Ideological Complementarity or Competition? The Kremlin, the Church, and the Monarchist Idea in Today's Russia

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In 2018, surveys conducted by VTsIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Center) showed that Nicholas II had become the most popular of all Russian historical figures of the first half of the twentieth century. With sympathizers comprising 54% of the populace, the last Romanov emperor was closely followed by Stalin (51%) and Vladimir Lenin (49%).[1] Needless to say, this paradoxical combination of tsarist personalities and Soviet leaders confirms the extent to which memory issues in Russia inspire a plurality of opinions, but it also shows popular support for the state-backed crafting of a unified pantheon that goes beyond political ruptures. Nostalgia for the Soviet Union and the ambivalent rehabilitation of Stalin by some segments of the Russian political elite and broader public opinion has been widely studied.[2] We know less, however, about the other side of the story: the progressive reintegration of tsarism into the national pantheon and the corresponding growth of pro-monarchist groups and lobbies. With the exception of one article by Mikhail Suslov on monarchism,[3] only research looking at new Orthodox practices has even indirectly tackled the question of the last Romanov emperor's status in public memory.[4]

This article hopes to partly fill this gap by exploring how the revival of the monarchist idea—accentuated by commemorations around the centenaries of the First World War, the February and October Revolutions, the killing of the imperial family in Yekaterinburg, and the civil war between the Red and White Armies—offers us an insightful prism through which to view the market of ideologies in today's Russia. Far from being an immobile structure, the Putin regime has showed an impressive capacity to adapt to new contexts and take on new challenging geopolitical and domestic environments. An ad hoc construction, it permanently adjusts its own boundaries; it regularly purges itself by excluding some of its members while at the same time developing

1. VTsIOM (Vserossiiskii tsentr izucheniia obshchestvennogo mneniia), *Sto let grazhdanskoi voine: Prichiny, sledstviia, uroki* (Moscow, 2018)

2. On Soviet nostalgia, see Serguei A. Oushakine, "'We're Nostalgic but not Crazy': Retrofitting the Past in Russia," *The Russian Review* 66 (July 2007): 451–82; Sarah E. Mendelson and Theodore P. Gerber, "Soviet Nostalgia: An Impediment to Russian Democratization," *The Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2005): 83–96; Stephen White, "Soviet Nostalgia and Russian Politics," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 1–9; Alexander Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (Stanford, CA, 2013); Ekaterina Kalinina, "Mediated Post-Soviet Nostalgia," PhD diss., Södertörn University, 2014.

3. Mikhail Suslov, "The Genealogy of the Idea of Monarchy in the Post-Soviet Political Discourse of the Russian Orthodox Church," *State, Religion, and Church* 3, no. 1 (2016): 27–62, 28.

4. See, for instance, Karin Hyldal Christensen, *The Making of the New Martyrs in Russia: Soviet Repressions in Orthodox Memory* (London, 2018).

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new strategies for co-opting other segments of society, which partly explains its longevity and ability to regularly rebound. It also demonstrates a large ideological plurality, with several ecosystems competing with each other by offering the presidential administration new ideological products in the hope of seeing them adopted at the highest level.

Here I argue that while the Russian government and its president have been explicit about their rebuttal of monarchism, several ideological entrepreneurs around the Kremlin have been engaged in promoting the monarchist idea as a way to reinforce the regime in its autocratic features. They have also acted as power brokers over the Russian Orthodox Church, a section of which advances a monarchist agenda openly nostalgic for tsarism. Through a case study of monarchism, this article thus explores two components of the Putin regime's inherent relationship to ideology. First, it shows how ideologies—understood as a set of malleable, philosophical worldviews rather than written, rigid doctrines seen in Marxism-Leninism—are played out and tested by the regime's different entrepreneurs, even on topics the Russian president has clearly refused to endorse. Second, it explores the continuum that connects these entrepreneurs to the segments of Russian society more genuinely convinced by these ideologies, creating an ambiguous relationship, both complementary and competitive, between the central Russian state and powerful actors such as the Orthodox Church.

The Putin Regime as an Ad Hoc Ideological Construction

There exist at least three schools working to decipher the "nature" of the Putin regime. The first considers it to be above all a kleptocracy, with corrupt members of the president's inner circle seeking personal enrichment. Karen Dawisha's book *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* offers the most detailed analysis of this aspect of the regime.[5] Yet massive and well-organized schemes, bribe-taking, money laundering, and the offshoring of national wealth are not enough to explain every logic at work in the political realm and how state–society interactions are shaped. Another school sees Putin's regime as a totalitarian, neo-Stalinist institution motivated by nationalism, revanchism, and imperial aggression, among other principles. In this view, deeply entrenched ideological convictions explain Russia's actions on both the international and the domestic fronts. Charles Clover's *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism* and Marcel van Herpen's *Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism* are good representatives of this insistence on Russia's supposed ideological "grand design."[6]

A third school, to which I belong, advances a more nuanced view that encompasses two levels of analysis. First, the regime's relationship with Russian society is much more than simply patronal and authoritarian: it is based on an implicit social contract with the population that is continuously

5. Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York, 2004).

6. Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism* (New Haven, CT, 2016); Marcel H. van Herpen, *Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism* (Lanham, MD, 2014).

renegotiated and limits the regime's options.[7] To continue to maintain its societal relevance, the regime is on a permanent quest to draw inspiration from and co-opt grassroots trends, and there are many bottom-up dynamics that western observers often ignore. Secondly, the internal configuration of the regime itself resembles a conglomerate of competing opinions; it is not a uniform, cohesive group. Gleb Pavlovsky, the father of political communication in Russia, may have coined one of the best descriptions of it: "The Kremlin's politics looks like a jazz group: an uninterrupted improvisation as an attempt to survive the latest crisis."[8] Indeed, as in jazz, there is an established common theme or point, but each player is allowed to improvise at will.

The common theme or point is what we may defined as Putinism. In his book *The Code of Putinism*, Bryan Taylor explains rightfully: "Putinism is more like 'Thatcherism' or 'Reaganism' than like 'Marxism'—it is not a fully developed, all-encompassing ideology, but a system of rule and a guiding mentality, a personality and an historical moment."[9] This system of rules is based on a set of habits, beliefs, and emotions: to survive, Russia can only be a strong state, that is a great power abroad, and a quite uncontested regime at home. For that, it needs law and order, unity more than diversity, respect from foreign countries and its own citizens, and a renewed sense of honor and dignity. While Putin probably believes in his own historical mission of reassessing the Russian state so the nation could survive, his decisions are taken through a flexible vision of the world, motivated by changing circumstances. The ideological components of this code are plastic, depending on the regime's needs and its interpretation of the world and domestic situations.

This ability to improvise new ideological agendas is reinforced by the fact that the Russian regime is a conglomerate of different vested interest groups, each with their own agenda. Western pundits tend to broadly apply the term "Kremlin" to all of Russia's decision-makers—the Russian government, the presidential administration, and Putin's inner circles—contributing to the impression of a "black box" impossible to decipher. Even if we know little about the internal adjustments of power and how the balancing/competing games are regulated, we can still identify several agencies at play. Deconstructing the notion of an all-encompassing "Kremlin" thus avoids reducing the regime to a handful of labels; it stresses flexibility and diversity *within* the system. Here I deconstruct the "Kremlin" by using the metaphor of ecosystems. An ecosystem is a living organism: it can evolve, adapt, and disappear; it interacts with other ecosystems and can absorb or be absorbed by them. It has its own boundaries, but they are plastic and moving, with lines of connection to and from other ecosystems. The "Kremlin" comprises three main ecosystems: the presidential administration, the military–industrial complex, and the Orthodox realm. Each forms a specific world made of institutions, funders,

7. Samuel Greene and Graeme Robertson, *Putin v. the People: The Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia* (New Haven, CT, 2019).

