

Reflections on World Politics #5

John A. Bernbaum

March 27, 2022

Weaponizing Christianity

The Autocrat's Playbook: Political analysts carefully track the large number of populists who enter the presidency of their country through elections and then quickly make strong anti-democratic moves. They defy any constraints on their control and quickly concentrate power in their own hands. They declare war on the media and depict themselves as supporters of the people against corrupt elites. These leaders, like Putin, use populist language, generate polarization, and propagate lies and half-truths, creating what Moises Naim describes as “post-truth politics.”

Over time, support for autocrats begins to diminish and, in a desperate effort to remain in power -- because there is no succession option for dictators -- the lies and half-truths multiply. As Putin's power began to recede during his re-election in March 2012, when thousands of Russians protested his re-election, the state authorities made it clear that they ran the political life of the country, and the opinion of its citizens wasn't necessary or welcome. What Putin and his cronies offer is a reasonable economy and unprecedented personal and consumer freedom. But this freedom brings with it increased repression against opponents of the regime, both domestic and foreign. Dissent is not tolerated.

Weaponizing Christianity: In early 2012, Putin and Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church launched a new weapon to defend the power of Russia's dictator. Kirill, who was named Patriarch in 2009, began by openly cooperating with the state; he enjoyed its patronage, but mostly stayed out of politics. But when Putin's popularity began to diminish, the Patriarch gave him enthusiastic support for his re-election as president, declaring that the Putin era was a “miracle of God.” It was the most direct political endorsement from the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church ever given in recent Russian history.

This new weapon is an argument for a Russian world (*Russkii mir*) – a Russian civilization that includes Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, as well as ethnic Russians throughout the world. *Russkii mir* has a common political center (Moscow), a common spiritual center (Kiev), a common language (Russian), a common church (the Russian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate), and a common patriarch – you guessed it – Kirill, who works in harmony with the common president (Putin). There is no room in this perspective for an independent Ukraine. It needs to be brought under Russian control. This argument makes it clear that the West is not only a political foe, it is also a spiritual enemy.

We need to understand that Ukraine's religious freedom and diversity provides a sharp contrast to Russia's authoritarian rule. When I personally visited Ukraine on one of my first trips, I had the privilege of meeting the Patriarch of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, as well as leading

Catholic and evangelical leaders. All of them highlighted the religious freedom in Ukraine and the healthy religious competition among various churches. They were proud of how they cooperated with each other, and it was such a contrast to what I had experienced for years in Russia. It is one of the reasons I fell in love with Ukraine.

As an autocrat who is losing popularity in Russia, Putin will use any argument, any leverage, to defend his policies. Christianity is another weapon in his toolbox. Ukraine is a threat to him because it is a western-style democracy, with an emerging economy, right on his southern border. Ukraine also embraces religious freedom and a diversity of beliefs, which adds to its strength.

With the collapse of Marxism-Leninism, Russian Orthodoxy has emerged as a substitute state ideology, which Putin has grasped to fortify his decreasing support base. This is quite an ironic decision for a former KGB agent. He is getting desperate and now sees Russian Orthodoxy as providing a sacred purpose for his regime's existence and support for his dream to rebuild the Russian empire.

Once again, Putin has miscalculated, adding this decision to his list of mistakes compounding Russia's failed military strategy. Russian pressures on Ukraine since 2014 have alienated Orthodox believers in Ukraine who attend Russia-related Orthodox churches and resulted in the growth of Ukrainian Orthodox Churches with a Ukrainian Patriarch. When Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, the senior leader of the world's Orthodox churches, granted independence to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, this was another major setback for Kirill and Putin. Now religious leaders around the world are condemning Putin's aggression, adding to Russia's isolation.

My colleague Mark Elliott, an expert in the religious life of Russia and Ukraine, points out that Putin and Kirill want to destroy a democratic, religiously tolerant nation with one of the most robust Christian populations of any country in Europe. Ukraine has more Orthodox churches than Russia, which has a population three times that of Ukraine. Ukraine also has growing populations of Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, and Adventists - unlike Russia.

Professor Elliott notes that two words in Old Slavonic (three words in English) are voiced repeatedly in the Orthodox Divine Liturgy: *Gospodi pomilui*, Lord have mercy. Witnessing what we are seeing in Ukraine, he reminds us: "We cannot repeat it too often."

.....

These "Reflections" are circulated approximately once a week. If you want to have your name added to our mailing list, let me know (johnbernbaum@gmail.com); you can unsubscribe at any time.