰ Florovsky, *Puti russkogo bogosloviya*, 84.

⁶¹ Florovsky, *Puti russkogo bogosloviya*, 85.

⁶² Alfeyev, *Pravoslaviye*, II, 155.

⁶³ Firsov, "Russkaya Tserkov'," 7–50.

⁶⁴ Moskałyk, "Od ortodoksijnej," 171–172.

⁶⁵ Sidorov, "Post-imperial Third Romes," 317–347; Engström, "Contemporary Russian messianism," 356–379.

favorably by the supporters of Sovietization of Russian public life who perceive the Soviet Union as the greatest period in the history of Russia and its international political significance.⁶⁶ On the other hand, these far-right intellectuals who emphasize Russia's civilizational uniqueness and object treating it as a part of European civilization⁶⁷ perceive the concept of the Third Rome as a useful tool to define the self-understanding of Russia in the modern world. They also find it useful to determine Russia's position with respect to other countries, cultures, and civilizations.⁶⁸

The remarks of one of the most controversial representatives of contemporary Russian anti-Occidentalism Aleksandr Dugin are significant in this context. In his opinion, the concept of the Third Rome is particularly relevant. On the one hand, it justifies the rejection of Western civilization, including the norms of the public life organization or accepted ways of government characteristic of the Western states. This rejection of the entirety of Western values is to stem from the assumption that the direction in which the West develops is a sign of its fall in numerous aspects – political, social, moral, and religious. On the other hand, by opposing the West and rejecting its patterns of social and political life, Russia, as a separate, independent civilization, becomes an anchor of religiously sanctified rules and values, which guarantee its survival and the final victory in its confrontation with the West. The authorities receive in this interpretation the metaphysical mission to lead Russia and those countries which oppose Western hegemony in their fight for the new, just and godly world order.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Kara-Murza, *Rossiya i Zapad*, 5–16; Kara-Murza, *Sovetskaya tsivilizatsiya*, 9–10.

⁶⁷ Cherepanova, "Discourse," 315–329.

⁶⁸ Umland, "Pathological Tendencies," 76–89.

⁶⁹ Dugin, "After Tskhinvali," 61–70; Shlapentokh, "Dugin Eurasianism," 215–236.

3. "God-Bearing Community": The Sacralization of Nation and Society

The Western reflection on the Russian approach to authority pays too little attention to Orthodox anthropology and its implications. Meanwhile, it is the Orthodox concept of the human person and society that enables the understanding of many aspects of the relationship between the state and society that are foreign to the Western point of view. It allows us, paradoxically, to comprehend why the secular, non-Orthodox concept of state authority, whose implementation began with the Peter the Great's reforms, could be accepted and widespread without major opposition so that it is sometimes considered typically Russian and even sacralized by Orthodoxy.

3.1. Orthodox Anthropology and Russian Politics

Determining the relationship between the human person and the community forms the first significant element of Orthodox anthropology.⁷⁰ It was traditional for Russian Orthodoxy to reject or marginalize an individual for the sake of a community. Paradoxically, this phenomenon in Russian conditions led to the strengthening of the cult of leaders who were to represent the community and were considered the emanation of its best features and goals.⁷¹

Orthodoxy places emphasis on the community and prioritizes the common good over the good of an individual – or, to be more precise, indicates that the real good of an individual can only be accomplished within the community. The concept that a human being is not an autonomous entity was already prevalent in Greek patristic anthropology. A person can be fully realized within the community. That is why individualism – characteristic of modern Western anthropology and social ethics – does not agree, according to the Orthodox standpoint, with the human nature and prevents its self-realization.⁷²

⁷⁰ Składanowski, *Cywilizacja*, 121–123.

⁷¹ Pisch, *The personality cult*, 60–63.

⁷² Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 63–64; Karsavin, *Filosofiya istorii*, 743; Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political*, 91–92.

