

# Putin's Russia: Commitment to Religious Ideals and Worldviews or Religion as Political Pragmatism?

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the relationship between religion and political power in Vladimir Putin's Russia. I argue that Putin's engagement with religion is primarily informed by political pragmatism rather than genuine ideological commitment. Using Naomi Goldenberg's concept of "vestigial states" and Bruce Lincoln's "maximalist" and "minimalist" cultural paradigms, I examine how religion provides ideological support for Putin's centralisation of power and resistance to Western liberalism. I analyse how Putin's attempting to reap the rewards of a market-oriented minimalist system, while maintaining the ideological and political centralisation of a maximalist system, offers varying advantages and disadvantages in co-opting the religious ideologies existent in the Russian Federation, which are interpreted as "vestigial states." The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), by supporting the "Russian World" ideology, aids in reinforcing Russia's geopolitical stance against Western influence, particularly in relation to Ukraine. Other religious groups and ideologies (Islam in the North Caucasus, or secular Soviet Communism) are treated within this framework, highlighting how their role aligns with or contradicts Putin's economic and political goals. I conclude that the state's relationship with religion in contemporary Russia is not sincere and functions primarily as a tool for sustaining autocratic rule.

**Keywords:** Vestigial states, Maximalist, Minimalist, Vladimir Putin, Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)

## **Introduction**

After former Russian president Boris Yeltsin's (1931-2007) resignation, and Vladimir Putin's (1952-) ascent to power, first as acting president, and then as president proper from May 2000, Russia saw the start of a great shift in internal policy with regards to the management of the religious plurality existent in the Russian Federation.<sup>1</sup> Putin's own religious commitments are opaque;<sup>2</sup> while apparently raised in and currently still identifying with Russian Orthodoxy,<sup>3</sup> his political engagement with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is at times pragmatically analysed, with sceptics arguing that it is a "means to an end."<sup>4</sup> In this article I argue that Putin's

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<sup>1</sup> John Andersen, "Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church: Asymmetric Symphonia?", *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 61, no. 1 (2007), pp. 186-187.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Ryan, "Putin and the Orthodox Church: How his faith shapes his politics", *Theos*, February 16 (2022). At: <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2022/02/16/essay-on-vladimir-putin>.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan, "Putin and the Orthodox Church: how his faith shapes his politics".

<sup>4</sup> James W. Warhola, "Religion and Politics under the Putin Administration: Accommodation and Confrontation within Managed Pluralism", *Journal of Church and State*, vol. 49 (2007), p. 79: "Lawrence Uzzell, a close observer of Russian religious and political affairs and head of International Religious Freedom Watch, offered

Russia and its relation to the religious is best understood: firstly, by internationally situating it in its given geopolitical and economic context of inferiority; secondly, by revealing Putin's dual-yet-contradictory desires to reap the benefits of free-market capitalism, without its associated cultural implications, particular framed through a synthesis of Bruce Lincoln's "maximalist" and "minimalist" paradigms;<sup>5</sup> and thirdly, by demonstrating how the present domestic religious groups in the Russian Federation, understood through Naomi Goldenberg's framework of "vestigial states,"<sup>6</sup> meet or contradict these geopolitical goals, and the consequences derived from these successes or failures. Thus, I will argue that Putin's relationship to religion is greatly more informed by political pragmatism than any genuine commitment to religious ideals.

Regarding the first argument, it was under Leonid Brezhnev (1906-1982) that the Soviet Union fell into the "Era of Stagnation," a period of great socioeconomic decline.<sup>7</sup> This stagnation revealed the failures of early Soviet isolationism, and its planned economic style. This in turn seeded a new, West-facing and capitalistic outlook that manifested in Mikhail Gorbachev's (1931-2022) *perestroika* (перестройка) policies,<sup>8</sup> and reached its zenith under Putin.<sup>9</sup> Putin's goal, I argue, is to reap the benefits of free trade and Western-style market economics, while maintaining political centralisation and Russian cultural distinctiveness. Lincoln argues that markets are increasingly playing a culturally constructing role.<sup>10</sup> Using his models of religiously "maximalist" and "minimalist" cultures,<sup>11</sup> I will demonstrate that Putin is attempting to maintain a maximalist cultural and political style, while organising Russia's economy in a mostly capitalist style, the foundation of a minimalist culture.

Understood within this dynamic, the role of religion under Putin can be critically identified as performing that of ideological backing and cultural insulation. The exemplar of this is Putin's relationship with the ROC, which, culminating in the "Russian World" ideology, represents a continuation of Russian protectionism and anti-Westernism that, ironically, can be found at the heights of early, atheistic communism.<sup>12</sup> To further elucidate the role of religion in Putin's Russia, I will employ Goldenberg's "vestigial state" paradigm. Goldenberg posits that religions can be understood as the vestigial remnants of former sovereignties, hitherto incorporated under extant sovereignties.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, they come into tension with, or coalescence with, the current power depending respectively on how they threaten, or assist, the

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in Autumn 2004 that the Kremlin was 'getting more skilful' at using the Russian Orthodox Church for political advantage, as well as demonstrating a 'growing ability to manipulate all religions.'

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 59.

<sup>6</sup> Naomi Goldenberg, "Theorizing Religions as Vestigial States in Relation to Gender and Law: Three Cases", *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2013), pp. 39–41.

<sup>7</sup> Andrei Grachev, "The Dynamics of New Thinking in the Era of Stagnation", in *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals, and the End of the Cold War*, ed. Robert English (New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 117.

<sup>8</sup> Rick Simon, "Passive revolution, perestroika, and the emergence of the new Russia", *Capital & Class*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2010), pp. 429–448.

<sup>9</sup> Anders Åslund, "An assessment of Putin's economic policy", *CESifo Forum*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2008), pp. 16–21.

<sup>10</sup> Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*, p. 59.

<sup>11</sup> Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*, p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> Valentina Feklyunina, "Soft power and identity: Russia, Ukraine and the 'Russian world (s)'", *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 22, no. 4 (2016), pp. 781–785.

