ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Vladimir Putin's Worldview and the Resurgence of Russia

About two years ago, Vladimir Putin began his third term as President of Russia, with his declared objective being to launch a 21st century resurgence of Russia. Rhetorically, he has embraced Russia's imperial past, which has brought him into conflict with the West, especially the United States. Ukraine is the most recent manifestation of this resurgence. There are two key elements of his worldview that are germane to his actions in Ukraine and to his vision of a resurgent Russia.

- First, I want to repeat a segment from Issues *in Perspective* of a few weeks ago: Putin evidences a dependence on three 19th and 20th century Russian philosophers—Nikolai Berdyaev, Vladimir Solovyov and Ivan Ilyin. According to columnist David Brooks, Putin was personally involved in getting Ilyin's remains re-buried on Russian soil. At that event, Putin said, "It's a crime when someone only begins talking about the separation of Russia and the Ukraine." Ilyin's writings are apparently most influential in framing Putin's worldview. Ilyin wrote that "We trust and are confident that the hour will come when Russia will rise from disintegration and humiliation and begin an epoch of new development and greatness." He also wrote that "We know that Western nations don't understand and don't tolerate Russia's identity. . . They are going to divide the united Russian 'broom' into twigs to break these twigs one by one." Another Putin favorite is a utopian novel set in 2054 (*Third Empire: The Russia that Ought to Be*), in which a ruler named Vladimir II integrates eastern Ukraine into a new Russian Union. Brooks cites three specific ideas from all these writers that inform Putin's worldview: (1) Russian exceptionalism: "the idea that Russia has its own unique spiritual status and purpose." (2) Devotion to Orthodox Christianity. (3) A commitment to an autocratic form of government. Brooks concludes that "Mashed together, these philosophers point to a Russia that is a quasi-theocratic nationalist autocracy destined to play a culminating role on the world stage." Further, Solovyov argued that the historic mission of Russia is to lead the way to human unification. Russia would transcend secularism and atheism and create a unified spiritual kingdom. "The Russian messianic conception," wrote Berdyaev, "always exalted Russia as a country that would help to solve the problems of humanity." Brooks concludes this summary with this astonishing observation: "All of this adds up to a highly charged and assertive messianic ideology. If Putin took it all literally, he'd be a Russian ayatollah. Up until now, he hasn't taken it literally. His regime has used this nationalism to mobilize public opinion and to explain itself to itself. But it has tamped it down every time this nationalistic ideology threatens to upend the status quo. The danger is that Russia is now involved in a dispute in Ukraine that touches and activates the very core of this touchy messianism. The tiger of quasi-religious nationalism, which Putin has been riding, may now take control. . . The Russian nation may now be motivated by a deep, creedal

ideology that has been wafting through the culture for centuries and has now found an unlikely, cynical and cold-eyed host." With this worldview as a context, Ukraine's attempt to embrace the West is a betrayal of Slavic brotherhood. Putin cannot therefore permit the "emergence of an alternative civilization on its territory."

- Second, a key element of Putin's worldview is his commitment to the Russian Orthodox Church. After it was nearly exterminated by atheistic communism during the 20th century, the Russian Orthodox Church is back at the heart of Russian politics. The Church has passionately supported Putin as he casts Russia's challenges in a framework of "foreign devils" vs. "Holy Russia." Peter Pomerantsev of *The Daily Beast* writes that "Since Putin's reelection, a parade of priests has been loudly denouncing forces aligned against the president. The head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Krill, [has argued] that liberalism will lead to legal collapse and then the Apocalypse." On another occasion, Krill called Putin's rule "a miracle." The Orthodox Church has long been central to Russian identity. Indeed, it was in AD 988 that Vladimir the Great converted to Christianity—Byzantine Christianity, not the Roman Catholic Church. Since then, Russia has usually been deeply suspicious of western Christianity, and, when Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453, Russia became known as the Third Rome. Today, the Russian Orthodox Church has rebuilt its power, such that 90% of ethnic Russians identify themselves as Orthodox. The Orthodox Church has helped facilitate the idea that the ideal Russian leader is a divinely chosen autocrat. Putin certainly fits that role and does not resist it. The Russian Orthodox Church and Putin's Russian state are now inextricably linked.

