

## Destructive Russian Orthodox Powerplay

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## EDITORIAL: DESTRUCTIVE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX POWERPLAY

I do not know whether President Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill know about Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations," but they do not hide their wish to make Moscow the center of the Orthodox World in another epiphany of the theological and political claim that Moscow is the Third Rome, which emerged some 500 years ago. Seeing that both Rome and Constantinople were on the decline as centers of Christian power, the rulers of "Holy Russia" envisioned themselves as the rightful heirs to defend Christian Orthodoxy from various threats. During the 74 years that the Bolsheviks held sway over Russian lands, this claim of primacy seems to have abated. Searching for a post-Communist identity, the desire to re-assert that claim began gradually growing with both Russia's secular leaders, primarily epitomized in Vladimir Putin, and the slowly recovering Russian Orthodox ecclesiastical leadership as it emerged from the almost incomprehensible suffering under the atheist regime bent on destroying religion. The Soviet Union had been legally dismembered and dissolved in 1991 and the Russian Federation seemed seriously weakened in economic, political, and social terms. In the early 1990s, it appeared to a visitor as a basket case with impoverished citizens hawking all kinds of military mementos of the Red Army for pennies. Some Russian leaders felt humiliated by this rapid decline in power and sought to remedy it. Putin expressed on several occasions the preposterous idea that the disintegration of the USSR was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century and felt victimized by some thoughtless Western belittlements of Russian power. He thought that he was the one to fix it.

There were alternate ways for the still largest country in the world to move into the future. One was to emulate the successful industrial nations, generally of a Western democratic orientation. But the call of the past was much more powerful: a czar-like autocrat who would lead the country with an iron hand—something Russians had experienced for centuries. But without a strong ally in the spiritual realm, it would be more difficult. The model that they sought to use was the Byzantine Christianity, namely creating a *symphonia* of state and church.<sup>1</sup> The secular president (aspiring to be like Peter the Great) receives the uncritical support of the Patriarch of

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<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Antonov. "The Varieties of Symphonia and the State–Church Relations in Russia" in *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion*, Volume 9, Issue 3, October 2020, Pages 552–570, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ojlr/rwaa035>.

Moscow, who would then exert his control not merely over Russia proper but over the entire canonical area of the Moscow Patriarch which extended over former federal republics of the Soviet Union. He also wields considerable influence over several fellow Orthodox patriarchs, especially among the former Soviet satellites.

This process needed time. First, to cement the state-church relationship, Putin had himself baptized and then rewarded the Russian Orthodox Church with enormously generous support in building churches and monasteries throughout the land—some of gigantic proportions. The martyred Czar Nicholas II and his family were canonized in the year 2000, nearly coinciding with the first presidency of Putin. This would symbolize a “reconciliation” of the royal and communist heritage of Russia’s history.

The attempt to set up a structure around Russia that would resemble the European Union did not yield desirable results, despite several military interventions in former republics, which were ominous signs of Putin’s future directions. A more potent idea was born, that of promoting *Russkiy mir* (Russian world). The core of the Russian world would be to bring Belarus and Ukraine (which the Russians frequently call “Little Russia”) into a closer institutional relation with Russia, using the precedent of their inclusion in the Russian Empire as a centrifugal power. *Russkiy mir* also includes Russians wherever they may live, and there are, indeed, many of them throughout the former Soviet Union: the three Baltic Republics, plus Moldavia, and other southern Soviet Republics would become the inner core, with the outer circle bringing the former satellite nations of Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and perhaps even encompassing the Balkans with friendly Serbia, Republika Srpska (part of Bosnia and Herzegovina), and traditionally friendly Montenegro into an outer *cordon sanitaire*. Not all these countries are Orthodox, but an Empire usually is ethnically and religiously plural as long as it has a solid inner core that keeps the centrifuge magnetized. “Holy Rus” would be an antidote to the materialistic consumer-and-pleasure oriented West, as it would stand for traditional values such a patriarchy, heterosexuality, and lofty metaphysical even mystical spiritual ideals, and become attractive to traditionalists throughout the world. This is how it would work if there were no obstacles. And, if there were obstacles, the nuclear-powered great army could accomplish what could not be accomplished in political and diplomatic terms.

The first step was the easiest because Belarus was still the most open dictatorship in Europe, quite easily enticed into a union with Russia since the will of its people was irrelevant.

