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*East-West Church and Ministry Report, Asbury University, Wilmore, KY*

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THE RUSSIAN CHRISTIAN TAKE ON PUTIN AND UKRAINE

By Mark R. Elliott

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In late May 2014 in St. Petersburg, Russia’s Evangelical Christians-Baptists ended their every-fourth-year congress with a ringing endorsement of Vladimir Putin and his Ukraine policies: “Esteemed Vladimir Vladimirovich, we express to you sincere appreciation for your labor in the post of president for the welfare of our motherland….We reaffirm our principled loyalty with respect to state authority, based on the unchanged words of the Bible, ‘Let every soul be subject to the powers that be, for there is no authority not from God’ (Romans 13:1).”

Citing Proverbs 24:21, “Do not join with rebellious officials,” the congress directly challenged the legitimacy of Ukraine’s Maidan Revolution and the February 2014 overthrow of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich.

The glowing commendation for Russia’s president and his Ukraine policies were so effusive, they brought to mind the praise church leaders had been periodically required to render unto Stalin and his Kremlin successors. Originally I suspected some back-room state pressure must have been at play. Surely these plaudits for Putin had been coerced.

However, after a week of extended conversations with more than a dozen Protestant and Orthodox believers in Moscow, November 11-17, 2014, it became clear to me that no outside interference and no arm-twisting would have been necessary to generate such fulsome praise for Russia’s president. More than ever, Putin is genuinely popular—and admired—by Russians across the spectrum: among believers as well as the religiously indifferent, among Protestants as well as Orthodox, and among academics as well as taxi drivers.
Quite a few of those I interviewed in Moscow have family members in Ukraine, or are themselves originally from Ukraine. They figure their aggressively anti-Russian relatives across the border have been manipulated by Ukrainian propaganda. One pastor from Siberia whom I met in November explained to me that a Russian is more likely to believe Putin than his own sister if she lives in Ukraine. Most Russians just do not seem to recognize their own susceptibility to the Kremlin media campaign against Ukraine. A Russian Orthodox journalist—and a rare opponent of Putin—shared with me that even the tiny Russian Quaker community is deeply divided over Ukraine, with a majority favoring Putin’s military moves there.

A Protestant educator with longstanding, firsthand knowledge of U.S. academia put it to me this way: “We really thank God for Putin’s leadership. We do not want to protest as Ukrainians think we should. We have more and more rights.” Sasha (I will call him) reminded me that Yeltsin had given democracy a bad name—what with the chaos and economic crises that surrounded his presidency. Russia, I was told, needs a strong leader to prevent disorder and division, a sentiment in which many Russians still put great stock. Sasha continued, “Putin has brought stability; we have a better standard of living now; and we feel more secure.” Putin, he believes, has also managed to pacify Chechnya. Corruption, Sasha says, is still a problem, but it is less so than it used to be. “I used to be stopped a lot by the police wanting a bribe to overlook some nonexistent traffic violation, but I have not been stopped for a bribe in four years.” Above all, Sasha—a long with many millions of his fellow citizens—are grateful to Putin for restoring their sense of pride in being Russian. Sasha recalled the humiliation of the 1990s with its rudderless state and discarded ideology, its territorial losses, its economic and psychic dislocations, and its declining status in the world. Putin, I was given to understand, is about recovering Russia’s rightful place in world affairs, and Russians like the ring of that a lot.

Just weeks prior to my trip to Moscow, in a speech in Sochi, Putin held the U.S. responsible for orchestrating the downfall of Yanukovich and for failing to accord Russia its due in the international arena. His country’s expectation was that “our position would be taken into account, that we be treated with (uvazhenie) respect.” Tellingly, several times more in the same address Putin complained of the West’s failure to extend Russia proper respect.1

Returning to my Moscow kitchen table talk, Sasha grew very upset with a reference to the Russian annexation of Crimea in a publication I had edited. His response was that NATO

tore Kosovo from Serbia in violation of international law that the West only selectively champions. And by what justification in international law did the U.S. invade and conquer Iraq? As for Ukraine, Russians overwhelmingly believe its new Maidan regime is simultaneously fascist and American-inspired, a “wild” land now reeling from Yeltsin-like chaos. I was told Maidan Ukraine cannot last, and “It’s terrible what is going on there.”

Another longtime friend, an Orthodox believer who was educated in the U.S., argues the West is willing to believe anything negative about Russia, whatever the truth. “Artyom” admitted he did not trust Russian television, but he still holds positions strikingly at odds with Western perceptions of the Ukraine crisis.