8. Ivan Krastev, "V chem Zapad oshibaetsia naschet Rossii," *Rossiia v global'noi politike*, August 16, 2015, at http://www.globalaffairs.ru/global-processes/V-chem-Zapad-oshibaetsya-naschet-Rossii-17624 (accessed March 30, 2020).

9. Brian D. Taylor, *The Code of Putinism* (Oxford, 2018), 2.

and patrons, identifiable symbolic references, ideological entrepreneurs, and media platforms in permanent motion, making constant readjustments to maintain their equilibrium.

The presidential administration is the newest of the three ecosystems. Its personnel are the youngest, and its cultural and ideological references are inspired by a wide range of domains: western political campaigning and marketing; late Soviet perestroika cultures, including dissident or at least underground realms; western post-modernism and US neo-conservatism; consumerism; globalization narratives, and so on. It is also the most eclectic of these ecosystems, and Vladislav Surkov (b. 1964), its First Deputy Chief from 1999 to 2011, perfectly encapsulated this catch-all dynamic in his ideational borrowings.[10] It is also the least ideologically rigid and the most adaptable of the three ecosystems, as evidenced by the appointment of the more liberal Sergei Kirienko as its first deputy chief of staff in 2016 after four years of ideological hardening and the wave of rally-around-the-flag nationalism that followed the annexation of Crimea and the war with Ukraine. The presidential administration has since then been curtailing any type of ideological inflation and has adopted a low profile, focusing on much more pragmatic and *Realpolitik* agendas at home and abroad.

For two decades, the presidential administration conducted a hesitant and cautious pursuit of ideational policy that can be defined in three main dimensions. First, it developed a myriad of new products and symbolic meanings as a way to reconnect with society and calm down the political passions that had been tearing the nation apart during the Yeltsin decade. Second, while over-productive in the ideational field, it tolerated a large ideological diversity, recognizing that this field followed the rules of a competitive—and privatized—market. The regime limited its interference into society and did not force its ideational products on the mindset of Russian citizens, letting individuals manage their lives with their own set of values—the sociologist Boris Dubin formulated it as the "non-intrusive state" (*gosudarstvo kotoroe ne dostaet*).[11] Third, while spending time, money, and human resources in producing meanings, the presidential administration declared that it stood against any kind of official, written-in-stone narrative, and the Russian constitution still forbade explicitly any "state ideology." Except for calling for Russia's stabilization and revival, and for citizens to be more patriotic, Putin for a long time had cast himself as a-ideological, claiming to be working solely in line with technocratic objectives.[12]

10. Georgii Bovt, "Vladislav Surkov: A Pragmatic Idealism," *Russian Politics and Law* 46, no. 5 (September-October 2008): 33–40; Richard Sakwa, "Russian Political Culture through the Eyes of Vladislav Surkov: Guest Editor's Introduction," *Russian Politics and Law* 46, no. 5, 3–7.

11. Boris Dubin, "Kharakter massovoi podderzhki nyneshnego rezhima," Doklad na konferentsii Levada-Tsentr "Sobytiia i tendentsii 2009 g. v obshchestvennom mnenii," January 19, 2010, at http://emsu.ru/nmsu/2010/0224_levada.htm (accessed March 30, 2020).

12. Stephen E. Hanson, "Instrumental Democracy: The End of Ideology and the Decline of Russian Political Parties," in Vicki L. Hesli and William M. Reisinger, eds., *The 1999–2000 Elections in Russia: Their Impact and Legacy* (Cambridge, Eng., 2003), 163–85.

In 2012, once he came back to power after the mass Bolotnaia protests of winter 2011–12, the regime's relationship to ideology evolved at three levels. First, it took a more structured, content-related turn, with a stronger emphasis on Russia's anti-western and anti-liberal stance, on the country's greatness, and on the Russian/Soviet state leaders' infallibility at all times.[13] The equilibrium between diversity and unity was partly disrupted: the unified statement of faith in the monopoly of the state to represent the nation's interests became dominant. Second, it became more repressive against those who were advancing a competing agenda from the liberal side; some prominent oppositionist figures were commonly harassed, persecuted, and prosecuted, and some academics and opinion leaders were pressured to leave their jobs or the country. The government developed a toolkit of new laws and decrees—yet applied very selectively—giving state organs more coercive powers to suppress patterns of behavior deemed inappropriate.[14]

Even in such a context, the presidential administration's promotion of ideological products appears quite eclectic and evolutionary. It offers a broad palette, aiming at a "pick and choose" policy that allows it to achieve a broad consensus. The core of this ideological palette is patriotism, revived through state programs since 2001 and present at every level of public discourse: no one can have public and political legitimacy without insisting on his/her patriotic feelings.[15] This is the only tool necessary to disqualify liberals: economic liberalism can be defended, but political liberalism, especially when it supposes "submission" to western geopolitical interests is rejected on the grounds of being unpatriotic.

Once liberalism has been excluded, the kaleidoscope is broad and plural. The presidential administration itself does not foster any clearly-formulated overarching doctrine. The state-backed ideology remains vague, comprised primarily of anti-western and anti-liberal attitudes, Soviet nostalgia, and a classic, state-centric vision of Russia. Beyond these three points, fuzziness prevails. As long as the 1990s are condemned, the selection of a historical Golden Age to be celebrated is flexible.[16] Nostalgia for late Soviet times—Brezhnev's two decades in power—is widespread and cultivated by the regime as the lowest common denominator for Russian citizens that provides a large repertoire from which each person can draw.[17] Yet other periods of reference are also allowed, even if they represent a minority point of view, from the nostalgia for Stalinism to that for Nicholas II's rule.

13. Neil Robinson, "Russian Neo-patrimonialism and Putin's 'Cultural Turn,'" *Europe-Asia Studies* 69, no. 2 (January 2017): 348–66.

14. See Elena Bogdanova, "NGOs under State Regulation: Strengths and Weaknesses of the Russian Civil Society," *Laboratorium* 9, no. 3 (2017): 5–10; Françoise Daucé, "The Duality of Coercion in Russia: Cracking Down on Foreign Agents," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 57–75.

15. J. Paul Goode, "Love for the Motherland (or Why Cheese is More Patriotic than Crimea)," *Russian Politics* 1, no. 4 (2016): 418–49.

16. Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, "Russia's Struggle over the Meaning of the 1990s and the Keys to Kremlin Power," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* 592 (May 2019), at http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/russias-struggle-over-meaning-1990s-and-keys-kremlin-power (accessed April 6, 2020).

17. See Charles Sullivan, *Motherland: Soviet Nostalgia in Post-Soviet Russia* (PhD diss., The George Washington University, 2014).

Through various acts and discourses, the Russian state has expressed its position on tsarism at several occasions. Vladimir Putin has repeatedly emphasized the continuity of Russia's history beyond political changes, as well as the need for reconciliation (*primirenie*), when speaking about the Bolshevik revolution and the collapse of the Russian empire.[18] The state therefore celebrates the Romanov dynasty as part of Russia's historical continuity and statehood, and as a time of prestige and expansion for imperial Russia. It is from that position that it supported the reburial of Nicholas II's family and several other members of the Imperial House.[19] Past that symbolic stage, however, the authorities are not keen to give tsarism any role model status. The government has erected many statues celebrating Russia's rulers, but never Nicholas II, seen as a weak figure who failed and contributed to his country's collapse—nothing to which a regime aspiring to great power reconstruction can refer. The same logic has been expressed about Boris and Gleb, eleventh-century princes canonized for not resisting with violence, when Putin explicitly stated: "Boris and Gleb are saints, that's clear. But they gave up without a fight. That cannot serve as an example for us. They lay down and waited to be killed."[20]

The Russian state has also shown no indication of recognizing a specific legal status for the imperial family. In 2008, responding to a request from the Romanov Imperial House, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation ruled that Nicholas II and his family were rehabilitated, and a year later, several other members of the family were given the same status. Yet when the House submitted an official request for an investigation into the murder of the tsar's family in order to identity and retroactively condemn the perpetrators, it was denied.[21] The Russian Prosecutor General concluded that too much time had elapsed since the crime and that those responsible had already died. He therefore closed the case—meaning, legally, that the killing of the family was considered a common crime on which the statute of limitations had expired, and not political persecution. In 2017, a group of Orthodox figures made the same demand, again unsuccessfully.[22] These decisions are in tune with Russia's broader legal stance on the Soviet period: requests for the status of victims of political repression are widely accepted on the condition that those

18. More in Marlene Laruelle, "Commemorating 1917 in Russia: Ambivalent State History Policy and the Church's Conquest of the History Market," *Europe-Asia Studies* 71, no. 2 (2019): 249–267.