Ukraine was a very different case. In size, the largest European state outside of Russia, with a history far more interwoven with Western Europe, Ukraine displayed a popular-based determination to be considered pro-European rather than Eastern and sought to become a member of the European Union and even NATO (the latter a step too far for Putin). It made some decisive moves toward democratization and developed friendly relations with many countries of Europe and North America. With its historic claim that in the 10th century Kiyv was the first center of Orthodoxy in Rus', the antecedent for later eastern Slavic state structures, it had originally obtained autocephaly from the Patriarch of Constantinople only to be subjected to the Patriarch of Moscow in 1686. It reclaimed autocephaly briefly in the 1920s only to be resubordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate. As a sovereign country it successfully sought to be again resubordinated to the Patriarch of Constantinople in 2018. In Vol. 41, No. 2 (March 2022) OPREE published the brilliant and extensive analysis by Denys Shestopalets of the process of Ukrainian Orthodox awarding of autocephaly<sup>2</sup> despite anticipating serious consequences of that process. The results of the Ukrainian breakaway from Moscow into the orbit of the Patriarch of Constantinople were catastrophic because it caused Kirill, the Patriarch of Moscow, to initiate the greatest schism in the history of Orthodox Christianity by breaking eucharistic relationship with Patriarch Batholomew of Constantinople and other patriarchs who recognized Ukrainian autocephaly. It also created the parallel existence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Moscow Patriarchate and Orthodox Church in Ukraine-Kyiv Metropolitanate--both centered in Kyiv. And finally, it triggered Putin's genocidal decision to fuse Ukraine into Russia—by military might. Instead of this invasion by Russian forces taking over Ukraine in a *blitzkrieg*, to the expected delight of Ukraine's population, it created the opposite effect, namely the nearly total rejection of Patriarch Kirill as the canonical head of the Orthodox people in Ukraine as well as a heroic defense of their land by the Ukrainian armed forces and its people, who often faced Russian troops unarmed, waving Ukrainian flags, chanting for Russians to go home.

The outcome of this war cannot yet be predicted. A prophetic pronouncement of "might does not make right"—which is not predictive in the world of *realpolitik*--is that the Russians will not be able to absorb Ukrainians in a single state structure in the long run, even if they were to be

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<sup>2</sup> On this issue see the brilliant analysis of the claims of Moscow, Kyiv, and Constantinople by Denys Shestopalets, (2022) "The Discursive Construction of the Past: The 1686 Resubordination of the Kyiv Metropolitanate, Ukrainian Autocephaly and the Conflict of Moscow and Constantinople," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 42: No. 2, Article 5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/2693-2148.2325>

successful in the short run. Ukrainians KNOW that they are not Russians, not Little Russians, not any Russians. They are Ukrainians--Putin and Kirill notwithstanding.

Another insight is that Putin's aspiration to make the Russian Empire a great power backfired into making Russia an outcast in the opinion of the much of the global community. It inherited a bad image from the USSR, which, for a while, it was on the road of improvement. But most of their neighbors instinctively knew that Russia poses a danger and sought safety by joining NATO. While some blame NATO for enticing former satellites, the truth is that these nations eagerly sought defense against Russia's predatory appetite. Instead of enticing allies, they repulsed them with their terroristic threats. For their military aggression they were condemned by an overwhelming vote in the UN General Assembly.

The Russian Orthodox Church also overreached in its claims to dominance in the Orthodox Church by violating the ancient order of preeminence in honor held by the Patriarch of Constantinople. By conflating love of country and faith in a symbiotic ethnoreligion with the concept of *Russkiy mir*, they brought upon themselves a charge of ethno-phyletic ecclesial heresy by over 1,300 of Orthodox theologians from around the world.<sup>3</sup> And by the unchristian decision to not distance themselves from the exceedingly brutal warfare in the Ukraine, they earned the condemnation of a wider Christian community in which prominent church leaders called for the ROC to be suspended from the World Council of Churches.

It is a rare event for both a country (Russian Federation) and a church (Russian Orthodox Church) to be simultaneously condemned in such a short time by such wide spectrum of world and Christian public opinion. We expect to analyze in OPREE's future issues the painful process that would ultimately lead to restitution for a destroyed Ukraine and repentance for straying from the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul Mojzes, editor-in-chief

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<sup>3</sup> "Declaration of Orthodox Theologians on the "Russian World" (Russkii Mir) Teaching"  
<https://www.praytellig.com/index.php/2022/04/11/over-1300-orthodox-theologians-condemn-heresy-of-russian-world/> Accessed April 12, 2022.