1. I was told that, besides volunteers crossing the border to fight with Ukrainian separatists, no real evidence exists that Russian regular troops are fighting in eastern Ukraine.
2. I was told that CNN’s decision to suspend broadcasting in Russia, announced in Moscow the week I was there, did not stem from Russian state pressure.²
3. I was told the Soviet Union brought many good things to Ukraine including, at least early on, the option of Ukrainian language schooling and publications.
4. I was told everyone in Crimea is happy, now that they are part of Russia.
5. I also was informed it was very likely that Ukraine, not Russia, shot down Malaysian Airline Flight MH17 in July 2014.

In response to so many assertions at variance with Western understanding of the Ukraine conflict, I will hazard some observations of my own.

• Ukrainian evangelicals defend their support for the Maidan Revolution by arguing that it was their civic duty to oppose a corrupt and immoral regime. They compare their opposition to Yanukovich with Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s resistance to Hitler, citing the martyred pastor’s dictum, “Obedience to tyrants is equal to disobedience towards God.”³
• Soviet tolerance for expressions of Ukrainian cultural sentiment were short-lived and pale before Stalin’s culpability in the death of millions of Ukrainians in the great famine of the 1930s.

² Mark Thompson, “CNN to End Broadcasts in Russia As New Laws Bite;” 12 November 2014.
• Russian tanks and support vehicles have been photographed in eastern Ukraine, and Ukrainian forces have captured Russian military personnel in eastern Ukraine.

• Recent Russian media legislation did influence CNN’s decision to end broadcasts in Russia.

• Not everyone in Crimea is happy with Russia’s annexation: The peninsula’s Muslim Tatars, Catholics, Protestants, and even Orthodox not affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate, are facing increased restrictions and discrimination.  

• The preponderance of evidence from the Dutch investigation of the downing of Malaysian Flight MH 17 suggests a Russian-supplied, surface-to-air missile fired by Ukrainian separatists was to blame.

Corroboration for the fervent Russian patriotism of my friends in Moscow in mid-November comes from an email I received from a missionary couple (American and Ukrainian) serving in Russia:

While I agree with the observations and most of the sentiments made in the [Ukraine theme issue of the East-West Church and Ministry Report 22 (Summer 2014)], I do believe one aspect of the situation was not covered. The thing is: Putin is wildly popular in Russia—beloved by Christians and non-Christians alike. He is not seen by most as a dictator who must be tolerated or endured. My spouse refers to him as “God’s man for Russia in this hour.” Because of our missionary work we meet with many Protestant pastors in our region from different denominations, and they all unanimously support Putin. I do not believe this is due to propaganda, but rather is a result of the many positive changes he has brought to the country (mostly economic). I have heard pastors say, “There simply isn’t anyone else who would be capable of leading this great country.” There have been some prophecies about a great revival coming out of Russia, and many believe that Putin is paving the way for Russia to rise as a spiritual giant.  

Two Russian Christian responses to the summer 2014 Ukraine crisis theme issue of the East-West Church and Ministry Report bear out the chasm between Russian perceptions and Ukrainian and Western perceptions of the conflict, while also reflecting more balance and discernment than the more typical, black-and-white rhetoric of Russian—and Ukrainian—patriots. “Andrei,” an Evangelical Christian-Baptist pastor from southern Russia, shared:

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5 East-West Church and Ministry Report 22 [Fall 2014], 4.
I personally do not fully support the actions of our Russian government. For sure, the state distracts the public’s attention and manipulates people’s consciousness by searching for an external enemy in the face of domestic economic problems. I admit that Crimea was annexed, our soldiers invaded foreign territory, and our media do not tell the truth. At the same time, aggressive moves of other governments are also easily detected, for example, U.S.-engineered changes of government [in Ukraine] for reasons of profit as well as politics and the strongly nationalistic accent of the current regime in Kyiv. We Russian evangelicals find it very offensive when our Ukrainian brothers rebuke us demanding that we should oppose our Russian authorities and make our own “Maidan.” From our side, we take strong exception to Ukrainian evangelical support for Ukrainian ultra-nationalist and radical groups.

Still, “Andrei” readily conceded we see through a glass darkly:

We must clearly understand that we live in the midst of an information war, and that we should accept only proven facts—or at least understand that our views may be distorted because we simply do not have all the facts. One should put aside one’s loyalties and preconceptions in order to be objective. For most of us this is very difficult, or even impossible, because of our inability to be fully independent of our national, cultural, and spiritual allegiances. The way towards healing will be difficult, but we can take steps toward that end. We must consciously resist simplifications and black-and-white thinking.

Russian Orthodox attorney Ekaterina Smyslova, a friend for decades who has assisted dozens of Western ministries in securing legal registration, has also bemoaned media bias:

I know that believers in both countries now live under the heavy influence of secular mass media. Few in Russia believe that Ukrainians, driven to extreme measures by corruption and grim poverty, participated in Maidan protests and demanded political change of their own free will. Russian state-controlled mass media advance the idea that a fascist junta seized power in Ukraine. This junta, bribed with Western money, callously butchers peaceful people. Every day all Russian TV channels show bloody pictures illustrating the malefiance of the junta. It motivates Russians to go to eastern Ukraine as volunteers to rescue local people dying there because of the fascists. In such a context anyone lifting a voice against Russian interference in Ukraine provokes social condemnation.