19. Wendy Slater, *The Many Deaths of Tsar Nicholas II: Relics, Remains and the Romanovs* (London, 2007). See also for the first half of the 1990s, Robert K. Massie, *The Romanovs: The Final Chapter* (New York, 2012).

20. Arsenii Zamostʹianov, "Boris i Gleb: 'Legli i zhdali, poka ubʹiut'?" *Pravoslavnyi mir*, August 6, 2018, at https://www.pravmir.ru/boris-i-gleb-legli-i-zhdali/ (accessed August 4, 2019).

21. "Russian Heir Demands Tsar Nicholas II Murder Investigation," *The Telegraph*, January 16, 2010, at https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/6998656/Russian-heir-demands-Tsar-Nicholas-II-murder-investigation.html (accessed April 6, 2020).

22. "Ne dopustitʹ pokloneniia lzhe moshcham," *Moskovskie vedomosti*, June 11, 2017, at http://mosvedi.ru/article/20745.html (accessed April 6, 2020).

responsible will not be legally pursued: one may commemorate victims but not sue perpetrators.[23]

Nostalgia for tsarism does not pertain to the Russian president's toolkit of worldviews. At several occasions, Putin has kindly mocked those convinced of a return to monarchism. Half-joking, he commented on his reluctance to live in pre-revolutionary Russia where his ancestors worked as serfs—directly criticizing all those who romanticize tsarism.[24] In 2017, reacting to the declaration of Crimea Republic head Sergei Aksenov about the need to restore monarchism, Putin's press secretary Dmitrii Peskov explained: "Putin regards this idea without any optimism. He has been asked the same question several times these last years. . . and very coldly relates to these discussions."[25] A few days later, Putin himself declared, "thank God we do not have a monarchy, but a republic."[26] The Russian authorities, both political and judicial, have thus maintained an unambiguous stance on their relationship to tsarism: it can be welcomed as part of a *Zeitgeist*, a cultural nostalgia for the early twentieth century, but it cannot be granted any legitimacy at the political level.

Monarchism as a Metaphor for Putinism

Outside of the president's own declarations and the official posture of the Russian government and presidential administration, however, there are a few quite powerful and well-connected ideological entrepreneurs, mostly linked to the Church's ecosystem, who play on the trope of monarchism. For the majority of them, this monarchist profession of faith is not to be read literally; they do not necessarily wish for the Romanov or any other dynasty to take back the Russian throne, but they use monarchism a metaphorical tool to call for a more autocratic Putin regime.

This trend is not a new one: during Yeltsin's time, the Kremlin PR team tested the attitude of the Russian public toward the monarchy, modelling the president as a neo-monarch. Several advisers to the then president even mentioned the possibility of a symbolic return of a Romanov to the throne to compensate for the weakness of the regime. In 1999, the nomination of Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov (1959–2015) for the position of Head of the State Commission for the Reburial of Emperor Nicholas II and his family was a telling argument for this new "political technology." Nemtsov even declared boldly: "Yeltsin is a natural Russian Tsar. With his recklessness, temper, determination and courage, sometimes, his rare shyness. But, unlike the evil Russian tsars, Yeltsin is kind and forgiving."[27]

23. Cathy A. Frierson, "Russia's Law 'On Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression' 1991–2011: An Enduring Artifact of Transitional Justice," *NCEEER Working Paper*, 2014, https://www.ucis.pitt.edu/nceeer/2014_827-13h_Frierson_1.pdf (no longer available).

24. "Putin vspomnil o svoikh predkakh – krepostnykh," *Gazeta.ru*, March 2, 2018, https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2018/03/02/n_11237695.shtml (accessed June 15, 2020).

25. "Peskov: Putin otnoshitsia k monarkhii bez optimisma," *Vedomosti*, March 15, 2017, at https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2017/03/15/681255-peskov-putin-monarhiyu (accessed April 6, 2020).

26. Ibid.

27. Boris Nemtsov, "Provintsial v Moskve," *Argumenty i fakty*, October 6, 1999, republished on Nemtsov Most, February 3, 2018, at https://nemtsov-most.org/2018/02/13/

Inside Putin's circles, some figures have long supported monarchism. Such is the case, for instance, of the world-renowned film director Nikita Mikhalkov (1945). His father, Sergei Mikhalkov, was one of the central figures of the "Russian Party," the informal conservative and nationalist branch of the Komsomol and Communist Party, and endorsed tsarism as early as the 1960s.[28] Since the *Barber of Siberia* (1998), which won the Russian State Prize, Mikhalkov has produced a number of patriotic films that express his nostalgia for the White past, such as "Sunstroke 2" (2014).[29] A member of the Presidium of the Russian National Council, he published in 2010 a *Manifest prosveshchennogo konservatizma* (Manifesto of Enlightened Conservatism) celebrating "Holy Russia" and presenting the Soviet Union as "a Great Russia without a Holy Rus" (*velikuiu Rossiiu bez Sviatoi Rusi*). Without calling openly for a return to monarchy, the Manifesto laments the fall of the Romanovs, speaks of monarchism's place in modern Russian conservatism (alongside its religious, Soviet, and liberal components), and lists "imperial norms, principles, and mechanisms of state structure" as key elements of "enlightened conservatism."[30]

Vladimir Yakunin (1948), the head of Russian Railways, has promoted a similar line from 2003 until he was dismissed in 2015. Close to Putin since the early 1990s, he remains one of the Kremlin's means of communicating with the Patriarchate.[31] Dubbed the "Orthodox Chekist" because of his KGB past and his Orthodox convictions, Yakunin runs the St. Andrew Foundation (or Andrei Protocletos), one of the largest and richest of Russian Orthodox foundations, having himself launched its own endowment fund in 2013. It finances multiple projects, including restorations of churches and monasteries, the return of Orthodox relics to Russian soil, cultural exchange programs with Orthodox Churches of the Jerusalem Patriarchate, celebrations of reconciliation between the Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR), campaigns to promote traditional family values, dedication of monuments to White Russians, and a slate of patriotic programs designed to keep the nationalist flame burning in the hearts of the younger generation.[32]

Yakunin's foundation has played a crucial role in defending Russia's interests abroad, for instance in France, where he lobbied for Moscow's decision to erect in the heart of Paris Europe's largest Orthodox cathedral, dedicated in 2016.[33] He has also worked to rally émigré circles behind the

boris-nemtsov-the-most-terrible-dream/ (accessed April 7, 2020).

28. Nikolai Mitrokhin, *Russkaia partiia: Dvizhenie russkikh natsionalistov v SSSR 1953–1985* (Moscow, 2003).

29. Susan Larsen, "National Identity, Cultural Authority and the Post-Soviet Blockbuster: Nikita Mikhalkov and Aleksei Balabanov," *Slavic Review* 62, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 491–511.

30. Nikita Mikhalkov, "Pravo i Pravda," *Polit.ru*, October 26, 2010, at http://polit.ru/article/2010/10/26/manifest (accessed April 7, 2020).

31. Boris Makarenko, "Postkrymskii politicheskii rezhim," *Pro et Contra*, August 10, 2014, at https://carnegie.ru/proetcontra/56731 (accessed April 7, 2020).

