

The Twilight of the Russian World

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The decision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople to support the establishment of an [autocephalous](#) Orthodox Church in Ukraine undermines severely the idea of the Russian World ([Russkiy Mir](#)) which constitutes the basic pillar of the foreign policy and identity politics of the Putin regime.

On 11 October the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople annulled its decision to transfer the metropolis of Kiev to the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate which was undertaken in 1686. The Patriarchate also confirmed that it would continue the procedure of granting Autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in Ukraine which should unite itself. Currently the Orthodox community in Ukraine is divided between three churches, including two without Autocephaly. The only one enjoying the autocephaly is subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate. These decisions can be seen as an earthquake with serious seismic waves hitting basic foundations of Russian national mythology and its neo-Imperial foreign policy gravely.

Immediately the next day, Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed the Constantinople Patriarchate's decision during a meeting with the presidential Security Council. After the meeting, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov reporting on the conduct of proceedings did not refrain from threats declaring that 'If the events that are developing take an unlawful turn, then, of course, just as Russia defends the interests of Russians and Russian-speaking people everywhere, in the same way, and Putin has spoken repeatedly about this, Russia defends the interests of Orthodox Christians.' In fact, a few days later, the events did take 'an unlawful turn' from the point of view of the Kremlin, because the Moscow Patriarchate severed full communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople characterising the latter as schismatic. This dramatic reaction was not a coincidence. In the Orthodox world, the autocephaly constitutes a basic condition for the absolute sovereignty of a nation and independence of the state. Meanwhile, the Kremlin, the Moscow Patriarchate and most Russians identify Orthodox Christianity very closely with the idea of an All-Russian nation. According to this idea the above-mentioned nation is composed of three sub-nations, ethnic Russians, Ukrainians and Belarussians. This concept is deeply rooted in the history of Tsarist Russia when it became the state ideology. The unity of these sub-nations allegedly originates from the common spiritual, cultural and state heritage of the Kiev Rus. What is even more important, Russia (the Greek name of Rus) and Russians (Russkiye, i.e. inhabitants of Rus) are supposed to be the most legitimate successors of that tradition, so to say senior brothers of Belarussians and Ukrainians. It is not by accident that the head of the Russian Orthodox Church holds the official title of the Patriarch of all Rus', not of Russia. This wider definition of Rus which covers the former Soviet Union confirmed also the fact that the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, which considered the Patriarchate of Constantinople to be schismatic, was held in Minsk, the capital of Belarus.

Currently this All-Russian-Orthodox mixture is particularly promoted by Moscow through the concept of the Russian World (Russkiy Mir). The idea was institutionalised several years ago by the establishment of the foundation under the same name. The term occurred for the first

time in the 90s but in the past similar terms such 'Russian Spirit' was used. The Russian World assumes that there is such a thing as a distinctive Russian civilisation with its own territory, and by default it should have a single political authority. Of course, the borders between state and civilisation became blurred in the case of the 'Russian World' because Russia itself is defined as a civilisation-state. In January 2012 Putin wrote in the newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*: 'The Great Russian mission is to unite, bind civilization. In this type of state-civilization there are no national minorities, and the principle of recognition of "friend or foe" is defined as a common culture and shared values (...) This civilizational identity is based on the preservation of the Russian cultural dominance, the carriers of which are not only ethnic Russian, but all carriers of such identity regardless of nationality.'

Therefore, the Russian World openly postulates Russian domination and the necessity of reunification of the divided nation. This motif gained a new momentum in March 2014 after the illegal annexation of Crimea. In Putin's famous speech in which he announced the annexation he compared the situation of Russians to that of the Germans who were unfairly divided during the Cold War. Moreover, in April 2014, a very 'vague' category, known as 'native in Russian language' was created by an amendment to the law on citizenship. It provides every person who has been recognised by the special state commission as a 'native in Russian language' with the opportunity to obtain citizenship of the Russian Federation on the fast track. Being native in Russian language is defined as the use of Russian in everyday life regardless of the current citizenship. Every person whose close relatives live or used to live in Russia, the former Soviet Union or the Russian Empire (including most of Poland and Finland) is eligible to apply for Russian citizenship. Nevertheless, applicants approved by the commission have to resettle in Russia and renounce their previous citizenship.