The religious community and national community, which is related to the former, constitute the whole before God by being “a living organism.” This approach results in rejecting individualism both in social as well as in political life.⁷³ One can point out here certain exceptions, which are a special form of prophetism and asceticism, such as the movement of *startsy* or the role of *yurodivyye*.⁷⁴ These spiritual movements, however, always had their social dimension because the activities of people that were gifted with particular understanding or had a particular relation or the manner of contact with God were always perceived as beneficial for the community.

Such a perspective makes the emphasis on one’s individuality and the strive to achieve personal goals be perceived negatively. Egoism and individualism are considered the result of sin and, therefore, understood as human weakness and error as well as an attitude that opposes God’s will.⁷⁵ By accomplishing one’s own goals, a human person becomes impoverished in the spiritual domain. As Vladimir N. Lossky⁷⁶ thinks, only after a human person gives up their own content, abandons it freely, stops existing for themselves, they will express themselves fully in nature common to all. By giving up personal profit, a person expands infinitely and gets enriched by all that is common.

In certain perspectives, this position gets radicalized. It is either indicated that a human person has no right to search for the accomplishment of their own plans and ambitions, but they should completely abandon themselves for the sake of the community, or it is openly stated that the mere fact of being a human person depends on maintaining relations with other people. This latter fact seems to lead to the relativization of a person and their marginalization for the sake of the community. Such an approach does not mean that a person as an individual is not significant, and that the real significance is granted to the state or society. The idea is that a person cannot exist

⁷³ Dugin, *The Rise*, 140.

⁷⁴ Zen’kovskiy, *Istoriya*, I, 47–48.

⁷⁵ Davydenkov, *Dogmaticheskoye bogosloviye*, 337.

⁷⁶ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology*, 115–120.

without a community although, at the same time, a community cannot negate the existence of a person.⁷⁷

Appreciating the community leads to the concept of its "sanctity," that is the idea that this community was particularly chosen by God and "separated" from others in its religious mission. In Russian socioreligious tradition, this sanctity of a national and political community assumes its final form in the concept of a "God-bearing nation." "God-bearing" (*bogonosnost'*) is understood here as a special mission entrusted to Russia to defend the social order that agrees with God's will and to promote appropriate values and behavior patterns.⁷⁸ It is precisely because this "God-bearing" indicates the mission of a "God-bearing nation" that it also possesses the political and institutional dimension, which means that it is expressed in the nature and mission of the government structures.

3.2. The Political Application of the Concept of "God-Bearing"

The sanctity of a community is reflected onto the sanctity of the lands inhabited by this community. It can be seen in the concept of Holy Rus'.⁷⁹ The term *Svyataya Rus'* cannot be correctly rendered as "Holy Russia." The sanctity of "God-bearing" lands transgresses Russia's borders and administrative structures.⁸⁰ In the Russian Orthodox tradition, this sanctity encompasses all the Rus' lands including those that are not a part of Russia's territory. Such an approach forms an argument in Russian political discourse for the attempts to unite, or subjugate, all the lands inhabited by the Orthodox Slavs. In the 19th century, it was the postulate of Russian Pan-Slavism.⁸¹ Nowadays, in a more secular form, such postulates are raised by Russian neo-imperial circles (e.g., the "Izborsk Club"), which demand that Russia make attempts to integrate the post-Soviet space.⁸²

⁷⁷ Zen'kovskiy, *Istoriya*, I, 223–224.

⁷⁸ Fagan, *Believing in Russia*, 24.

⁷⁹ Andrusiewicz, *Trzeci Rzym*, 135.

⁸⁰ Strickland, *The Making of Holy Russia*, 6–7; Dugin, *Last War*, 5–6.

⁸¹ Hunter, *God on Our Side*, 104.

⁸² Krickovic, "Imperial nostalgia," 503–528.

