

Welcome to the Kremlin

As we recall, Putin started his presidency at the very moment the twenty-first century began, anointed by Boris Yeltsin as his successor. An exhausted Yeltsin addressed the nation, but Putin had already given the traditional New Year's greeting for 2000. In a few months, presidential elections were to take place in Russia. Putin, presented as a young, energetic KGB man, stood for the promise of a new standard in politics and was meant to give hope to Russians worn down by the "miserable" nineties.

In spring of 2000, Putin was elected president of the Russian Federation for the first time. In his first term he tried to take an "amicable" approach with the West. George W. Bush, after meeting him in 2001, memorably declared: "I looked the man in the eye and found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy. I was able to get a sense of his soul. This is a man very dedicated to his country and the interests of his country. I wouldn't have invited him to my ranch if I didn't trust him!" Yet at the time, Russia was still falling apart—the war in Chechnya was underway—and the country faced the West in a weak, even humiliated position.

I remember well the Kursk tragedy in the early days of Putin's presidency. The submarine sank with her crew, and although there was a chance of saving lives, the bungled rescue attempt embarrassed Russia, while Putin undermined himself with his own mendacity. So we got used to making fun of Russia—but in the meantime, little by little, the Russian economy improved by leveraging conditions on the energy markets. Russia even joined the G8 group of wealthiest countries in the world. But Putin would never have succeeded politically without skillfully stewarding the country through conflict and pointing the finger at the nation's enemies. He got a perfect pretext from the war in Chechnya on the one hand and a war against the oligarchs on the other. But as these conflicts escalated, Russia was increasingly accused of violating human rights—and Putin didn't like, and still doesn't, being accused of something “demeaning.” He wanted Russia to “rise from its knees” and be treated by the West as an equal partner. But instead he kept getting lectured at.

In 2002, Putin's romantic relationship with the West went sour when former Eastern Bloc countries joined NATO. The Americans' actions in Iraq—the same Americans who so often nagged him about human rights—added fuel to the fire.

The turning point came in 2007. Putin, disappointed not so much in Bush as in his administration, had some memorable, critical words to say at the Munich Security Conference. He accused the United States of building a “unipolar” world. He no longer saw the US as a friend and ally, but instead a rival and enemy. A year later, Putin attacked Georgia, a country that enjoyed strong US support. The optimistic “reset” in relations between the United States and Russia, a policy launched by the Obama administration during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev (2008–2012), was only an interlude.

When revolutions broke out in Arab countries in 2011, Putin watched anxiously as one dictator after another was toppled. All the more anxiously because in September of that year, he'd announced he would run for election again. He had already served two terms (eight years in power), plus four years behind the back of his anointed successor, Medvedev, while officially serving as Prime Minister. Putin's decision to run again was met with disappointment by some Russian citizens, those who desired change. Mass

protests took place on the streets of many cities. It had already been twelve years with Putin. It was looking like he intended to “continue the mission” for another six years (the constitution had been changed and the presidential term extended). So they were gearing up for eighteen years with Putin, after which he’d have the right to run for another six years, which would give him a total twenty-four years in the Kremlin. Only Stalin ruled longer—thirty years.

Many Russians, representatives of the emerging middle class who until now had wanted to keep politics at arm’s length, now came out onto the streets. They shouted, “Russia without Putin!” or “Putin out!” The police arrested them, and the courts convicted them. Meanwhile Putin “took offense” at society and started applying repression. Biographers and journalists claim Putin was obsessively terrified of these protests. He not only persecuted his own people, he also initiated unprecedented attacks on US Embassy staff, accusing America of inciting Russian citizens.

When the election results were announced—Putin won, of course—the new-old president took the stage to thank his compatriots. He shed a tear, though he later claimed it was from the wind. But this was no time to get emotional: there were protests, discontent, and an economic crisis on top of it to deal with. Putin had to create a new self. An entertaining take on this metamorphosis comes from Mikhail Zygar, a Russian journalist, founder of the independent TV station Dozhd and author of *All the Kremlin’s Men*, a collection of portraits of people close to Putin. Putin found himself between the phases Zygar refers to as “Putin the Terrible” and “Putin the Saint.”¹ Putin the Terrible went to war: in Syria and Ukraine. Meanwhile Putin the Saint sentenced the young women of the punk feminist band Pussy Riot to jail for offending religious sentiments.