32. "Fund's Programmes," Endowment for St Andrew The First-Called Foundation, at http://www.st-andrew-foundation.org/en/programmes/ (accessed January 18, 2019).

33. Claire Digiacomi, "Comment la Russie a réussi à construire une imposante église orthodoxe au pied de la tour Eiffel," *Huffington Post* French Edition, October 19, 2016,

Putin regime. In 2010, he organized a cruise of Russian émigrés that set out from the Mediterranean and headed to the Black Sea, reversing the journey of the White exiles at the end of the civil war. While those most loyal to the Romanov monarchy refused to participate, instead demanding the restitution of their property and the removal of Lenin from the Red Square Mausoleum, many others supported this symbolic rapprochement with the Kremlin.[34]

Since 2014, the new apostle of a Putin-styled monarchism has been the oligarch Konstantin Malofeev (1974), who leads Marshall Capital Partners, an investment fund specializing in the telecommunications market.[35] Inspired by Metropolitan Yoann Snychev, he has been a leading supporter of the most radical tendencies of the Moscow Patriarchate and cooperates closely with Metropolitan Tikhon. Using funds raised by Marshall Capital, Malofeev founded the Philanthropic Fund of St. Basil the Great, which boasts some thirty programs advocating for a broad range of family values (anti-abortion groups, assistance to former convicts and single mothers, and so on), providing Orthodox religious education, and offering assistance to Orthodox churches and monasteries.[36] In 2014, Malofeev entered the media spotlight as one of the beacons of the Novorossiya project—and its main funder.[37]

Malofeev proudly expresses his monarchist convictions; he has funded several meetings at which the European and Russian far right have become acquainted with each other and with monarchist circles.[38] He made headlines by hosting French far-right politician Philippe de Villiers—a fellow monarchist—to launch a project for "Vendean-style" historical parks (Vendée being the region that resisted the French revolution most strenuously and remained pro-monarchist the longest) in Crimea and Moscow.[39] During the Ukrainian crisis, one of his closest allies, Paris-based Prince Dmitri Shakhovskoi, launched the

at http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2016/10/18/comment-russie-reussi-construire-eglise-orthodoxe-tour-Eiffel_a_21585977 (accessed April 7, 2020).

34. Anna Nemtsova, "Bittersweet Return for White Russians," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, August 6, 2010, at https://www.rbth.com/articles/2010/08/06/bittersweet_return_for_white_russians04857.html (April 7, 2020).

35. The most complete biography of Malofeev (in Russian) is available at "Spravka: Malofeev Konstantin Valer′evich," Komitet Narodnogo Kontrolia, at http://comnarcon.com/444 (accessed January 18, 2019). In English, see Ilya Arkhipov, Henry Meyer, and Irina Reznik, "Putin's 'Soros' Dreams of Empire as Allies Wage Ukraine Revolt," *Bloomberg*, June 15, 2014, at https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-06-15/putin-s-soros-dreams-of-empire-as-allies-wage-ukraine-revolt (accessed April 7, 2020). See also Iuliia Latynina, "Kakaia sviaz′ mezhdu molokozavodami, pedofilami, 'Rostelekomom' i neudavshimsia senatorom Malofeevym," *Novaia Gazeta*, November 22, 2012, at https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2012/11/23/52462-kakaya-svyaz-mezhdu-molokozavodami-pedofilami-171-rostelekomom-187-i-neudavshimsya-senatorom-malofeevym (accessed April 7, 2020).

36. See the Foundation's website, http://www.ruscharity.ru/ (no longer available).

37. Elizaveta Ser′gina and Petr Kozlov, "Interv′iu – Konstantin Malofeev, osnovatel′ 'Marshal kapitala,'" *Vedemosti*, November 13, 2014, at https://www.vedomosti.ru/newspaper/articles/2014/11/13/v-sankcionnye-spiski-vklyuchali-posovokupnosti-zaslug? (accessed April 7, 2020).

38. "Interv′iu—Konstantin Malofeev, osnovatel′ 'Marshal kapitala.'"

39. "French Businessman Defends Plans to Build Crimea Theme Park," *France 24*, August 16, 2014, at http://www.france24.com/en/20140816-french-businessman-villiers-theme-park-crimea-sanctions (accessed April 7, 2020).

Russkii most initiative (Russian Bridge), a petition of solidarity with Russia that gathered more than a hundred names of descendants of the Russian aristocracy, including the Tolstois, the Pushkins, and the Sheremetievs.[40]

Malofeev is active not only in the European scene, but also at home. In 2006, he opened the St. Vasilii the Great gymnasium, a private boarding institution in the Moscow suburbs that can accommodate up to 400 pupils—for a tuition of 600,000 RUB/year, the average price for a private school in the Russian capital. The gymnasium's mission is proclaimed to be forming the new Russian elite and instilling monarchist values in them. It is led by Malofeev's close associate Zurab Chavchavadze, a representative of the Georgian aristocracy who is also working to revive a monarchist International in Europe.[41] The gymnasium fosters a tsarist atmosphere, holding traditional balls and hanging portraits of the imperial family and the main aristocratic families on the walls. It reproduces the tsarist education program, with daily prayers in Slavonic and classes in Orthodoxy, Latin, calligraphy, and traditional etiquette.[42] In the fall of 2014, Malofeev launched the first monarchist television channel, Tsargrad—the old Russian name for Constantinople—inspired, as he himself said, by the model of Fox News.[43]

In June 2016, Malofeev took a new step by inaugurating the Two-headed Eagle (*Dvuglavyi orel*). Registered as an association for historical enlightenment, the Eagle acts as a potential political party with a clear objective: "the transformation of Russia into a full monarchy; this conversion should be done by constitutional means."[44] Malofeev invites his country to return to absolute monarchy (as it existed before the creation of the first Duma) and not the constitutional monarchy that functioned between 1905 and February 1917. In 2017, he publicly endorsed Putin's presidential candidacy but stated, "I hope these [2018] elections will be the last ones, and around 2024 Russia will restore our traditional, monarchist form of government."[45]

40. "Descendants of the White Emigration against Russophobia in Western MSM," December 27, 2014, at http://stanislavs.org/descendants-of-the-white-emigration-against-russophobia-in-western-msm/ (accessed January 18, 2019). See the Russian version at "Parizh, Sevastopolʹskii bulʹvar," *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, December 25, 2014, at https://rg.ru/2014/12/25/pismo.html (accessed April 7, 2020).

41. Shaun Walker, "'Russia's Soul Is Monarchic': Tsarist School Wants to Reverse 100 Years of History," *The Guardian*, March 6, 2017, at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/06/russia-revolution-tsarist-school-moscow-nicholas-ii (accessed April 7, 2020).

42. See "Informatsiia o gimnazii," Gimnaziia Sviatelia Vasiliia Velikogo, at http://www.vasiliada.ru/about/information/ (accessed January 18, 2019). See also Isabelle Mandraud, "Tsarskaia shkola v Rossii," *Le Monde*, April 7, 2017, at https://inosmi.ru/social/20170407/239071082.html (accessed January 18, 2019).

43. Joshua Keating, "God's Oligarch," *Slate*, October 20, 2014, at http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2014/10/konstantin_malofeev_one_of_vladimir_putin_s_favorite_businessmen_wants_to.single.html (accessed April 7, 2020).

44. "Russkoe istoricheskoe prosveshchenie sdelalo shag vpered. Itogi Vserossiiskogo Obshchego Sobraniia Obshchestva 'Dvuglavnyi oriol,'" Two-headed Eagle, at https://rusorel.info/v-rossii-sushhestvuet-moshhnoe-monarxicheskoe-dvizhenie-itogi-vserossijskogo-obshhego-sobraniya-obshhestva-dvuglavyj-orel/ (accessed January 18, 2019).