<sup>13</sup> Naomi Goldenberg "'Religion' and its limits: Reflections on discursive borders and boundaries", *Journal of the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions*, vol. 7 (2019), p. 4.

relevant hegemon.<sup>14</sup> In the context of economic dependance on the West and Western-style economics, and a continued attempt at ideologically independence from it, the various religions existing in the Russian Federation will present different balance sheets respective to Putin's geopolitical aims. Through an analysis of the paradigm of vestigial states, religious groups such as Russian Orthodoxy and Islam are variously treated, and as a novel instantiation, discuss the role of Soviet Communist ideology as a vestigial state, showing how it neatly fits Goldenberg's framework, given its status as a former sovereignty that has been "conquered." In analysing these cases, the argument that the benefit of Goldenberg's framework is that it better answers the relation of church and state in Russia when compared to secularist paradigms, because, despite Russia's constitutionally secular status, the *realpolitik* stance of Putin has led to an all-but-secular privileging of the ROC, which is easier explained through the lens of vestigial states.

### From Khrushchev to Yeltsin

In a 1956 meeting at the Polish embassy in Moscow, Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971), the first leader of post-Stalinist Russia, infamously declared, "[a]bout the capitalist states, it doesn't depend on you whether or not we exist. If you don't like us, don't accept our invitations, and don't invite us to come to see you. Whether you like it or not, history is on our side. We will bury you!"<sup>15</sup> This declaration was a clear message to the West that Russia did not need its assistance, and it opened the tensest years of the Cold War. Gorbachev later opined that Khrushchev was "describing the competition between the two systems, and wanted to show that socialism does not fear being compared to capitalism, and that the future belongs to socialism."<sup>16</sup> Gorbachev further asserted that Khrushchev's mandate of Soviet isolationism was not made due to some *a priori* ideological position, but rather that it was a learned position derived from the frustration of Khrushchev's "sincere efforts and specific proposals to improve the international situation [which] came up against a brick wall of incomprehension and resistance."<sup>17</sup>

Following Khrushchev, the failures of the early Soviet system, particularly under Brezhnev,<sup>18</sup> became increasingly apparent, although they are hard to pin to one cause. In economic terms, Janos Kornai described the socialist system in the context of Eastern Europe as a "shortage economy."<sup>19</sup> The experience of the socialist citizen is one of, he writes, "countless frustrations of thwarted purchasing intentions, queuing, forced substitution, searches for goods, and postponement of purchases in their daily lives as consumers and producers."<sup>20</sup> This quotidian experience of shortage, is, for Kornai, rooted in the socialist

<sup>14</sup> Goldenberg "'Religion' and its limits: Reflections on discursive borders and boundaries", p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> "We Will Bury You!" *Time Magazine Archive* (2022). At: <https://web.archive.org/web/20070124152821/http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,867329,00.html>

<sup>16</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), p. 150.

<sup>17</sup> Gorbachev, *Perestroika*, p. 150.

<sup>18</sup> Grachev, "The Dynamics of New Thinking in the Era of Stagnation", p. 117.

<sup>19</sup> Janos Kornai, *The Socialist System: The Political Economy of Communism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 238-243.

<sup>20</sup> Kornai, *The Socialist System: The Political Economy of Communism*, p. 234.

system being fundamentally “resource-constrained” as opposed to capitalism’s being “demand-constrained.”<sup>21</sup> To wit, there is an excess of demand and not enough supply in the former, and the opposite situation obtains in the latter. This state of shortage can temporarily occur in capitalist economies, yet in socialist economies is consistently and systematically reproduced by the relations between firms and their further relations to central-planning agencies.<sup>22</sup> Over the course of the mid to late twentieth century, the resource-constrained economies of the Soviet Union fell behind in both growth and innovation, while the West, albeit bumpily, had trended upwards.<sup>23</sup>

Under the pressures of economic stagnation, new visions for the Soviet economy started to emerge. Notably, and to the chagrin of die-hard socialist-isolationists, Gorbachev began his *perestroika* campaign, in an effort to end, in his own words, the “stagnation process.”<sup>24</sup> The ‘restructuring’ of the Soviet economy was not initially intended to signal a full transition to a free market system, but rather the modification of state socialism with free market and democratic ideas.<sup>25</sup> Critically, Gorbachev was emphatic regarding the prospect of increasing intellectual and cultural exchange with the broader, globalised world.<sup>26</sup> Gorbachev failed to maintain significant political esteem in Russia’s transition from Soviet to Federation, and Boris Yeltsin became the first popularly elected President of the new nation in 1991.<sup>27</sup> It was under Yeltsin that sweeping efforts at privatisation were made,<sup>28</sup> and a disjunct with Russia’s Communist past truly emerged. The “shock therapy” of the 1990s was seen in many regards as a failure, with Steve Keen, for example, arguing that the hasty transition from state socialism to market economics could be better viewed instead as a transition from “socialist to Third World [sic].”<sup>29</sup> Some argue that shock therapy is necessarily linked to an acceptance of political pluralism and democratisation,<sup>30</sup> which were not policies faithfully enacted in Yeltsin’s presidency, and that Russia’s economic reforms were subject to the same strong-arming as had always been, which is what lead to the systemic failure of the reform.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Janos Kornai, “Resource-constrained versus demand-constrained systems,” *Econometrica: Journal of the Econometric Society* (1979), p. 803.

<sup>22</sup> Paul G. Hare, “Economics of shortage and non-price control,” *Journal of Comparative Economics*, vol. 6, no. 4 (1982), p. 408.

<sup>23</sup> Steve Keen, “The Russian Defeat of Economic Orthodoxy,” in *The Crisis in Economics: The Post-autistic Economics Movement: The First 600 Days*, ed. Edward Fullbrook (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 183.

<sup>24</sup> Gorbachev, *Perestroika*, p. 34: “Perestroika means overcoming the stagnation process, breaking down the braking mechanism, creating a dependable and effective mechanism for the acceleration of social and economic progress and giving it greater dynamism.”

<sup>25</sup> Gorbachev, *Perestroika*, pp. 22-24.