The concept of the sanctity of the Rus' lands limits the Russian cultural expansion significantly. The focus of this expansion has turned onto those countries and ethnic groups that were shaped by the Orthodox tradition but due to historical and political reason severed or loosened their ties with Russia. The consequence of accepting the concept of sanctity and "God-bearing" is closing within their own religious, cultural, and state borders which guarantee sanctity, that is the fact of being chosen and separate.⁸³ One can see here Manichaeism traces that have been present in the whole history of Russian socioreligious thought over the centuries. The Russian historiosophic Manichaeism sees the world as an arena of the constant battle between good and evil, and considers the Rus' as an anchor of good, as the state that was destined to oppose the evil until the end of times and the Last Judgment. Anthropological dualism, which distinguishes in a human person a mortal body and a spiritual element, relates to such a concept of sanctity and "God-bearing."⁸⁴

Christianity, also in the West, is inclined to assign the priority to the spiritual element by accentuating its superiority over the feeble body. However, the specific Russian continuation of this motif is the idea of the so-called spiritual values and spiritual culture. "Spirituality" (*dukhovnost'*) is the main measure of a person's value and the culture they create. None of the material accomplishments can be compared to these. It is in these spiritual values that the uniqueness of a human person is expressed. That is why in a confrontation with any earthly values, the spiritual values are more highly priced.⁸⁵ One can also see here the eschatological perspective of Orthodox anthropology which was mentioned above in relation to the theological background of Filofey's concept. Orthodox anthropology, in its Russian version, is deeply eschatological,⁸⁶ which found its expression in the Old Believers' movement (*starovery*).⁸⁷ The contempt for earthly values and search for spiritual values leads to the conclusion that it

⁸³ Dugin, *The Rise*, 126–135; Chadayev, *Putin*, 109.

⁸⁴ Davydenkov, *Dogmaticheskoye bogosloviye*, 284–287.

⁸⁵ Dugin, *Geopolitika*, 498–499; Dinello, "Russian Religious Rejections," 45–64.

⁸⁶ Dugin, *Last War*, 34–36.

⁸⁷ Zen'kovskiy, *Istoriya*, I, 58–59.

is only at the end of the world that interpersonal relations will be truly perfect. The fate of the human being is to abandon that which is earthly and imperfect and to reach for the heavenly, perfect, and final.⁸⁸

The first consequence of adopting the ideas of the sanctity of land and "God-bearing" of the nation as rules regulating sociopolitical life is the rejection of the Western patterns of this life, regardless of the potential evaluation of their efficiency. The primacy of "spiritual foundations" (*dukhovnyye skrepy*) makes it impossible for the Western models of authority, including the rules of democratic life, to be authoritative in themselves. If they support the phenomena that go against these values, they deserve to be rejected.⁸⁹ For the same reason the mere fact of supporting by certain Western countries the phenomena that go against traditional norms of individual and social life makes the patterns of leadership in those countries irrelevant from the Russian perspective; consequently, they cannot form a point of reference for Russian authorities. On the contrary, such phenomena form a motif for contrastive comparison of the Russian Orthodox concept of the human person in the community with respect to Western individualism and egoism.⁹⁰ In the statements of Russian conservative intellectuals (e.g., Aleksandr Prokhanov or Aleksandr Dugin) the ethical and cultural changes that occur in the West are supposed to be a proof of the moral fall of the West. This fall, on the other hand, is supposed to be the result of the Western concept of state authority that is based on democracy and individualism.⁹¹

One should also point out to the special significance assigned to authority which relates to God's will with respect to the nation and state. If a community is an independent entity, a living organism, then the duty of state authority is to strengthen and protect this community even at the expense of the interest of individual people. The primacy of state authority is not the result of the contempt for a human being, nor does it stem from the refusal to accept

⁸⁸ Alfeyev, *Pravoslaviye*, II, 511.

⁸⁹ Østbø, "Securitizing," 200–216.

⁹⁰ Iudin, *Navstvennoye bogosloviye*, 46–48.

⁹¹ Stoeckl, *The Russian Orthodox Church*, 46–49.

the human dignity of each citizen, but it stems from the primacy of a community and the supremacy of its interests. Ultimately, the interests of a community-state are identical with the actual interest of all the citizens. The Russian sociopolitical tradition sees its uniqueness in the sense of community which enables the entire nation as well as each person to truly develop. Orthodox appreciation of spiritual values manifested in the life of an entire community as one entity leads to the unification of religious, social, and political space. In this approach, the division into *sacrum* and *profanum* spheres is impossible. In practice, it is revealed nowadays in living tendencies to identify the values promoted by the authorities and the political interests of the Russian Federation with the Orthodox values.⁹² In the official discourse, they are called “traditional values” in contrast to the values characteristic for the Western world.