And here we get to the heart of the matter. In Poland we like to repeat like a mantra that Russia equals communism, as if thirty years hadn’t passed since the Fall of the Berlin Wall. Meanwhile we’re slower to notice that since 2012, Russia has become the cradle of a different internationalism. The Communist International has been replaced by an ultra-right internationalism with religious fundamentalist overtones. Moscow has become its capital, while the former KGB agent Putin has become what one

¹ Mikhail Zygar, *All the Kremlin’s Men*, tr. Thomas Hodson, New York: Public Affairs, 2016.

of the most influential Russian think tanks called in 2013 “the new world leader of conservatism.”²

PUSSY RIOT VS. PUTIN

On the wintery day of February 21, 2012, shortly before the presidential elections, some strange characters burst into Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior. A young woman wearing a bright yellow balaclava, a sleeveless green mini-dress and burgundy tights crosses herself on her knees in front of an icon of Christ. A confused man goes up to her and tries to pull her away. Here the image begins to shake. You can watch this video now on YouTube. We see older women in jackets, two more young women in balaclavas hopping onto the platform in front of the iconostasis, and guards chasing them. One tears off a woman’s balaclava, another woman plays the guitar, the rest are dancing. The chase is on, and a woman in a white head covering tries to grab the camera. We can count four women on the “stage,” but there are a few more, including the guitarist, at a side altar. All are in campy dresses and colorful balaclavas. They’re dancing to music that alternates from a church choir into a punk rock number. The women sing: “Mother of God, banish Putin”³ and encourage her to become a feminist.

This is a performance piece by the Pussy Riot collective. And by no means their first. The activists had done similar actions before, including in a church. They also sang in their colorful balaclavas on Red Square, a song called “Rebellion in Russia—Putin’s Wet Himself.” They simultaneously recorded music videos that afterward they’d release on YouTube. If they got a thousand views, they were happy. This time there were a lot more. And other results too.

² Christian Neef, Matthias Schepp, “How Putin Outfoxed the West,” *Spiegel Online*, December 16, 2013, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/how-vladimir-putin-ruthlessly-maintains-russia-s-grip-on-the-east-a-939286-2.html>.

Also: Brian Withmore, “Vladimir Putin, Conservative Icon: The Russian president is positioning himself as the world’s leading defender of traditional values,” *The Atlantic*, December 20, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/12/vladimir-putin-conservative-icon/282572/>.

³ Translation by Carol Rumans: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/20/pussy-riot-punk-prayer-lyrics>

For singing a forty-second song in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, criticizing Putin and the Orthodox Church's involvement in the presidential elections a few days later, three of the band members were arrested for "hooliganism." These were twenty-three-year-old Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, twenty-four-year-old Maria Alyokhina and twenty-nine-year-old Yekaterina Samutsevich. All three immediately became "enemies of the people." Ultra-right and religious websites started posting information about the activists' families, their places of residence, and Nadya and Masha's small children. The public television station Channel One had no scruples about using images of Nadya's four-year-old daughter and of her then-husband, Pyotr Verzilov—also a political performance artist. Katya Samutsevich was later released, but both mothers, Nadya and Masha, were sentenced to two years in prison. They were released in December 2013, after twenty-one months in a penal colony. Putin pardoned them right before the end of their sentence. Nadya, in her book *Read and Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism*, published in late 2018, writes irreverently: "Every single interrogator who talked to us after our arrest recommended we (a) give up, (b) shut up, and (c) admit that we love Vladimir Putin. 'Nobody cares about your fate; you'll die here in prison and no one will even know about it. Don't be stupid—say that you love Putin.' However, we insisted that we don't love him. And many supported us in our stubbornness."⁴

In the introduction to the book, Nadya writes: "I was born a few days before the fall of the Berlin Wall. One might have thought at the time that after the assumed elimination of the Cold War paradigm, we were going to live in peace. Hmm..."⁵ When they are asked whether they think a new Cold War is starting, Nadya replies that it never ended: "The people who are running the power in our country, they are from that Soviet