<sup>26</sup> Gorbachev, *Perestroika*, p. 152: “I am convinced that today’s politicians must be aware of the intellectual potential of other countries and peoples, for otherwise their activities will be doomed to provincialism and a narrow national view, if not worse. That is why we stand for a broad dialogue, for the comparison of views and for debate and discussion... I would therefore say that the informal and lively dialogue of politicians, scientists and cultural personalities is an imperative.”

<sup>27</sup> Stephen White, Ian McAllister, and Olga Kryshnanovskaya, “El’tsin and his Voters: Popular Support in the 1991 Russian Presidential Elections and After,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 46, no. 2 (1994), p. 285.

<sup>28</sup> Helmut Steiner, *Privatisation and the Emergence of New Business Elites in Russia*. No. P 01-004. WZB Discussion Paper (2001), pp. 10-17.

<sup>29</sup> Keen, “The Russian Defeat of Economic Orthodoxy,” p. 183.

<sup>30</sup> John Marangos, “The Political Economy of Shock Therapy,” *Journal of Economic Surveys*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2002), p. 46.

<sup>31</sup> Lynn D. Nelson and Irina Y. Kuzes, *Radical Reform in Yeltsin’s Russia: Political, Economic, and Social Dimensions* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 38.

## The Minimalist/ Maximalist Synthesis

The undemocratic implementation of free market reforms and privatisation aptly symbolises the later policies of Putin's presidency. Putin's assumption of power in May of 2000 saw an improvement in the economy, with continued Western-style reforms,<sup>32</sup> yet also saw a simultaneous increase in political centralisation<sup>33</sup> and an inversely proportional decline in democracy.<sup>34</sup> It is within this context that Lincoln's "maximalist" and "minimalist" cultural paradigm will be introduced.

The axiomatic claim that begins Lincoln's delineation is that markets have replaced other philosophies in the formation of culture in modernity.<sup>35</sup> This is not a completely novel idea, Marx noted that "social consciousness" is produced by "relations of production."<sup>36</sup> In opposition to the materialist formulation is Weber's idea of a religious "ethic" producing economic shifts, a reversal of the causal link between religion and economics.<sup>37</sup> In some ways, Lincoln synthesises these two views, arguing for a dual system. In maximalist cultures religion is, Lincoln writes, "the central domain of culture", and "[c]ultural preferences [are] constituted largely as morality and stabilised by religion."<sup>38</sup> Whereas in minimalist cultures, it is the economy that is "the central domain of culture", and "[c]ultural preferences [are] constituted largely as fashion and open to market fluctuations."<sup>39</sup>

For Lincoln, the prevailing institution in the non-capitalistic maximalist culture is religion. I would like to expand this framework by positing that ideological, and even explicitly anti-religious regimes such as the Soviet Union, could be viewed as maximalist when considering that its cultural norms are derived from a centralised and largely unchanging philosophical outlook, that is akin to a religious-metaphysical structuring in a Durkheimian functionalist sense. Of course, even Lincoln notes that the maximalist and minimalist dichotomy is one that is not fully realised in any given instance. Taking the example of the USSR, it was in the end the case that both internal and external market pressures contributed to its dissolution, and hence, even while framing it as mostly maximalist, it is still evident that it was not completely impermeable to minimalist tendencies. This largely resolves the dichotomy induced by the mutually exclusive paradigms of Marx and Weber, as there is realistic nuance in Lincoln's paradigm in highlighting the back and forth flow between religion and economics.

The failures of planned economies can point us towards the adoption of at least some market-style economics as being a bare minimum for geopolitical success, and in following

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<sup>32</sup> Åslund, "An assessment of Putin's economic policy", p. 17.

<sup>33</sup> Warhola, "Religion and Politics under the Putin Administration: Accommodation and Confrontation within Managed Pluralism", pp. 78-79.

<sup>34</sup> Graeme Gill, "A new turn to Authoritarian Rule in Russia?", *Democratisation*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2006), pp. 58-77.

<sup>35</sup> Lincoln, "On the Relation of Religion and Culture", p. 59.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Marx, "Preface," *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), p. 4. At: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/>.

<sup>37</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1930), pp. 1-3.

<sup>38</sup> Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*, p. 59.

<sup>39</sup> Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*, p. 59.

this trend, the prevalent cultural model is shifting widely towards that of minimalist styles.<sup>40</sup> An exemplar of this shift is Saudi Arabia, which in its *Vision 2030* campaign is aiming to Westernise and de-theocratise the state for the purpose of increasing Western investment and economic growth.<sup>41</sup> However, many scholars have connected free trade practices with democratisation. This idea can be traced to Adam Smith.<sup>42</sup> The direction of causality is currently a hotly contested theme,<sup>43</sup> although one line of argumentation claims that “trade agreements should foster democratisation because they undermine the ability of governments to distribute rents to maintain an autocratic regime.”<sup>44</sup> Additionally, the conditionality of trade agreements offered by Western democracies to autocracies have been argued to “improve compliance [with democratic norms] more than actual human rights treaties.”<sup>45</sup> Yet if it is to be taken as true that freer markets and trade undermine autocratic rule, then the autocrats trying to accomplish the ‘best of both worlds’ are in a precarious position. Certain preconditions make this balancing act easier. If, in the context of trade, increases in “rent distribution” and the number of interacting economic agents balance political power structures, then Putin is well-served by Russia’s status as a petro-state. Since the infamous exile of oil oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky in 2003, Putin has secured the lion’s share of Russia’s energy export supply under the state apparatus.<sup>46</sup> Like Venezuela and Saudi Arabia, Russia’s reliance on a singular export creates a bottleneck respective to rent distribution; control over Russia’s economy, and hence political power, is easier secured than if it were diversified.