45. "Konstantin Malofeev vozglavil dvizhenie 'Dvuglavnyi oriol' i provozglasil tselʹiu reabilitatsiiu russkoi monarkhii," *Tsargrad*, November 6, 2017, at https://tsargrad.

Malofeev recognizes the existence of different constituencies inside the movement—some in favor of the Romanovs, others open to the idea of another dynasty—but does not seem to belong to any of them; he is not close to the Romanov Imperial House and is not known to have courted other aristocratic figures who could potentially claim Russia's throne. He belongs, in fact, to a third trend: the "Putinists," who hope that Vladimir Putin will declare himself monarch or will restore the autocratic regime even under a presidential system. He has professed, for instance, that "Putin would be a wonderful monarch; he proves it to us every day."[46] He has advanced the same enthusiasm for Stalin: "Beginning in 1943, Stalin began to behave not as a revolutionary, building a world International, but as a sovereign, Russian tsar. After the war, we received a Soviet empire, in many respects a continuation of the Russian Empire. . . . All the good that Stalin brought resulted from him trying to play the role of monarch."[47]

The Two-headed Eagle elected two vice-presidents alongside Malofeev. First, Prince Aleksandr Trubetskoi, heir of the prestigious eponymous family living in France, who gives the movement its aristocratic legitimacy and acts as a transmission belt to the émigré world and the European aristocratic jet-set. Second, Lieutenant General Leonid Reshetnikov, who worked for the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), specializing in the Balkans. Formerly a director of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI), he oriented the SVR think tank toward a clear monarchist stance.[48] A small number of officials have also joined the Two-headed Eagle, thereby openly expressing their monarchist positioning: the Belgorod governor Evgeni Savchenko (from the presidential party United Russia), as well as several members of the Federation Council (Anton Beliakov from Just Russia and Sergei Tsekov from United Russia), and the Duma (Viktor Vodolatskii from United Russia and Mikhail Degtiarev from the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia [LDRP]). The association also boasts Aleksandr Borodai, one of the main "polit-technologists" of Donbas secessionism, having signed a cooperation agreement with his Association of Donbas Veterans.[49]

Less close to the President than Mikhalkov, Yakunin, or Malofeev, the Russian political scene has also seen the emergence of a new muse of monarchism, Natalia Poklonskaia (1980)—this time with a bolder positioning in favor of the Romanov rather than a Putin form of monarchism. A former prosecutor general of the Republic of Crimea and now a Russian Duma MP,

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tv/news/konstantin-malofeev-vozglavil-dvizhenie-dvuglavyj-orel-i-provozglasil-celju-reabilitaciju-russkoj-monarhii_94213 (accessed April 7, 2020).

46. "Konstantin Malofeev: 'Poiavilas′ boiazn, chto Putin uidet,'" *MK.ru*, March 13, 2018, at https://www.mk.ru/politics/2018/03/13/konstantin-malofeev-poyavilas-boyazn-chto-putin-uydet.html (accessed April 7, 2020).

47. Ibid.

48. Sergei Chapnin, "Tsarskie ostanki: obratnyi otschet," *Colta*, July 18, 2017, at https://www.colta.ru/articles/media/15442-tsarskie-ostanki-obratnyy-otschet (accessed April 7, 2020).

49. "Popisano Soglasheniia o sotrudnichestve mezhdu obshchestvom 'Dvuglavnyi oriol' i Soiuzom dobrovol′tsev Donbassa," Two-headed Eagle, October 19, 2017, at https://rusorel.info/podpisano-soglasheniya-o-sotrudnichestve-mezhdu-obshhestvom-dvuglavyj-orel-i-soyuzom-dobrovolcev-donbassa/ (accessed January 18, 2019).

Poklonskaia has become an iconic political star in today's Russia.[50] Her resignation from Ukrainian state service a few days before the annexation of Crimea made her a rare female hero for nationalist-minded groups; since then, everything she has said has generated buzz on social media. In 2014, she was the fifth most searched-for person on the Internet in Russia, and has inspired dozens of fan-created anime-style *moe* (a Japanese term to describe affection for fictional characters) images that have been circulated on the Internet.[51] Since she became prosecutor in Crimea, she has demonstrated her devotion to the memory of Nicholas II, even declaring that one of his statues cried—a sign of sanctity in Orthodox Christianity.[52] In what was probably her most symbolic gesture, she marched in the Immortal Regiment demonstration of May 9, 2017 with a portrait of Nicholas II—an allusion to tsarism as Russia's core genealogy and Nicholas II as Russians' father.

The Church's Competing Reading of Monarchism

Outside of the Kremlin's ecosystems and the grey zones in which ideological entrepreneurs prosper, the main actor pushing for a monarchist rehabilitation has been the Russian Orthodox Church—but with a different approach as it offers a reading of monarchism that is more literal than figurative. The Patriarchate is a huge conglomerate that includes many diverse components. It is not unified in terms of ideology and faces multiple internal tensions.[53] Many criticized the dissolution of the Patriarchate by Peter the Great and the submission of the Church to the temporal power of the Romanov dynasty for three centuries. Contemporary adherents to this view therefore consider today's republican system the best guarantor of the Church's autonomy in spiritual matters. A powerful lobby, however, seeks to activate nostalgia for tsarism.

Although the Patriarchate maintains that it does not have a preference for any particular type of political regime, its *Fundamentals of the Social Conception of the Russian Orthodox Church* (2000) pleads for a political regime grounded in Orthodoxy.[54] The *Fundamentals* stipulates that the Patriarchate

50. One of the most complete biographies of Poklonskaia is available at "Mirotochenie i muzhestvo," *Meduza*, April 5, 2017, at https://meduza.io/feature/2017/04/05/mirotochenie-i-muzhestvo (accessed April 7, 2020).

51. "Natal′ia Poklonskaia popala v Top-5 samykh populiarnykh zhenshchin v internete," *Krym24*, December 10, 2014, at http://c24news.ru/society/15095-natalya-poklonskaya-popala-v-top-5-samyh-populyarnyh-zhenschin-v-internete.html (accessed April 7, 2020).

52. "Natal′ia Poklonskaia soobshchila, shto biust Nikolaia II mirotochit. Vy ne poverite, shto proizoshlo potom," *Meduza*, March 6, 2017, at https://meduza.io/feature/2017/03/06/natalya-poklonskaya-soobschila-chto-byust-nikolaya-ii-mirotochit-vy-ne-poverite-chto-proizoshlo-potom (accessed April 7, 2020).

53. For more details see Nikolai Mitrokhin, *Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov′: Sovremennoe sostoianie i aktual′nye problemy* (Moscow, 2004), 174–232.

54. Boris Knorre and Tatiana Kharish, "Political Language of the Church in the Post-Soviet Period," *KnE Social Sciences*, ISPS Convention 2017 "Modernization and Multiple Modernities" (2017): 365–83, at https://www.knepublishing.com/index.php/Kne-Social/article/view/2488/5426 (accessed April 7, 2020).

recognizes the separation of Church and state,[55] yet it displays outspoken sympathy for monarchy and theocracy, which are considered superior forms of polity because they guarantee the symphony of spiritual and temporal powers.[56] Those within the Patriarchate who support a monarchist line do so by referring mostly to a Byzantine definition of autocracy and to the Slavophile interpretation of it: even Patriarch Kirill celebrates the harmony between tsar, patriarch, and people in Muscovite Rus′, insisting on its democratic aspect, as well as on the notion of rule-of-law autocracy (*pravovoe samoderzhavie*).[57] The divine nature of tsarist rule—the ruler as an "impersonator" of Christ (*christomimetets*)—thus merges with the concept of popular sovereignty. Other important public figures, such as Vsevolod Chaplin (1968–2020), in charge of the Synodal Department for Church and Society Interactions until 2015, have called for the establishment of a monarchist party.[58] The Patriarchate has also endorsed the legal proceedings initiated by the Imperial House to legally rehabilitate those members of the imperial family who were executed in 1918.

