

Making the Nation: Hybrid exceptionalism and the rehabilitation of the Russian Orthodox Church in Post-Soviet Russia

Aedan McCabe looks at Russia's identity crisis following the end of the Soviet Union and how Russian Orthodoxy plays a large role in constructing the nation's sense of self.

Arguably the most significant and enduring consequence suffered by Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major crisis of identity. While this crisis persisted through the turbulent 1990s, the accession of Vladimir Putin to the presidency in 1999 marked the beginning of a concerted effort to understand Russia's place in the modern world. Perhaps the most striking aspect of this has been the rehabilitation of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). One of the foundational pillars of the Russian Empire, the ROC wielded substantial political and social power as the Empire's official religion. While the Church did not disappear entirely following the 1917 revolution, its power and political influence waned significantly under the state-sponsored secularism of Communist rule. Although the ROC was at times co-opted by the Communist Party for purposes of public relations (many retained their faith despite the Party's doctrine of state atheism), it generally became less visible in socio-political life. At the turn of the millennium, the relationship between the Church and the State evolved once again, with the former re-emerging as a prominent political force. Despite ostensibly supporting the notion of a secular state, both Putin and Dmitry Medvedev (President from 2008 to 2012) have nonetheless employed a public narrative on Russian Orthodoxy which places it at the core of the 'new' Russian national identity.

In order to understand both how and why this was done, we have to situate this discourse within the broader context of national identity construction in post-Soviet Russia. First, the nation is 'imagined' in that its members don't necessarily know one another, but they nonetheless form a community because they are all bound by a deep sense of 'comradeship', persisting in spite of the inequalities that may exist among them (Anderson 2006, 7). Second, these 'imagined communities' are constructed discursively through the beliefs about the 'nation' that communicative social interaction continuously produces, reproduces, and transforms (De Cillia et al. 1999). Crucially, it is political and cultural elites who propagate these beliefs in order to foster unity, partly through a willingness to exclude others. Lastly, national identity is not static, it is inherently dynamic, evolving alongside the fluid contexts in which it is constructed (De Cillia et al. 1999, 154).

Within these parameters, Oskanian's (2018) concept of 'hybrid exceptionalism' strongly characterises Russia's post-Soviet identity. This concept follows from Said's (1994) definition of imperialism as a structure of narratives that serves to reproduce the hierarchy of a given nation and legitimise its domination over others. In the post-Soviet period, and under Putin in particular, politicians have engaged in the construction of an imagined community that views itself as 'exceptional' in its dominant hierarchical position within the post-Soviet space. It also views itself as 'hybrid' in that the civilisational sphere it occupies is geographically, culturally, and historically distinct, being uniquely situated between East and West.

So how has the expression of 'hybrid exceptionalism' manifested under Putin? One of the earliest and clearest instances of this concept is in his speech 'Russia at the Turn of the Millennium'. Here we can already see elements of identity construction through public discourse, whereby Putin re-asserts Russian *derzhavnost*, or 'great power status':

"Derzhavnost – Russia was and will remain a great country. This is due to the inherent characteristics of our geopolitical, economic and cultural existence." (Putin 1999)

It is within the context of re-establishing Russia's 'great power status' that we see more explicit manifestations of hybrid exceptionalism in the post-Soviet identity as constructed through Russian political discourse. Against the hegemony of contemporary liberal norms which preclude the formal existence of empire, Russia has attempted to establish itself as the power center of former Soviet territories by employing its own 'liberal' perspectives on economic integration and international law. Economic projects like the Eurasian Economic Union and Moscow's justifications for military intervention such as in Georgia in 2008 are key examples of this ideology put into practice (Allison 2009). Naturally, from the dominant Western perspective, the legitimacy and credibility of Russia's self-declared position as the guardian of liberal values in the post-Soviet space – or the 'near abroad' as it is referred to in Russia – is weakened because Russia does not belong to the Western order. As a result, its own representations of these liberal values will be seen in the West as illegitimate. To mitigate this discrepancy in beliefs, it is therefore necessary to establish and maintain a public narrative that emphasises Russia's distinctiveness from both West and East. This may further the construction of a national identity that places Russia in a unique cultural space and bolsters Russia's claim to dominance over that space (Oskanian 2018, 39-40).