The “contagion” of democratic values is recognised by undemocratic states, and another means for circumventing this cultural pollution, as well as the conditionality of Western trade practices, is by trading with other autocratic states. This serves the dual purpose of evading Western sanctions, and likewise evading the cultural osmosis of democratic values that might undermine autocratic rule. This growing trade bloc of autocratic countries has been described by Anne Applebaum as “Autocracy Inc.”<sup>47</sup> Despite having distinct ideologies underpinning their reign, these states and leaders have developed a commercial relationship of convenience which offers them the mutual opportunity of continued rule. In this context, religious ideals, or jettisoned ideologies such as Soviet Communism, offer Putin alternate world views that support his autocratic rule, instead of challenging it, hence performing the role of cultural insulation while engaging in the open, globalising economy of both ideas and trade. In essence, this yields to him the benefits of a free market that is actually unfree, to control a democratic state that is actually undemocratic. Society in the Russian Federation is seemingly minimalist, yet is carefully shepherded by centrally distributed political ideals, and

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<sup>40</sup> Roger E. Backhouse, “The rise of free market economics: Economists and the role of the state since 1970”, *History of Political Economy*, vol. 37, issue suppl. 1 (2005), p. 355.

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Grand and Katherine Wolff, “Assessing *Saudi Vision 2030*: A 2020 review”, *Atlantic Council*, vol. 17 (2020), p. 64.

<sup>42</sup> Mark S. Manger and Mark A. Pickup, “The coevolution of trade agreement networks and democracy”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 60, no. 1 (2016), p. 164.

<sup>43</sup> Manger and Pickup, “The coevolution of trade agreement networks and democracy”, p. 165.

<sup>44</sup> Manger and Pickup, “The coevolution of trade agreement networks and democracy”, p. 165.

<sup>45</sup> Manger and Pickup, “The coevolution of trade agreement networks and democracy”, p. 165.

<sup>46</sup> Simeon Djankov, *Russia's Economy under Putin: From Crony Capitalism to State Capitalism*. No. PB15-18 (Washington: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2015), p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> Anne Applebaum, “The bad guys are winning”, *The Atlantic*, vol. 15, no. 11 (2021), p. 6.

therefore actually still maximalist.

## Religions as Vestigial States in the Russian Federation

To the extent that Putin's vision for the Russian Federation is shaped by this dual goal, the role of religion can be pragmatically analysed in its assistance or resistance to this goal's accomplishment. As a further means to methodologically disentangle the relationship of state and religion in Putin's Russia, I will utilise Goldenberg's paradigm of 'vestigial states'. Goldenberg begins by problematising the distinction of 'religion' and the 'state'. In a similar vein to Cavanaugh,<sup>48</sup> she argues that religion does not transhistorically or transculturally maintain itself as categorically unique from the state, and that such distinctions are subject to cultural flux.<sup>49</sup> From this basis Goldenberg suggest one imagines so-called 'religions' as rather being "vestigial states," meaning they are remnants of past sovereignties that exist in a now-relegated condition one could call "vestigiality."<sup>50</sup>

In a partially euhemeristic account, Goldenberg analogises the religiously incorporative strategy of nation-states to Hesiod's *Theogony*; the defeated Titans become impotent administrators of restricted jurisdictions within the new Olympian world order.<sup>51</sup> Within this understanding, it can be inferred that the extent to which vestigial states attempt to reclaim sovereign power dictates the degree of conflict to which they find themselves in with the dominant state. Alternatively, aiding the dominant state in achieving its goals without contesting its power can provide the vestigial state with benefits and entitlements in both the religious and political realm.<sup>52</sup>

## Vestigial States in the Putin Regime: The Russian Orthodox Church

Conceptualising the religions of the Russian Federation as vestigial states offers a powerful explanatory tool regarding the increasing laxity, or alternatively, strictness, with which they have been treated under Putin. The answers this heuristic lead to tend to undermine the prospect of Putin's policies being guided by any genuine religious commitment, or conversely even abandonment of some deeply held principle of secularity, and rather point to a realist, pragmatic approach to statecraft. The exemplar, not only of synergistic religio-political enterprise, but also of the vestigial state *par excellence*, is that of the ROC.

The ROC epitomises the vestigial state concept as it represents the subsumed progenitor of the modern Russian state. The Christianisation of Kievan Rus, the ancestor of the modern states of Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia, is considered by many, Putin included, to be the

<sup>48</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, "The myth of religious violence", *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence*, ed. Andrew R. Murphy (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), p. 16.

<sup>49</sup> Naomi Goldenberg, "The category of religion in the technology of governance: An argument for understanding religions as vestigial states", in *Religion as a Category of Governance and Sovereignty*, ed. Trevor Stack, Naomi Goldenberg, and Timothy Fitzgerald (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), p. 280.

<sup>50</sup> Goldenberg, "'Religion' and its limits: reflections on discursive borders and boundaries", p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> Goldenberg, "'Religion' and its limits: reflections on discursive borders and boundaries", p. 6.

<sup>52</sup> Goldenberg, "'Religion' and its limits: reflections on discursive borders and boundaries", p. 5.

principal foundation of the modern Russian State.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, it is also widely considered the birth of the ROC, which has had a chequered history corresponding to the various political transformation of Eastern Europe and Russia across time.<sup>54</sup> Amongst the other religions of the Russian Federation, the ROC could be titled *primus inter pares*,<sup>55</sup> and its relationship to the Russian state has rather aptly been described as “asymmetric symphonia.”<sup>56</sup> The “asymmetric” component, for the purpose of this argument, indicates a quality of subjugated statehood, that is, vestigial statehood, with regards to the ROC. The “symphonia” component points towards the fact that the ROC is greatly tolerated and supported, because it “provide[s] some of the intellectual and cultural backing for Putin’s Statist vision for Russia,”<sup>57</sup> and does not contest the dominant sovereign.

Within the context of Putin seeking a “statist,” or, maximalist, Russia, while at the same time an economically liberal, or, minimalist, Russia, the ROC has positioned itself in metaphysical alignment with these political goals. Ironically, if Putin’s utilisation of the ROC is more indicative of political pragmatism than it is religious commitment, the ROC’s shift towards the worldly can be said to express the same, if not more. That this shift towards the political has occurred in a conversely more religiously permissive space is counterintuitive, but no accident. In a religiously hostile context such as the Soviet Union the religious blocs have no choice but to be secularised and de-institutionally relegated to the otherworldly or domestic fringes of internal politics.<sup>58</sup> It may be that it is only when religious groups are given the option for upward mobility that there is any potential payoff in syncretising theological ideas with political agendas. As a caveat, it is important to distinguish this kind of free-forming, adaptive ideologisation from the ROC’s politicisation under Joseph Stalin (1878-1953), which was done under compulsion.<sup>59</sup> Returning to my argument again; firstly, it can be said that Putin’s goals are a politically maximalist and economically minimalist synthesis; secondly, the ROC and other religions operate within the Russian Federation as vestigial states, and hence, within this context of vestigiality are beholden to the dominant sovereign; thirdly, the ROC then has achieved the status of *primus inter pares* through a deep politicisation, in alignment with Putin’s goals, of its religious outlook.