⁴Nadya Tolokonnikova, *Read & Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism*, New York: HarperOne, 2018, p. 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11

age.”⁶ And also: “We were really inspired by the Arab spring protesters. That really drove us on.”⁷

The women of Pussy Riot were recognized as a symbol of the changes occurring in the third term of Putin’s presidency. A macho leader against twenty-year-old women in colorful dresses. Putin avoids saying the name of the group out loud, and they laugh at him. “He has this magical, tech-centered approach to his thinking, where he thinks that if he names something, it will go on existing, and become much more threatening. He avoids naming things that he doesn’t like,”⁸ explains Verzilov.

Pussy Riot is an exclusively female entity. Its members chose to make it that way, knowing from experience that whenever a man turns up, he’s immediately viewed as the leader. Their illegal acts, committed since 2011, have been directed against the political elites’ disdain for a protesting civil society. But also against sexism, whose perfect personification is macho-posing Putin himself. Using balaclavas in their actions meant any woman could become a member of the group. That means Pussy Riot can appear anywhere in the world, because faces don’t matter.

“When we are going to other countries, we always meet people who are Pussy Riot. I think that it’s the best thing. You should not have to have some kind of membership. You should just put the mask on and start protesting,” says Masha.⁹

The activists emphasize the strongly feminist character of the group. As they work, they want to create a “new role for a woman.” By protesting, they want to have fun and not be obedient. But not everyone in Russia has responded to their “little shows” as positively as in the West, where Madonna put on a balaclava during a concert as a protest, and wrote on her back: “Free Pussy Riot.”

⁶ Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruMclx5Gy7M>

⁷ Carole Cadwalladr, Pussy Riot: ‘When friendly people like us become enemies of the state, it is very strange’, November 16, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/nov/16/pussy-riot-russia-opposition-political-activism-putin>.

⁸ Cait Munro, Pussy Riot on Art, Activism, and Their Name’s Hilarious Russian Translation, ArtNet, November 3, 2014, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/pussy-riot-on-art-activism-and-their-names-hilarious-russian-translation-152590>.

⁹ Cait Munro, Pussy Riot’s Maria Alyokhina on Her Plans for a Women’s Museum, ArtNet, December 16, 2015, <https://news.artnet.com/market/pussy-riot-womens-museum-whitebox-show-393189>.

SAINT PUTIN

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia was a spiritual *tabula rasa*. After years of religious persecution came an era of freedom and soaking up spiritual inspiration. There was an enormous opportunity for regaining lost ground and at the same time here was a wonderful new tool for crafting state-creating myths. The 1993 Constitution of the Russian Federation granted its citizens “the freedom of conscience [and] the freedom of religion.” But this was still the era of post-Soviet chaos. The time for the state to reclaim religion would come two decades later.

I’m reading *Landscape After the Thaw* by Jędrzej Morawiecki.¹⁰ It’s a habilitation thesis about the place of religion in Russia during the revolution, under Stalinism, under Khrushchev, and its rebirth after 1991. Jędrzej and I know one another from our kids’ sandbox. While Klarcia and Hesia were playing, we’d talk about Russia. Then we went on vacation together in Ukraine, and afterward to Russia. Jędrzej was going there for research, investigating cults, doing interviews with shamans; I went to wander around.

Russia has always lived deep within me. My grandma was an ethnic Russian from Kyiv. She married a Pole, whose father had once fought under Józef Piłsudski, the general who led Poland to independence in 1918. In family pictures, on one side you see my great-grandfather, mustachioed and in his Polish Legionnaire’s uniform, and on the other, my proud great-grandmother wearing beads. Grandma Valentina and Grandpa Aleksander often argued about history. I remember those knock-down, drag-out brawls but only today do I understand them. Grandma’s family fled Kyiv during the Polish-

¹⁰ Jędrzej Morawiecki, *Krajobraz po odwilży. Poradziecka tożsamość religijna mieszkańców współczesnych miast syberyjskich* [Landscape after the Thaw: The Post-Soviet Religious Identity of Modern Inhabitants of Siberian Cities], Kraków, 2018.