Of course, national identity is built from myriad socio-cultural influences, through which we can expect to observe its manifestation in a variety of contexts, particularly where discussions of language, key historical events, and other indicators of historical continuity are concerned. As noted by Oskanian (2018, 41), 'hybrid exceptionalism' in contemporary Russian identity construction relies on 'imperial and Soviet markers of identity' which serve to reproduce an 'authentic' Russian culture, and, by extension, its dominance in an ambiguous East-West cultural space. However, given its historical significance and renewed importance in the post-Soviet era, it is no surprise that the ROC represents the 'main such marker of authenticity' (Oskanian 2018, 42).

The importance of the ROC is strongly reflected in the views of both Putin and also Medvedev during their tenures as President. It is true that both leaders have continuously reiterated that the Russian state is fundamentally secular, albeit enriched by its multi-confessional character. Putin, during a recent meeting with the leaders of United Russia (the majority party of the Federal Assembly which ensures Putin's dominance in the legislature), emphasised 'unity among our multi-ethnic and multi-confessional people' as one of the core principles necessary in bringing Russians together (Anonymous 2019). Yet at the same time, the broader discussion conducted by both leaders expresses and normalises an active assumption that Russian Orthodoxy is the dominant spiritual force in an authentically Russian cultural space. It is within this discourse that we can see very clearly the expression of 'hybrid exceptionalism' as it pertains to Russian national identity. For instance, in an address to Orthodox leaders on National Unity Day in 2011, Medvedev refers to the Orthodox Church as 'the keeper of enduring values of our country' which 'helps an enormous number of people to not only find themselves, but to understand... what it means to be Russian.' (Medvedev 2011) Here, Medvedev not only establishes a direct connection between the Orthodox faith and Russian national identity, but he also suggests that the latter is a necessary condition for the former. This is corroborated when he later states that 'the entire history of our country... is the history of Russian Orthodoxy' (Medvedev 2011), cementing the belief that the values of the Orthodox church are the most fundamental to Russian identity because they have survived since the birth of the nation. The 'exceptional' character of this identity is further established through the portrayal of Western 'liberal' values as both unauthentic and morally corrupting by comparison with the traditional Russian values associated with Russian Orthodoxy (Verkhovsky 2002). Similar beliefs are promoted by Putin in crafting the public narrative on Crimea and the Ukrainian conflict; during his address in March 2014 following the Crimean status referendum, Putin took the opportunity to once again re-affirm the significance of Orthodoxy when he stated:

‘Here [in Crimea] we find the ancient city of Chersoneses, where Saint Vladimir the Great was baptized. His spiritual feat – the conversion to Orthodoxy – represents the core cultural, civilizational, and value foundation that binds the peoples of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus together’. (Putin 2014)

By employing a pseudo-historical narrative that frames Crimea as the spiritual birthplace of Orthodoxy – itself a fundamental unifying force within the post-Soviet space – Putin re-affirms the historical authenticity of Russian Orthodoxy (and, by extension, the ROC) and uses this authenticity to justify intervening in Crimea to protect the fount of Russian spirituality. This is not the only example of Putin using the Ukrainian Crisis to consolidate the spiritual authenticity of the ROC. Consider his response to the decision of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) to split from the Patriarch of Moscow:

‘A blatant interference into the church life is being carried out, as if its initiators have learned from the atheists of the past century, who have expelled the faithful from the temples’ (Anonymous 2019)

By drawing direct comparison to ‘the atheists’, Putin suggests that an independent UOC would be devoid of (theistic) spirituality. In doing so, he re-affirms that the ROC is the sole authentic spiritual authority within the post-Soviet space, and that others are merely pretenders sowing ‘hatred and intolerance’ for self-interested political gains (Anonymous 2019). Thanks to an already established discourse tying Russia’s fate with that of Orthodoxy, the ROC’s moral superiority, as it is portrayed here, ultimately reflects that of Russia, heightening the ‘exceptional’ character of Russian national identity and further legitimating Russia’s right to dominate the distinct civilisational sphere that it occupies.

From this brief analysis, we can see how political elites’ control of the public narrative on the ROC has helped to resituate the Church at the center of post-Soviet society and at the foundations of the ‘new’ Russian identity. By portraying Russian Orthodoxy as an immutable source of cultural authenticity and moral superiority opposed to a corrupt and amoral Western order, Putin and Medvedev have fashioned a powerful tool in legitimating Russia’s right to dominate the post-Soviet space. The rehabilitation of the ROC is thus central to the development of the ‘hybrid exceptionalism’ which now rests at the core of Russian national identity.

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