In the case of Russia and the ROC, Goldenberg’s statecraft-oriented model has greater explanatory power when compared to secularity paradigms, which largely fall apart when regarding the *realpolitik* of Putin, as the state and the ROC have both consolidated the same geopolitical goals, coalescing around a jointly held “Russian World” ideology.<sup>60</sup> The ideology

<sup>53</sup> Vladimir Putin, *Vladimir Putin’s Meeting with Young Academics and History Teachers at the Museum of Modern Russian History*. 5 November (2014), “...Prince Vladimir was baptised, subsequently baptising Rus. The first, initial font of Russia’s Baptism...”

<sup>54</sup> George Soroka, “International Relations by Proxy? The Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church”, *Religions*, vol. 13, no. 3 (2022), p. 1, “Historically, the ROC has both challenged—as was the case under the 17<sup>th</sup>-century reformer Patriarch Nikon, who headed the Church from 1652 to 1666—and been subjugated by the Russian state.”

<sup>55</sup> Giovanni Codevilla, “Relations between Church and State in Russia Today”, *Religion, State & Society*, vol. 36, no. 2 (2008), p. 113.

<sup>56</sup> Andersen, “Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church: Asymmetric Symphonia?”, p 185.

<sup>57</sup> Ryan, “Putin and the Orthodox Church: how his faith shapes his politics.”

<sup>58</sup> Philip Walters, “The Russian Orthodox Church and the Soviet State”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 483, no. 1 (1986), pp. 135-145.

<sup>59</sup> Walters, “The Russian Orthodox Church and the Soviet State”, pp. 135-145.

<sup>60</sup> Feklyunina, “Soft power and identity: Russia, Ukraine and the ‘Russian world (s)’”, pp. 781-785.



of the Russian World, dually-headed and espoused by Putin and Patriarch Kirill (1946-), revolves around a civilisational discourse that incorporates Ukraine and Belarus by virtue of a shared cultural milieu – specifically the shared features of “the Russian language, Orthodox Christianity and Russian culture”<sup>61</sup> – as well as a common, but now ruptured, past. Within this understanding Russia forms the head of the Russian World, which in its totality stands in opposition to supposedly morally corrupt West.<sup>62</sup> The Russian World vision provides a religiously infused transnational basis for imperium in Eastern Europe that Putin makes sure to employ. For instance, following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, he made the following justification, “[a]nd this history does not hold any losing positions for us, starting with the fact that for ethnic Russians (I mean that particular segment of our multi-ethnic peoples – ethnic, Orthodox Russians), Crimea has a kind of sacred significance.”<sup>63</sup> Speaking similarly of the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine, Patriarch Kirill claimed that it was “a struggle that has not a physical, but a metaphysical significance.”<sup>64</sup>

While the Russian World concept does co-opt genuine historical truths, for example, the past unity of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, the polemical use of this history appears more proximately caused by material preconditions. The broader economic and cultural implications of a Russian Ukraine, or conversely a European Ukraine, are hard to miss. The patently obvious economic promise of Ukraine lies in its access to the Black Sea<sup>65</sup> and its status as the “breadbasket” of Europe.<sup>66</sup> Control of Ukrainian territory would superbly aid the Russian market in its global positioning. As far as the cultural, the loss of Ukraine to Western hegemony would be all-but-fatal to the vision of a “Russian World,” and critically, would constitute a loss to “the enemy.” It is known that past and current conflicts in Ukraine can be interpreted as a Russian response to the perceived encroachment of NATO.<sup>67</sup> Ukraine, as well as the other countries that separate Russia from Western Europe, form a buffer between Russia and the West. Russia, in seeking to reimagine itself as an economic superpower with all the benefits of market capitalism, and without the necessary cultural trade-offs, would necessarily see far greater threat in a western border that is culturally and politically aligned with the West, as would the ROC, who positions itself greatly in opposition to Western liberalism and consumerism.<sup>68</sup> Evidencing this, Thomas Bremer gave a comment on Patriarch Kirill's blessing of the 2022 Ukraine War, stating that, “[Kirill] expressed his view that behind the war

<sup>61</sup> Feklyunina, “Soft power and identity: Russia, Ukraine and the ‘Russian world (s)’”, p. 783.

<sup>62</sup> Feklyunina, “Soft power and identity: Russia, Ukraine and the ‘Russian world (s)’”, p. 785.

<sup>63</sup> Putin, *Vladimir Putin's meeting with young academics and history teachers at the Museum of Modern Russian History*.

<sup>64</sup> Jan Leonid Bornstein, “Moscow Patriarch Kirill: War has a metaphysical significance against gay parade”, *The European Times*, 6 March (2022). At: <https://europeantimes.news/2022/03/moscow-patriarch-kirill-war-has-a-metaphysical-significance-against-gay-parade/>.

<sup>65</sup> Byron Chong, “The role of the Black Sea in Russia's strategic calculus”, *Center for International Maritime Security* (2017). At: <http://cimsec.org>.

<sup>66</sup> Kiran Bala Das, “Ukraine: Stand-of Threatens Europe Breadbasket”, *International Journal of Social Science*, no. 3, no. 3 (2014), pp. 378-379.

<sup>67</sup> Andrew T. Wolff, “The future of NATO enlargement after the Ukraine crisis”, *International Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 5 (2015), pp. 1103-1121.