Conclusions: A Conservative Historiosophic Synthesis

Under the rule of Patriarch Kirill, a strong relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and state structures has developed into a symbiosis of State and Church. In Russian conditions, the declaration as to belonging to the Orthodox Church does not necessarily correspond to the religious reality.⁹³ Orthodoxy becomes a sociopolitical structure which legitimizes the authorities and guarantees the ideological continuation of the Russian state.

This political and religious context should be considered while one tries to outline the picture of state authority and patterns of political life which are promoted by Orthodoxy in Russian conditions – both official as well as radical, isolationist, and nationalist. The difference between Russian and Western ways to organize social, political, and religious life leads some of the Western observers to draw hasty conclusions. One of the frequently repeated arguments is the accusation of the sacralization of state authority in Russia regardless of political changes and historical events. This phenomenon is supposed to lead to creating in Russia the tradition of absolute

⁹² Putin, *Mysli o Rossii*, 169.

⁹³ Turner, “Religion,” 37.

authority, which has total control over all the aspects of social life, does not allow for the civil society to develop and uses the religious mandate given by the Orthodox Church for the above. Such an image is far too simplified. A high level of social support for the authorities of the Russian Federation is by no means the result of the total control of social life on the part of authorities supported by the Church hierarchy. Neither can one speak of Russia as an authoritarian country. Appreciation for the authorities, which is so characteristic of Russian society, despite noticing the difficulties of social and economic life, can be related to the Orthodox concept of the human person. According to this concept, the Western individualism which is revealed in egoism and consumerism cannot be considered an authentic value serving the social and individual development. Such a perception of the authority has kept its significance even though Russia has become over the centuries a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. Orthodox anthropology, especially in its social dimension, has numerous common elements with Asian concepts of the human person, society, and state.

Religious ideas influenced profoundly the modern image of Russia. It did not happen by granting absolutism a religious sanction. Over the centuries Russia has created a paradigm of social organization and interpersonal relations. The Russian Orthodox concept of the human person and society became a filter that transformed foreign sociopolitical ideas and gave them typically Russian character. Nowadays also, when the Russian Federation declares itself as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state, Orthodox concepts, even though they have been secularized, form a significant part of Russian political and historical discourse. These concepts play an important role particularly in the attempts undertaken by President Putin to redefine Russian identity, to newly define Russia's position in the confrontation with the West and, ultimately, to allow Russia to regain its key position in international politics. The actions aiming to raise Russia's significance are supported not only by the size of its military forces, large territory, and natural resources. Depicting Russia as an independent civilizational space also plays an important role in reinstating Russia's rightful position in the world.

„Bogonośny naród”: religijne aspekty rosyjskiej koncepcji władzy państwowej

Abstrakt: W kontekście konfrontacji Rosji z Zachodem, zwłaszcza po wybuchu wojny przeciwko Ukrainie 24 lutego 2022 roku, można być zaskoczonym poparciem, jakim Władimir Putin cieszy się w społeczeństwie rosyjskim. Autor stawia tezę, że to zjawisko nie może być wyjaśnione wyłącznie czynnikami politycznymi. Artykuł ma na celu ukazanie ideologicznego znaczenia rosyjskiej (ruskiej) tradycji prawosławnej w procesie formowania i umacniania rosyjskiej koncepcji władzy państwowej. Po naszkicowaniu głównych problemów związanych z ideologiczną legitymizacją władzy w Rosji, przedstawione zostaną dwie religijnie zakorzenione koncepcje: Trzeci Rzym i „bogonośność”. Koncepcje te wyjaśniają również, dlaczego Rosyjska Cerkiew Prawosławna prawie jednoznacznie wsparła rosyjską agresję przeciwko Ukrainie.

Słowa kluczowe: Rosja, prawosławie rosyjskie, historiozofia religijna, Trzeci Rzym, antyokcydentalizm

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