Putin has a well-oiled and expertly managed propaganda machine, but his is not the only source of media distortion in the present conflict. For example, without question, people are suffering and dying in eastern Ukraine at the hands of both Russian-backed separatists and Ukrainian Army units. But one would be hard-pressed to know of the extent of civilian casualties at the hands of both Russian and Ukrainian combatants if one depended upon any one source of media coverage alone, whether Russian, Ukrainian, or Western. For example, Western and
Ukrainian media infrequently report accounts such as the following: A pastor friend in Moscow has a new member in his congregation, a recently widowed pastor and tent evangelist from Lugansk, eastern Ukraine. A Ukrainian Army artillery shell took his wife’s life as she was standing on their apartment balcony: “After that,” this grieving father of two shared, “we almost immediately moved to Moscow. We don’t have any relatives in Moscow. I didn’t find a job here yet. There are difficulties with citizenship…. By God’s mercy there will be a job for me.”

To date [late 2014], fighting in eastern Ukraine has claimed over 5,300 lives and over 9,900 wounded. Refugees displaced by the fighting number nearly one million. An ethnic Russian pastor originally from Ukraine shared with me that he fears huge loss of civilian life in the war zone for lack of heat and food. Ultra-Orthodox separatists have closed dozens of Protestant and Catholic churches and the Protestant Donetsk Christian University. Rogue separatist units have kidnapped, tortured, and killed evangelical pastors. At the same time, in central and western Ukraine some Orthodox parishes and priests loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate have been harassed and pressured to switch their allegiance to one of two Ukraine-based Orthodox jurisdictions. Piecing together a balanced picture of the Ukraine tragedy can only be attempted with a careful, inclusive reading of Russian, Ukrainian, and Western sources.

Sadly, few observers have the ability—or the inclination—to weigh the merits of what is widely regarded as the propaganda of one’s opponents.

Another sad casualty of the fighting is the loss of Christian community and collaboration in Kingdom work. Christian attorney Ekaterina Smyslova writes,

Sadly, the Christian NGO, “Russia without Orphans,” no longer cooperates with its counterpart, “Ukraine without Orphans,” because Russian and Ukrainian leaders of these two charities disagree about the situation in Ukraine. Are our political disputes worth the cost of a home for thousands of orphans? Disagreements over Putin’s policies in Ukraine are taking place in all international ministries in Eurasia, and longstanding relationships and partnerships are being broken. What is going on, brothers and sisters? What are our priorities? How can we place our political views higher than issues of faith and mercy? If God is love, how can we consider that we know God if we are unable to love our neighbors unconditionally?

Two additional conversations with Russian believers in Moscow bear repeating. The first I conducted with a thoroughgoing convert to Putinism. The second was with a pastor who, in the rising tide of national passions, defends his homeland, but who also reflects with humility and sorrow upon what is being lost spiritually in the Ukrainian crisis. In the first case, I visited with a
friend of 25 years standing who in the 1980s and 1990s had been an ardent and articulate evangelical advocate for democracy and a market economy. “Valentin,” who has stayed in my home, is now as anti-American as he ever was a supporter of Westernization: “From the age of 17 I was strongly anti-Soviet, and I was very happy to see the fall of communism and the breakup of the Soviet Union. Then as Yeltsin made so many mistakes I was neutral politically. But now since radical Ukrainian nationalists have taken power in Kyiv, I am proud to be a Russian patriot.”

“Daniel,” more thoughtful than “Valentin,” holds multiple degrees from U.S. seminaries. He supports Russian moves in Ukraine and considers Western support for the new government in Kyiv ill-considered: “The idea to play a ‘nationalistic card’ and make out of Russians the villains makes me sick. It seems to be the only way that Ukraine under the pretext of independence can slip from Russia’s influence.” Still, “Daniel” is more nuanced than most Muscovites I encountered, believing as he does that mass media, whether Russian, Ukrainian, or Western, distort the facts. He also assumes that the Russian—and Western—public may not be hearing the whole story of what is happening in eastern Ukraine. Like Ekaterina Smyslova, truly pained by the new divisions the Ukraine crisis has sown between Russian and Ukrainian Christians, he noted sadly, “There is national blood, and there is the blood of Christ. Which is thicker?” Believers in Ukraine and in the West would also do well to ponder this question because favoring loyalty to one’s earthly fatherland over one’s loyalty to God the Father is a temptation that knows no borders.