<sup>68</sup> Soroka, “International Relations by Proxy? The Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church”, “In a broader ideational sense, the aims of the ROC center on upholding conservative religious and societal values in the face of what Church officials take to be their increasing irrelevance to (or even outright rejection by) the modern world and countering the homogenizing thrust of Western consumerist culture, along with its associated liberalism.”

in Ukraine there is a spiritual difference between the West and the Orthodox world, and it is obvious that for him, the latter is the better.”<sup>69</sup> Despite Putin’s paranoia about Ukraine’s allegiances, if anything has driven Ukraine westward, it is Putin’s own geopolitics. Ukrainian support for NATO membership rose from 18% to 47.8% in the aftermath of the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and to as high as 89% following the 2022 invasion.<sup>70</sup> Likewise, Ukrainian public sentiment regarding EU membership was similarly shored by the 2014 annexation and has only trended upwards since the 2022 invasion.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, part of the ‘reason’ for Russia’s imperialism—shifting Ukrainian allegiances—has been produced and guaranteed by the imperialism itself.

This paranoid, anti-Western *realpolitik* can be historically traced. It is no coincidence that Russia’s geopolitical interest in its other, eastern-bordered countries swelled at a time when Western colonialism had a closer grip on countries like nearby India. The so-called “Great Game,” that largely centred around Central Asia, was much more the result of competing Russian and English interests, than it was Russian and Chinese interests.<sup>72</sup> Within Lincoln’s paradigm, one can further note that maximalist cultures are always threatened by the potential cultural corruption of minimalist cultures,<sup>73</sup> and so it is no surprise that NATO forms a problem in the face of Putin’s desire for maximalist style authority and centralisation. In this sense, the “Russian World” ideology extolled by the Kirill and Putin himself forms the basis for an internal representation of Russia as an “alternative, non-Western model of modernity.”<sup>74</sup> With “non-Western” corresponding to maximalist visions, and a fear of liberalism, but “modernity” corresponding to the still-desired benefits of modern market economics.

To summarise, the context of economic inferiority in which Russia finds itself, interpreted through Putin’s politically realist framing of competition with the West, implies that Russia must necessarily retain or seek control of former Soviet states, which risk falling under Western influence. The backing for this imperialism has been derived from a joint project with the ROC that is underpinned by the Russian World ideology. I additionally posit that Patriarch Kirill has provided a religio-cultural justification for this ideology because, fundamentally, this encourages Putin to privilege the ROC over other religious groups.

### The Northern Caucasus and the Chechen Problem

It is of critical importance to note that the privileges afforded to the ROC are resultant on its rather singular capacity to appeal to a sense of Russian foundationalism.<sup>75</sup> The “asymmetric symphonia” between the Russian state and the ROC is well represented in the numerous

<sup>69</sup> Cited in Niko Vorobyov, “Patriarch Kirill: Putin ally faces backlash after ‘blessing’ war”, *Al Jazeera*, 28 March (2022). At: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/28/patriarch-kirill-putin-ally-faces-backlash>.

<sup>70</sup> Anna Anisimova, “Ukraine and NATO – Evidence from Public Opinion Surveys”, *Stockholm School of Economics*, 30 October (2023), pp. 2-3.

<sup>71</sup> Olga Onuch, “Ukrainians’ Unwavering Path Toward the EU”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (August 2023), p. 1.

<sup>72</sup> David Fromkin, “The Great Game in Asia”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 58 (1979), pp. 936-951.

<sup>73</sup> Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*, p. 59.

<sup>74</sup> Mikhail Suslov, “‘Russian World’ concept: Post-Soviet geopolitical ideology and the logic of ‘spheres of influence’”, *Geopolitics*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2018), p. 330.

<sup>75</sup> Feklyunina, “Soft power and identity: Russia, Ukraine and the ‘Russian world (s)’”, pp. 783-784.

constitutional breaches of secularity in favour of the ROC.<sup>76</sup> Notable amongst the religious groups who operate within the supposedly benevolent “hegemonic ecumenism”<sup>77</sup> of the ROC is Islam. Islam constitutes a substantial religious minority in Russia and forms the denominational majority in the North Caucasus region.<sup>78</sup> To understand the relationship of the Putin administration to Islam, it is crucial to first understand the geopolitical importance of the area within which the religion predominates. Russia derives most of its local geopolitical power from the European Union’s dependance on its hydrocarbon energy supplies,<sup>79</sup> although this situation is perhaps irreversibly undermined following the sanctions enforced throughout the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine.<sup>80</sup> In this context, the North Caucasus presented a key strategic point in maintaining this energy hegemony, as its loss offers European powers the opportunity for a corridor from Central Asia to Europe to be opened, bypassing Russian-controlled supply lines.<sup>81</sup> José Antonio Peña-Ramos, Phillipp Bagus and Dmitri Amirov-Belova, for example, note that the Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline, owned by Azerbaijan, runs through multiple North Caucasus republics, meaning their potential independences would largely cut out Russia as the middleman in Azerbaijan’s oil dealings with Europe.<sup>82</sup> As far as pure hydrocarbon reserves, the North Caucasus republics, in particular Dagestan, all have relatively small but non-trivial potential.<sup>83</sup>

The Chechen conflicts were landmarks in post-Soviet geopolitics in Russia. The Second Chechen War (1999-2009) is of particular interest to the question at hand. Understanding the strategic significance of the North Caucasus, it is easy to see why, upon Putin’s ascension to power, amongst his top priorities was that of quelling the Wahhabi secessionist rebellion in Chechnya, going so far as to say that his “historical mission... consisted of resolving the situation in the Northern Caucasus.”<sup>84</sup> The secessionists’ movements in the Caucasus have an especially Islamist tint, but this style of Islamic Nationalism is not uniform across the region, and comes into conflict with more moderate, pro-Russian Sunnism.<sup>85</sup> Through Goldenberg’s paradigm, it can be said that the Wahhabi movements in Chechnya are an expression of a desire to supersede Islam’s status as vestigial. In this sense, it is not strictly the case that Islam itself is the cause of the conflicts; in fact, understood in terms of Putin’s desires for trade benefits with the West and for broader economic benefits through capitalism, while maintaining ideological distance from the West, the moderate brand of Islam found in the North Caucasus

<sup>76</sup> Codevilla, “Relations between church and state in Russia today”, p. 113.

<sup>77</sup> Warhola, “Religion and Politics under the Putin Administration: Accommodation and Confrontation within Managed Pluralism”, p. 79.