The lobby pushing for a straightforward monarchist agenda is led by Metropolitan of Pskov and Porkhovsk Tikhon Shevkunov (1958), a prominent cleric and best-selling writer often presented as Putin's personal confessor—something neither man has confirmed, although rumor has it that they meet often.[59] Tikhon, who seeks to make the Church the ideological avant-garde of the regime, has come to the regime's ideological rescue with his hit movie "The Fall of the Empire: Lessons from Byzantium" (2008). Regularly aired on television, it validates the parallel between present-day Russia and the Byzantine Empire before its fall, framing both as fortresses threatened by the west.[60] Tikhon has never hidden his commitment to monarchism, even if he recognizes that Russian society is not yet ready for it: "The monarchy is the ideal condition, natural for Russia. The monarchy is natural to us, but I think it is totally wrong to speak about the renaissance of monarchy now. . . one must elevate oneself and live through until the special monarchic consciousness emerges."[61]

55. "Osnovy sotsial′noi kontseptsii russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi," *Moskovskii Patriarkhat*, 2000, at https://mospat.ru/ru/documents/social-concepts/ (accessed August 4, 2019).

56. Zoe Knox, "The Symphonic Ideal: The Moscow Patriarchate's Post-Soviet Leadership," *Europe-Asia Studies* 55, no. 4 (June 2003): 575–96.

57. See more in Suslov, "The Genealogy of the Idea of Monarchy."

58. Bulat Akhmetkarimov and Bruce Parrott, "The Surprising Future of the Religious Party in Russia," *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 37, no. 1S (2017): S55–S70.

59. Charles Clover, "Kto takoi arkhimandrit Tikhon (Shevkunov)," *Vedemosti*, January 29, 2013, at https://www.vedomosti.ru/library/articles/2013/01/29/putin_i_arhimandrit (accessed April 9, 2020).

60. The film is available on YouTube at: "Gibel′ Imperii: Vizantiiskii urok (2008)," YouTube video, 1:11:03, posted by "hramtroicy2," May 26, 2013, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0hs30505kX4 (no longer available). On the notion of "fortress" (*katekhon*), see Maria Engstrom, "Contemporary Russian Messianism and New Russian Foreign Policy," *Contemporary Security Policy* 35, no. 3 (2014): 356–79.

61. See Tikhon's interview by Vladimir Soloviev on "Vecher s Vladimirom Solovievym," *Telekanal "Rossiia*," July 9, 2017, at https://russia.tv/video/show/brand_id/21385/episode_id/1520739/video_id/1649929/viewtype/picture/ (accessed April 9, 2020).

Tikhon emerged from Orthodox fundamentalist circles: he was one of the initiators of the movement against electronic barcodes in the late 1990s before coming around to the Patriarchate's view.[62] He now exerts a high level of institutional influence: not only is he close to Putin himself, but he is also Secretary for the Patriarch's Council for Culture, a member of the Presidential Council for Culture, member of the Supreme Council of the Church, and head of the Sretenskii Monastery. The monastery's proximity to Lubyanka, the headquarters of the former KGB and of today's FSB, is often interpreted as an indication of close personal and ideological proximity, because many high-ranking FSB officers go to confession at the monastery. The monastery also hosts one of Russia's largest publishing houses, producing liturgical texts as well as secular books related to religious culture, and manages the site Pravoslavie.ru, the Church's most popular Internet portal, with about seven million visitors per month.[63] Tikhon is also persistently rumored to have ambitions of becoming Kirill's successor, even if the current Patriarch appears more reserved on monarchism and is prone to demonstrating his support to state memory initiatives that are more turned toward Soviet than tsarist nostalgia.

The Moscow Patriarchate has recently made its position toward memory of tsarism more explicit by investing in the wider realm of historical parks, a new and trendy niche for popularizing history. Under Tikhon's leadership, the Patriarchate Council for Culture launched the historical park megaproject "Russia—my history" (*Rossiia—moia istoriia*), with a dual meaning of both history and story. The park opened in 2013 and is now hosted at the trade show and amusement park VDNKh. At over 28,000 square meters, it encompasses 900 multimedia offerings, eleven cinema rooms, and twenty interactive 3D historical reconstructions.[64] The idea was supported by the Moscow municipality—which has been very close to the Church since the leadership of former mayor Iurii Luzhkov, even if the new mayor Sergei Sobianin seems less supportive—and was partly funded by direct federal subsidies as well as big corporations such as Norilsk Nickel and several subsidiaries of Gazprom. It has also received support from the presidential administration: Putin, Dmitrii Medvedev, and other senior officials have met on several occasions with Tikhon or other orchestrators of the project.[65]

The historical park designers took their inspiration from multimedia technologies, combining many visual elements—photos, videos, and

62. At the turn of the twenty-first century, a movement opposing electronic barcodes—in which it saw the presence of the Antichrist in the world—became so powerful within the Church that it began to threaten the unity of the institution. See Nikolai Mitrokhin, "Infrastruktura podderzhki pravoslavnoi eskhatologii v sovremennoi RPC. Istoriia i sovremennost,'" in *Russkii natsionalizm v politicheskom prostranstve,* ed. Marlene Laruelle (Moscow, 2007), 196–250.

63. Anastasia Mitrofanova, "Russian Ethnic Nationalism and Religion Today," in *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism, 2000–2015*, ed. Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (Edinburgh, 2017), 104–31.

64. See their website, https://myhistorypark.ru/ (accessed April 9, 2020).

65. A. Pushkarskaia and O. Goriaev, "Rossiiskuiu istoriiu izlozhat v 25 parkakh," *Kommersant*, February 13, 2017, at https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3218554 (accessed April 14, 2020).

animations—with infographics and short texts. The exhibitions thus aim to produce not a research-based product, like a conventional museum, but a more popular outcome designed to attract larger audiences. The exhibition has been a success, both politically and commercially, thanks to its unique combination of a conservative reading of Russian history with an ultra-modern medium for its transmission.[66] By late 2019, another twenty parks were opened in major cities across Russia.

The historical park is promoted as a "living textbook": visitors travel through three exhibition halls, devoted to Russia's first dynasty (the Riurikids), the Romanovs, and Soviet history, respectively. The most ideological of the three, the Romanov section takes a straightforward monarchist stance, systematically presenting the Russian tsars as wise heads of state. Any attempt to question their autocratic power is condemned as a plot concocted by Russia's enemies, external and internal. Every revolutionary movement, including the Decembrists, is depicted as a masonic-inspired conspiracy. The huge area devoted to the 1914–1922 period, which occupies several rooms, is particularly visually powerful.

Three documentary films propagate the Church's reading of 1917, which can be summarized as follows.[67] Under Nicholas II, the Russian empire was on its way to a flourishing and modernizing future—economically, politically, and culturally—when it was destroyed by a combination of external and internal forces. The seeds of evil were sown with the Revolution of 1905 and the transformation of the autocracy into a parliamentary monarchy; one film denounces the "weakening of state censorship that allowed liberals to de-sacralize the tsar." The February Revolution was prepared with the help of "foreign and domestic capital," with a specific obsession on Great Britain. Another documentary on the 1917 coup heaps accusations on the liberals: "The Romanov throne collapsed not under the coup of Soviet and terrorist-revolutionaries, but of aristocratic families, court nobilities, bankers, publishers, lawyers, professors, and other civil society organizations." In this context, the February Revolution becomes the first "color revolution" in Russia's history, as claimed by another of the documentary films, which draws overt parallels with the Orange Revolution, the Euromaidan, and the Arab Springs.

By stating that the Russian empire was destroyed by its own elites, the Church frames the February Revolution—a symbol of liberal values and western-oriented worldviews—as the real evil that annihilated Russia. February symbolizes the beginning of a national tragedy; the collapse of the tsarist regime was its turning point, and the Bolshevik Revolution was just one more dreadful step. If Lenin is presented as a puppet in the hands of Germany, his role becomes almost secondary; his team is framed as a group of weak revolutionaries with little popular support. It is therefore not Soviet

66. See more in details Marlene Laruelle, "Commemorating 1917 in Russia: Ambivalent State History Policy and the Church's Conquest of the History Market," *Europe-Asia Studies* 71, no. 2 (March 2019): 249–67.