What does it mean to be a Russian Orthodox Christian? Daniel Clendenin describes a typical Orthodox worship service: "The near absence of chairs or pews, dim lighting, head coverings for most women, icons and frescoes covering almost every inch of space on the walls and ceiling, a massive and ornate iconostasis separating the priest and the worshipers, the smoky smell of incense and hundreds of candles burning in memory of the dead, the priest resplendent in his ornate vestments and enormous beard, and worshipers repeatedly prostrating themselves, kissing the icons, and making the sign of the cross." ["Why I'm Not Orthodox," *Christianity Today* (6 January 1997), p. 35] What is the theology of Orthodoxy that produces a worship service often so foreign to Western Protestants?

The Church. Eastern Orthodoxy teaches that it is the one true church on earth, tracing its origins back to the apostolic church in unbroken succession. The implication of this position is that both Catholics and Protestants have departed from the true church and true faith.

The Sacraments. As with the Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodoxy affirms the seven sacraments through which God transmits both saving and sanctifying grace. Baptism, however, is the primary sacrament for "everything in the church flows out of the waters of baptism: the remission of sin and life eternal." Orthodoxy practices infant baptism, immersing the child three times, by which the infant is "born again" and wholly cleansed from all sin. Immediately following baptism is the rite of "chrismation," where the priest anoints the child with a special ointment, making the sign of the cross on various parts of the body, symbolizing the gift and seal of the Holy Spirit. Like Catholicism, Orthodoxy teaches the sacrificial presence of Jesus in the

communion elements, but Orthodoxy rejects transubstantiation, simply affirming the mystery of the sacrament. Orthodoxy also administers communion to infants.

Icons. Probably the most unusual aspect of Orthodoxy for the Protestant is the centrality of icons during worship. At baptism the believer often receives an icon of the saint whose name he or she takes; at marriage the fathers of the couple bless them with icons; and at death the icon precedes the burial procession. Icons are flat images of Christ, Mary or a saint. They usually take the form of wooden pictures painted in oils and are often ornately decorated with brilliant colors. The icons are central to Orthodoxy because they are of equal benefit and mutually revelatory with the written Word. Icons are not idols or vile images. They are types, figures and shadows of the truths of Christianity. What the Bible proclaims in words, the icon proclaims in "color." For the Eastern Orthodox Christian, icons demonstrate the humanity of Jesus, which is the key to His incarnation. The icons of Jesus demonstrate that He is God and man together in one person localized in space-time history. Icons thus teach a profound truth of Christianity.

Theosis. One of the most difficult Orthodox doctrines to understand is that of "theosis" (deification). Orthodoxy teaches that "As human beings we each have this one unique calling, to achieve Theosis. In other words, we each are destined to become a god; to be like God Himself, to be united with Him . . . (2 Peter 1:4). This is the purpose of your life . . . to become just like God, a true God." For Orthodoxy, this astonishing doctrine does not mean that humans become or join the essence of God (as in pantheism); rather humans remain distinctly human by nature "but participate in God by divine energies or grace. At no point, even when deified, is our humanity diminished or destroyed." Synonyms for this Orthodox teaching might be transformation, co-mingling, assimilation or an "influx of the divine."

Scripture. For the Protestant, Scripture is the final authority . For the Roman Catholic, it is both Scripture and tradition. However, for the Eastern Orthodox, theological authority is internal, coming from the Spirit, Who speaks to believers through tradition. For Orthodoxy, the papacy is not the guardian of truth, the "whole people of God is the protector of apostolic tradition." As Clendenin argues, "tradition is the life of the Spirit in the church, who alone is the ultimate criterion of truth." For that reason, the Bible is the unique expression of that tradition and is elevated, incensed, kissed and given a place of honor in various processions. However, tradition also includes the historic Church councils and the early Fathers and their writings. Orthodox believers never approach Scripture without the "grid" provided by the Councils and the Fathers. They are all complementary in the Spirit's witness to truth.

See Peter Pomerantsev in www.newsweek.com, (September 2012); James P. Eckman, *The Truth About Worldviews*, pp. 105-118; David Brooks in the *New York Times* (4 March 2014).