<sup>78</sup> Juan Carlos Antunez, “Islam in Russia: Challenge or Opportunity”, *Análisis GESI*, vol. 34 (2016), p. 7.

<sup>79</sup> José Antonio Peña-Ramos, Philipp Bagus, and Dmitri Amirov-Belova, “The North Caucasus Region as a Blind Spot in the ‘European Green Deal’: Energy Supply Security and Energy Superpower Russia”, *Energies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2020), p. 1.

<sup>80</sup> Kate Abnett, “EU unveils 210 bln euro plan to ditch Russian fossil fuels”, *Reuters*, 9 May (2019).

<sup>81</sup> Peña-Ramos, Bagus, and Amirov-Belova, “The North Caucasus Region as a Blind Spot in the ‘European Green Deal’”, p. 5.

<sup>82</sup> Peña-Ramos, Bagus, and Amirov-Belova, “The North Caucasus Region as a Blind Spot in the ‘European Green Deal’”, pp. 5-6.

<sup>83</sup> Peña-Ramos, Bagus, and Amirov-Belova, “The North Caucasus Region as a Blind Spot in the ‘European Green Deal’”, p. 7.

<sup>84</sup> Ryan, “Putin and the Orthodox Church: how his faith shapes his politics”.

<sup>85</sup> Peña-Ramos, Bagus, and Amirov-Belova, “The North Caucasus Region as a Blind Spot in the ‘European Green Deal’”, p. 5.

perfectly meets both these goals. Because it is generally pro-Russian, restricted to the non-political, and serves to remedy ethnic tensions in the diverse region by providing a supra-ethnic model of identity. These all increase stability in the region, which ensures Russia's oil trade supplies are not geopolitically compromised. Likewise, while proving crucial for trade with Europe, a North Caucasus that is decisively moderately Islamic presents the opportunity for a kind of "managed maximalism" under Putin's auspices. That is, despite Islam's being somewhat incompatible with traditional ethno-Russian nationalistic ideas, it correlates to a societal structuring that is largely adjacent to a maximalist, religio-centric ideal, which corresponds better to Putin's vision of political centralisation and authoritarianism.

Furthermore, this moderate, and decidedly vestigial brand of Islam in the North Caucasus presents the opportunity for a kind of immunity to the "consumerist corruption" of the West, while still carrying out exploitation of the region for its resources for capitalistic purposes. A vestigial Islam in the Northern Caucasus offers possibilities of continued Russian paternalism in the region, perhaps best encapsulated by Putin's own words that, "freedom, independence and prosperity [of Chechnya] can be achieved only together with a free and prosperous Russia."<sup>86</sup>

### **Soviet Communism as a Vestigial State**

The perhaps most intriguing case of relations between religion and state in Russia is that of Soviet Communist ideology. It can be countered that Soviet Communism does not constitute a religious group, and rather constitutes the opposite, as it was explicitly anti-religious. One could reject this argument by invoking a Durkheimian functionalist understanding of the religious. That is, what function does Soviet Communism serve, and could that function justifiably parallel that of the religious? Within my given frameworks, those of Lincoln and Goldenberg, I propose that civilisational ideologies such as Communism, within the context of statecraft and culture, offer the same functionalist capabilities as religion. Soviet Communism, despite its anti-religious claims, broadly trespasses into typically religious domains of ethical, and some would say metaphysical, concerns regarding the organisation of the world, society and the individual.<sup>87</sup> My chosen paradigms already tend towards functionalist understandings of religion, as they problematise its definitional boundaries.<sup>88</sup> Hence, it can be said that I have extended the already present functionalist logic in these frameworks to the domain of the ideological, for the purpose of using them as a heuristic tool.

In this sense, the Soviet Union could be described as being sufficiently, functionally maximalist, yet instead of being religiously centred, it is ideologically centred. Cultural norms emanated from the centralised power of the Communist Party, and the relatively inviolate market did not expose Soviet citizens to cultural flux by virtue of its stringent regulation and demand-unresponsive nature. As far as its status as a vestigial state, this seems even more

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<sup>86</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Address to the First Session of the Parliament of the Republic of Chechnya", 12 December (2005).

<sup>87</sup> Marcia Kula, "Communism as Religion", *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2005), pp. 371-381.

<sup>88</sup> Goldenberg, "The category of religion in the technology of governance: An argument for understanding religions as vestigial states", p. 280.

apparent. On 23 August 1991, Yeltsin finalised an edict suspending the Communist Party of the RSFSR from political activity, essentially destroying any state status the party had hitherto possessed.<sup>89</sup> In effect, the party was separated from the state apparatus, or one could say, subjected to “secularisation.” Following this line of thought, the Communist Party and its ideology were relegated to the domain of the vestigial. It is then within this context of prior maximality, and current vestigiality, that the Soviet Communist ideology is treated with respect to Putin’s goals.

Putin has not hidden his nostalgia for the glory of old Soviet imperium. In an address to Russia’s leading politicians in 2005, he remarked that “the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century.”<sup>90</sup> Disregarding the opacity of Putin’s personal beliefs about Soviet ideology, he has not shied away from deploying it rhetorically and politically. Among his first moves as president in 2000, was reinstating the Soviet national anthem, regarding which he gave detailed comments as revealed by the 2018 documentary *Putin’s Witnesses*. He is recorded as saying the following:

Putin: Let’s say, the restoration of the anthem with the Soviet melody gives additional bonuses to a person involved in politics, from the point of view of increasing the rating or increasing public confidence. This is necessary in order to achieve something, relying on this trust of the population. Although, you can argue about the ways in which to make it happen and choose the best option.

Interviewer: Very many people have signed against the anthem being the conscience of the nation.