67. Based on the author's visits to the exhibition in July 2016 and December 2017 and notes taken from documentary films, which are forbidden to record.

Russia but the west, not Bolshevism but liberalism, that is responsible for the fall of tsarism. This ideological "trick" allows the exhibition to avoid being too confrontational toward the state-sponsored valorization of the Soviet Union. It also confirms the presentism of the Church's historical policy: today's identified enemy is liberalism, more than communism or even Soviet nostalgia, judged fully or partly compatible with the Church's ideological orientation.

Proponents of monarchism inside the Church can rely on a broader phenomenon with deeper societal roots that has taken shape since the early 2000s: that of a cult of the last tsar, Nicholas II, and his family, murdered by the Bolsheviks in the midst of the civil war. The Church canonized the imperial family in 2000, at the same time as the Patriarchate was negotiating a canonic reconciliation with ROCOR.[68] The media interpreted the canonization gesture as legitimizing monarchist principles, although the Patriarchate was careful to avoid politicizing it, stating that Nicholas II was recognized not as a martyr but as a passion-sufferer (*strastoterpets*)—a lower status—and that he was canonized neither for his political activities nor for his ideological convictions, but as a private person.[69] However, the Church has always refused to acknowledge the remains buried in 1998 in the Romanov family mausoleum of the Sts. Peter and Paul Cathedral as those of the imperial family, contesting DNA results and opening its own investigation committee, with Tikhon as its secretary.[70] As the centenary of the execution (July 16–17, 2018) approached, the Russian government was hoping that the Church would finally agree to formally recognize the remains in order to bury the last two Romanov children and close that chapter of history—but that hope was dashed.[71]

Whatever the Patriarchate's position on the nature of the imperial relics, the shadow of Nicholas II extends far beyond the debate around his death. He became a cult figure for a large part of the active believer community well before he was canonized by the Church. As explained by Kathy Rousselet, "Worshipping [has developed] as a reaction to post-Soviet disorder."[72] Icons of the imperial family are now prominently displayed in those churches that

68. Wendy Slater, *The Many Deaths of Tsar Nicholas II: Relics, Remains and the Romanovs* (London, 2007); Robert K. Massie, *The Romanovs: The Final Chapter* (New York, 2012).

69. Aleksandr Morozov, "Chto stoit za kanonizatsiei Nikolaia II?" *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, August 12, 2000, at http://www.ng.ru/ideas/2000-08-12/1_nikolai.html (accessed April 14th, 2020); Marianne Leeper, "The Schism of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Canonization of Nicholas II and the Royal Family" (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas-Arlington, 2001), 66.

70. Anatolii Stepanov, "Na vopros, iabliaiutsia li 'Ekaterinburgskie ostanki' sviatymi moshchami, dolzhny otvetit′ sami tsarstvennye mucheniki," Russkaia narodnaia liniia, Pravoslavie.ru, June 24, 2017, at http://www.pravoslavie.ru/104654.html (accessed May 4, 2020).

71. Arsenii Oganesian, "'Khristianstvo—eto vsegda podvig,'" *Izvestia*, July 9, 2018, at https://iz.ru/762492/arsenii-oganesian/khristianstvo-eto-vsegda-podvig (accessed April 14, 2020).

72. Kathy Rousselet, "Constructing Moralities around the Tsarist Family," in *Multiple Moralities and Religions in Post-Soviet Russia*, ed. Jarrett Zigon (New York, 2011), 158.

are the most popular with pilgrim tourists.[73] One of Nicholas II's icons is said to have flowed with myrrh and to have emitted a sweet smell.[74] The yearly procession-commemoration from Yekaterinburg to Ganina Yama has grown from a few dozen people in 1992 to 100,000 participants in the centenary commemoration of July 2018.[75] For these *tsarebozhniki*—fervent believers in the sacredness of the tsar—political issues around monarchism do not matter. Nicholas II's elevation to the status of saint glosses over his record as a ruler, replacing the historical figure with a mythical one.

The cult of Nicholas II does not limit itself to its religious aspect and reaches members of society far beyond the limited circle of active believers. Portraits of the tsar now serve as a metaphor for pre-revolutionary Russia, used to market any product that has been available since that period, such as chocolate or tea. It has also become common to depict the imperial family as an ordinary bourgeois family of the early twentieth century: as stated by Wendy Slater, "the imagery of a happy family has become central to the post-Soviet reputations of Nicholas and Alexandra."[76] The proliferation of photographs, films, and serials showing the tsar's supposed idyllic family life, with a loving wife, nice daughters, and a fragile, hemophiliac heir, exhibit the virtues of domestic harmony, but also of a bygone past.[77]

The Church has been heavily nurturing this popular and mythicized vision of Nicholas II. In 2017, for instance, the Patriarchate launched the operation "Words on Love" (*Slova o liubvi*), displaying 300 billboards on Moscow streets featuring excerpts from Nicholas II and Alexandra's correspondence on love and family values.[78] Around the centenary of the execution in 2018, this effort was renewed in several big Russian cities. According to the Church, the goal of this advertising campaign was to strengthen family values in society, but also, indirectly, to cultivate the idea of the imperial family as an example to follow.

In 2017, the Church and the Orthodox activists surrounding it were able to make their voices heard as never before in defense of Nicholas II as a holy figure. The polemics arose around the film "Matilda," which depicts the documented love story between the young Nicholas II, still only tsarevich,

73. The process of creating new saints is often driven by believers themselves. See, for example, Victoria Fomina, "Between Heroism and Sainthood: New Martyr Evgenii Rodionov as a Moral Model in Contemporary Russia," *History and Anthropology* 29, no. 1 (February 2018): 101–20. See also Jeanne Kormina, "Russian Saint under Construction: Portraits and Icons of Starets Nikolay," *HSE Research Paper* WP BRP 04/HUM/2012, April 9, 2012.

74. Wendy Slater, "Relics, Remains, and Revisionism: Narratives of Nicholas II in Contemporary Russia," *Rethinking History* 9, no. 1 (February 2005): 53–70.

75. "Episkop Tikhon: chast' tserkovnoi kommissii uverena v ritual'nom kharaktere ubiistva Romanovykh," *TASS*, November 27, 2017, https://tass.ru/obschestvo/4763023 (accessed June 15, 2020).

76. Slater, "Relics, Remains, and Revisionism," 64.

77. "Nikolai i Aleksandra: chetvert′ veka liubvi (foto)," *Pravoslavnyi mir*, November 27, 2014, at https://www.pravmir.ru/nikolay-i-aleksandra-chetvert-veka-lyubvi-foto/ (accessed August 4, 2019).