The definition of 'Russian World' is even wider than the amended citizenship. According to the [website of the Foundation Russkiy Mir](#) the term compatriot 'refers to our compatriots in the countries of the nearer and farther abroad, emigrants from Russia, their descendants, foreign nationals speaking Russian, students and teachers of the Russian language, and all those who are sincerely interested in Russia.' What is the most worrying is the fact, that the Military Doctrine of Russia foresees that it is the state's duty to protect compatriots abroad including even through the use of force.

In the concept of the 'Russian World', the notion of world is understood by its ancient meaning (*Pax* from Latin), that of a civilisational space ('a global community of values'). In consequence, the concept of the 'Russian world' in Russian foreign policy did not only become an ideological platform for the reintegration of the territories of the post-Soviet area. It also gained the status of global counteroffer 'which deviates from the consumer-society values of the "American world"' or the conservative alternative to the liberal West. It is not an accident that, pro-Russian separatists from Donbass present the war with the Ukrainian state as a 'religious war' which according to them constitutes a defence of the canonical Russian Orthodoxy against the aggression by 'schismatics' and 'Uniates' (Greek Catholics) supported by the West.

In recent years the Patriarchate of Moscow became an institution almost completely subordinated to the Kremlin. In effect, the Russian Orthodox Church contributed considerably to the development of the Russian World. The Russian clergy even coined a rhyming slogan, 'Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus/There you have it: Holy Rus' which may be called its informal national anthem. The union of the altar and throne was confirmed when Vladimir Putin joined Patriarch Kirill on his annual pilgrimage to Kyiv in 2013. They came to celebrate the '1025th anniversary of the baptism of Rus'. It was then that Putin for the first time embraced officially the idea, previously articulated by the Church and the Foundation of the Russian World, that Russians, Belarussians and Ukrainians were one people: 'We understand today's realities: we have the Ukrainian people and the Belarussian people and other peoples, and we are respectful of that whole legacy, but at the foundation there lie, unquestionably, our common spiritual values, which make us one people.'

The Kremlin strongly intertwines the concept of the Russian World in its narrative about Russia's place on the world stage and the Russian national and civilisational identities with other ideas such as Eurasianism (see previous blogs). However, there is an obvious tension between both concepts. The Russian World is simultaneously broader and narrower than Eurasianism. It is broader because its founding principle is to expand Russia's influence globally beyond the boundaries of the post-Soviet or post-Tsarist space. On the other hand, it is narrower because it focuses on Russian speakers but in practice mostly on the Orthodox Slavs (the heritage of Kiev Rus). In contrast, the Eurasian narrative perceives Russia as a leader of Eurasia defined as a multi-national and -religious civilisational space. The Russian World project is a soft power instrument that targets societies rather than elites or states, while the Eurasian project is an institutional, economic and strategic integration initiative that affects the development patterns of the post-Soviet states.

However, even more challenging for the Russian World is the fact that Russia's aggressive foreign policy has achieved the opposite from what the Kremlin expected to achieve. For instance, after the Russian aggression against Ukraine, its inhabitants became definitely more critical towards the idea of All-Russian nation based mostly on Orthodox Christianity. The support of Ukrainians for the united and independent Ukrainian Church increased dramatically after the Russian invasion of Donbass. According to the opinion polls conducted by Rating Group, before the Euromaidan only around 33 percent of Ukrainians endorsed the unification and independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and more than 25 percent rejected it. Right now, more than 55 percent give the green light to the first scenario and less than 20 percent hold a negative attitude towards this issue. The idea of an All-Russian nation became even more surrealistic, taking into consideration that the Kremlin through its war propaganda provoked a dramatic rise of Russian nationalism with a strong anti-Ukrainian flavour. Indeed, surveys powered by the Levada Centre show a dramatic deterioration of the attitude of Russians towards Ukraine after the 'Revolution of Dignity'. At the beginning of 2014 two-thirds of Russians expressed a positive attitude to Ukraine and around one-fourth a negative one. Currently only one-third of Russians express sympathy towards Ukraine and more than 55 percent feel antipathy. Moreover, the Russians have a more negative attitude towards Ukraine than Ukrainians towards Russia. It also means that the 'All-Russian nation' is turning into one of the many fake ideas promoted by the Kremlin abroad.