Putin: The conscience does not feel for the tragedy that the people are going through!<sup>91</sup>

This candid interview provides a glimpse into the kind of ideological pragmatism Putin operates within. He reveals nothing regarding his views of Soviet ideology, yet understands that it can help construct a national consciousness and consensus which is necessary to accomplish his goals. The redeployment of Soviet iconography is perhaps most dramatically seen in the Church of the Russian Armed Forces. The cathedral takes the form of a traditional Russian Orthodox church, yet it is embellished with a panoply of Soviet symbols.<sup>92</sup> Bojidar Kolov attests that the blending of Orthodox and Soviet iconography represents a linking of “two established knowledges, i.e., two types of structural power” which co-legitimate each other.<sup>93</sup> The unification of Soviet and Orthodox imagery was architecturally envisioned at the

<sup>89</sup> Valery Zorkin and Yuri Dmitrievich Rudkin, “12. In the Case of the Verification of the Constitutionality of Edicts of the President of the Russian Federation No. 79 of 23 August 1991 “On the Suspension of the Activity of the Communist Party of the RSFSR;” No. 90 of 25 August 1991 “On the Property of the CPSU and the Communist Party of the RSFSR;” and No. 169 of 6 November 1991 “On the Activity of the CPSU and the CP RSFSR;” as well as of the “Verification of the Constitutionality of the CPSU and the CP RSFSR”, *Statutes and Decisions: The Laws of the USSR and its Successor States*, vol. 30, no. 4 (1994), pp. 8-43.

<sup>90</sup> Katie Sanders, “Did Vladimir Putin call the breakup of the USSR ‘the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century?’”, *Politifact*, 3 March (2014). At: <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2014/mar/06/john-bolton/did-vladimir-putin-call-breakup-ussr-greatest-geop/>.

<sup>91</sup> Vitaly Mansky, *Putin’s Witnesses* (Icarus Films, 2018), 1:18-1:20.

<sup>92</sup> Elena Markus and Nina Frolova, “Cult of War: The Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces”, *FOOTPRINT*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2022), pp. 146-148.

<sup>93</sup> Bojidar Kolov, “Main Cathedral of Mutual Legitimation: The Church of the Russian Armed Forces as a Site of Making Power Meaningful”, *Religions*, vol. 12, no. 11 (2021).

behest of Patriarch Kirill himself,<sup>94</sup> returning us to the ROC's status as *princeps* amongst the vestigial states in Russia, incorporating those ranked below into their 'hegemonic ecumenism'.

In harkening back to the military glories of the Soviet empire, Putin invokes the spirit of consolidated and centralised-yet-wide-ranging authority of the maximalist cultural institutions of the Russian past. However, ultimately, the Soviet project was a failure, and Putin is not seeking to replicate its shortcomings, chief of which was its underemployment of the religious sphere.<sup>95</sup> Additionally, despite a decline in democracy and an increase in authoritarian political centralisation which is congruent with Soviet ideology, the failings of state socialism are too great for Putin to renege on the shift towards freer market economics. Hence, in this sense, any radical brand of Soviet ideology will not be as permissively treated as the relatively more otherworldly, vestigial state, that is the ROC. However, its moderate instantiations can be expected to be continuously employed in achieving Putin's goals, as they do not threaten to supersede their own relegated status.

## Conclusion

The failures of Soviet Communism in Russia, followed by the ensuing chaos of the 1990's, led to a position of economic and geopolitical inferiority, from which Vladimir Putin was determined to rise. It is perhaps the case that Putin's dual goal for a maximalist style of government, with the benefits of a minimalist market-oriented economic system, has failed, in both instances. In attempting to achieve this centralised, maximalist idea, it has been argued that it is this same centralising phenomenon, which is increasingly leading to fractures within Russian Federation, particularly along religious lines.<sup>96</sup> Likewise, in the economic domain, the endemic lack of innovation and advancement in the capital sector which plagued the Soviet Union in many ways still does so, with oil and gas making up the majority of modern Russian's economic output,<sup>97</sup> better characterising it as a developing, resource export-based, economy. Putin has been successful in one domain, which is that of power. His grip on the Russian state is unchallenged and is likely to remain so. In describing "Autocracy Inc.", the growing bloc of autocratic states economically sustaining each other, Anne Applebaum borrows from activist Srdja Popovic the "Maduro model." She writes that autocrats who adopt it are "willing to pay the price of becoming a totally failed country, to see their country enter the category of failed states," accepting economic collapse, isolation, and mass poverty if that is what it takes to stay in power."<sup>98</sup>

Putin's lack of commitment, both for and against, any principle of secularity, is instead replaced with a political realism that I argue is best analysed through Naomi Goldenberg's vestigial state paradigm. The varying treatments of Russian Orthodoxy, Islam, and Soviet Communism, indicate a political pragmatism that is not akin to any true religious commitment.

<sup>94</sup> Kolov, "Main Cathedral of Mutual Legitimation: The Church of the Russian Armed Forces as a Site of Making Power Meaningful."

<sup>95</sup> Ryan, "Putin and the Orthodox Church: how his faith shapes his politics."

<sup>96</sup> Warhola, "Religion and Politics under the Putin Administration: Accommodation and Confrontation within Managed Pluralism", pp. 88-89.

<sup>97</sup> Angelina Davydova, "Will Russia ever leave fossil fuels behind?", *BBC*, 24 November (2021). At: <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20211115-climate-change-can-russia-leave-fossil-fuels-behind>.

<sup>98</sup> Applebaum, "The bad guys are winning".

The deployment of religious style rhetoric continues in the unfolding 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Whether or not this constitutes an internalised perception of 'holy war' in the mind of Putin is unimportant; the crucial point to be made is that neither religious nor ideological backing can justify such examples of blatant imperialism, and sustained sanctions, admonishments, divestments, and the like must necessarily be continued in the face of such actions. Even if one was to suspend disbelief and grant imaginings of a holy war in Putin's mind, one wonders what he would have then thought of the 2022 sinking of the Moskva. The flagship of the Black Sea fleet was carrying a piece of the True Cross, which was placed aboard in 2020.<sup>99</sup> Reportedly, the relic sunk with the vessel. It is hard to imagine a less auspicious and more morally condemning omen: a piece of the True Cross at the bottom of the Black Sea.

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<sup>99</sup> Matthew Gault, "A Piece of the True Cross May Have Sunk with Russia's Warship", *Vice*, April 18 (2022). At: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/7k8k3b/a-piece-of-the-true-cross-may-have-sunk-with-russias-warship>.