78. "RPTs ustanovila bannery s tsitatami iz perepiski Nikolaia II s zhenoi," *Radio Svoboda*, September 27, 2017, at https://www.svoboda.org/a/28760363.html (accessed April 14, 2020).

and the ballerina Mathilde Kschessinska. The Orthodox Church advanced the idea that the film was blasphemous, calling on believers to pray for it to be banned.[79] Poklonskaia took the lead on the campaign against "Matilda," calling for the film to be outlawed because, she claimed, it contravened the law on offending religious feeling, and stated that she had collected 100,000 signatures against it.[80] Several Orthodox movements, including Sorok Sorokov, the Church paramilitary movement, organized prayer sit-ins in the streets near theaters showing the film, bringing together as many as 10,000 people united in denouncing a sacrilegious movie. Defenders of Nicholas II also responded by producing a documentary film, "The Slandered Sovereign" (*Obolgannyi gosudar′*), a straightforward rehabilitation of Nicholas II by several religious and cultural figures who made public their devotion to the last tsar.[81]

Even more unexpected was the rise of a militant Orthodoxy (*boevoe pravoslavie*) ready to commit violent action to defend Nicholas II's sainthood.[82] A henceforth unknown group calling itself "Christian State-Holy Russia" (*Khristianskoe gosudarstvo-Sviataia Rus′*) threatened to commit violent acts if the film was released, and indeed threw petrol bombs at the building housing film director Aleksei Uchitel′'s studio. Some cars were torched near Moscow, where flyers displayed the slogan "Burn for Matilda," and in Yekaterinburg a man was arrested after crashing his Jeep into a theater showing the film. Several calls about bomb threats resulting in the evacuation of schools and commercial malls may have been organized by the group, stated its leader, Aleksandr Kalinin.[83]

Faced with violence, the authorities were compelled to navigate between punishing street violence and avoiding offending the Church. Several municipal authorities barred the distribution of the film out of fear of violent

79. "RPTs protiv 'Matil′dy': Moleben protiv kinoprem′ery oshelomil dazhe sviashchennikov," *MK.ru*, June 30, 2017, at http://www.mk.ru/social/2017/06/30/rpc-protiv-matildy-moleben-protiv-kinopremery-oshelomil-dazhe-svyashhennikov.html (accessed April 14, 2020).

80. Natal′ia Poklonskaia, "Sozdateli fil′ma 'Matil′da' mogut byt privlecheny k ugolovnoi otvetstvennosti," *Natal′ia Poklonskaia (blog)*, January 30, 2017, at http://poklonskaya-nv.livejournal.com/2017/01/30/ (accessed April 14, 2020). See also Aleksandr Baunov, "Razdvoenie loial′nosti. Pochemu ne poluchaetsia ostanovit′ kampaniiu protiv 'Matil′dy,'" *Carnegie.ru*, September 14, 2017, at http://carnegie.ru/commentary/73097 (accessed August 4, 2019).

81. "Dok. Fil′m 'Obolgannyi Gosudar'' (polnaia versiia)," YouTube video, 1:44:14, posted by "Sed′moi Angel," October 19, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mGtklsLIrw (accessed January 18, 2019, no longer available).

82. Maria Engström, "Religious Terror in Modern Russia," *Intersection: Russia/Europe/World*, October 18, 2017, at http://intersectionproject.eu/article/society/religious-terror-modern-russia (accessed April 14, 2020)

83. "'Khristianskogo gosudarstva' ne sushchestvuet. No za nim, vozmozhno, stoit FSB. 'Meduza' vyiasnila, otkuda vzialis′ pravoslavnye radikaly i chto pro nikh dumaiut v RPTs," *Meduza*, September 20, 2017, at https://meduza.io (accessed April 14, 2020). See also Vladimir Rozanskij, "Aleksandr Kalinin, the War against 'Matilda' and Putin," *AsiaNews*, September 22, 2017, at http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Aleksandr-Kalinin,-the-war-against-'Matilda'-and-Putin-41852.html (accessed April 14, 2020).

reactions; Tatarstan banned it from public theaters but not private ones.[84] Local authorities in Chechnia and Dagestan, with the support of Moscow's main mufti, Albir Krganov, asked that the film be banned from their republics and called for a replacement film that would show the last tsar in a better light.[85] At the federal level, however, the Procuracy did not find any element of the film that could be considered to cause offense to religious feeling, confirming that law enforcement remains largely secular and sometimes insensitive to Orthodox lobbying.[86] The Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinskii, although known for his cultural censorship, refused to ban the film.[87] Putin's press secretary, Dmitrii Peskov, denounced the "extremists" threatening the film and labeled their actions "unacceptable." At the same time, he asked for "mutual responsibility," saying that the "artists must explain that they had no intention of insulting the feelings of others."[88]

The revival of the monarchist idea in Russia has accelerated in recent years with the activism of several memory actors and a long series of centenary commemorations. While there is no popular support for a return to monarchism, widespread cultural nostalgia for tsarism and especially for Nicholas II's reign, as well as for White Army heroes such as Aleksandr Kolchak and Anton Denikin, keeps the topic of monarchism alive.

This historical reference illustrates how the Russian regime deploys symbolic politics to cultivate the largest social consensus possible, allocating room to all sides, from Stalinists to nostalgics of tsarism, so that each citizen can recognize him or herself in the current ideological status quo. It also shows how the regime builds its relationship to ideology: the highest levels of the state—the government, the judicial system, and the president himself—do not allow for any ambiguity in relation to monarchism's potential rehabilitation. Yet, other circles of power that are outside state organs themselves—but still part of the Kremlin's ecosystems—are welcome to perform some forms of monarchist nostalgia. They mostly operationalize it as an allegory for an autocratic regime in which Putin could stay in power for life, but also as a soft power tool for reaching European aristocratic and far-right circles.

84. "Territoriia 'Matil′dy': gde mozhno i gde nel′zia smotret′ fil′m v Rossii. Karta," *Meduza*, August 10, 2017, at https://meduza.io/feature/2017/08/10/territoriya-matildy-gde-mozhno-i-gde-nelzya-smotret-film-v-rossii-karta (accessed April 14, 2020).

85. "Muftii Moskvy predlozhil sniat′ blokbaster o Nikolae II v otvet na 'Matil′du,'" *Interfax*, August 9, 2017, at http://www.interfax.ru/moscow/574154 (accessed April 14, 2020).

86. "'Poklonskuiu podstavili.' Interv′iu Alekseia Uchitelia—o 'Matil′de,' Nikolae II i proverkakh prokuratury," *Meduza*, November 8, 2016, at https://meduza.io/feature/2016/11/08/poklonskuyu-podstavili (accessed April 14, 2020).

87. "Ministerstvo kul′tury: Ekspertiza Poklonskoi ne povliiaet na prokat 'Matil′dy'—ee avtory ne videli fil′ma," *Meduza*, April 25, 2017, at https://meduza.io/news/2017/04/25/minkult-ekspertiza-poklonskoy-ne-povliyaet-na-prokat-matildy-ee-avtory-ne-videli-filma (accessed April 14, 2020).

88. "V Gosdume napomnili nedovol′nym fil′mom 'Matil′da' o prave na svobodu tvorchestva," *Interfax*, February 13, 2017, at http://www.interfax.ru/russia/549602 (accessed April 14, 2020).

Inside the Church, the relationship to monarchism is read in a more literal mode, with groups convinced it responds to Russia's atemporal political nature. These groups, however, also exhibit monarchist convictions as part of their own toolkit of influence: promoting tsarism helps to consolidate the Church's stance as Russia's main moral entrepreneur, with the hope of influencing citizens as well as state organs. Last but not least, riding the wave of popular nostalgia for Nicholas II and his growing cult as a redemptive figure allows the Patriarchate to position itself as the main victim of the Soviet regime. While the Church's posture on tsarism seems to contradict the state's, both are connected through several ideological entrepreneurs. Mikhalkov, Yakunin, and Malofeev, even if without official functions at the highest echelons of the state, blur the official discursive line that refutes monarchism and closely collaborate with the Church through personal connections with Tikhon and many layers of institutional cooperation.

This ambiguous continuum is at the core of the Russian state's relationship to ideology. None of the possible ideological set is made official, but several powerbrokers can act in their favor, offering a plurality of opinions. They cultivate contacts with societal actors who promote these ideologies in a more literal manner so that the channels of communication with each group remain open for back and forth influences. This continuum cannot then be interpreted as either competitive or complementary: it is simultaneously both—by design, not by default—meaning that the balancing act between co-opting and competing is intrinsic to the logic of the political system. The risks are also intrinsic. This equilibrium has been at the core of "Putinism" and its *ad hoc* ideological constructions for years and has worked well so far. Yet tensions may accentuate as the elites prepare for a post-2024 era, with ideological discrepancies becoming more visible among different vested interest groups.