Bolshevik War of 1920–22, as Piłsudski’s forces were approaching the city. So for my grandfather, Piłsudski was a hero, while for my grandmother, he was a murderer.

Jędrek was in Moscow when Russia first invaded Ukraine in 2014. When he got back to Poland, he was feeling low; the scale of mendacious propaganda had overwhelmed him. It was hard to have a conversation, even his Russian academic contacts had seemed brainwashed. I always read his posts with interest, he would share how his work was coming along or news from Russia. Since the fall of 2015, when PiS took over in Poland, I started to have the unsettling impression that what I’d learned from his posts was a projection of what was going on now in my own country. I’m even more unsettled reading his posts today, now that it’s clear where the winds are blowing from.

Amid his posts about the war in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea were some saying the Russian Orthodox Church and its head, Patriarch Kirill, had started using rhetoric of loyalty to the Kremlin. Cooperation between the Church and state was nothing new; when the KGB archives were opened, it turned out that, as in Poland, many clerics had collaborated with the intelligence services. But Saint Putin, as Zygar writes, has renewed the alliance of the throne and the altar. He needed Orthodoxy as “the pure embodiment of the national idea, with a greater capacity to unify the people than any political party.”¹¹ In a speech in 2012, Putin talked about the concept of “a spiritual brace” holding the nation together. Though Kirill had once been—by Church standards—a liberal supporter of the West, as the head of the Church he couldn’t reject the president’s advances. The state needed the Church. After Kirill’s elevation in 2009, “Orthodoxy was well on its way to becoming the official state ideology and a means to cement Putin’s electorate.”¹²

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¹¹ Zygar, p. 234.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 235.

In Pussy Riot's punk prayer, there's a line about Kirill (whose secular surname is Gundyayev): "Patriarch Gundy believes in Putin. / Better believe in God, you vermin."¹³ Apparently the Patriarch himself personally pressured the president to order the women's arrests.¹⁴ "During Putin's third term Patriarch Kirill acquired unprecedented political influence. He had access to Putin at the drop of a hat,"¹⁵ writes Zygar, for in 2009 an agreement had been struck between the government and the Orthodox Church giving the Patriarch the right to revise and suggest changes to legislation under consideration by the Duma.

Masha from Pussy Riot mocked the Patriarch in one of the interviews she gave after leaving prison: "You can rent a room in the bottom of this cathedral to have parties with music, with girls and stuff [...] The price is on the official website!"¹⁶

CHRISTIAN VALUES AND GEOPOLITICS

From March to the summer of 2012, I kept up to date with the news about Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina and Yekaterina Samutsevich. I watched reports from the courtroom of their show trial, where the women were held in a glass box. Their microphones and speakers were often switched off, so they didn't even know what they were accused of. I remember waiting for the verdict to be announced, listening to all of the authorities' twisted explanations. Then news started coming about the first two women's time in prison. I wrote notes about them for the momentarily leftist *Przekrój* magazine, run by Roman Kurkiewicz. I did this even though Russia seemed far away, and we in the European Union seemed safe. This was one of the ways I got to know the Kremlin's mechanisms, making it easier for me to spot them later in Poland. Similarly, it was easier for the women of Pussy Riot to recognize these mechanisms in the United

¹³ Rumens, op. cit.

¹⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8mY2IECa_Y.

¹⁵ Zygar, p. 235

¹⁶ Munro.

States, as they watched Donald Trump coming to power. Easier than for the American public.

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At the same time as the members of Pussy Riot were on trial, Putin proclaimed himself the main spokesman for Christian values. In a speech in September 2013 to the Valdai Discussion Club, an annual conference of experts and politicians to acquaint foreigners with the current official government line (a peculiar sort of Russian Davos), the Russian president, disenchanted with the West, had this to say:

Another serious challenge to Russia's identity is linked to events taking place in the world. Here there are both foreign policy and moral aspects. We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilisation. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan.

The excesses of political correctness have reached the point where people are seriously talking about registering political parties whose aim is to promote paedophilia. People in many European countries are embarrassed or afraid to talk about their religious affiliations. Holidays are abolished or even called something different; their essence is hidden away, as is their moral foundation. And people are aggressively trying to export this model all over the world. I am convinced that this opens a direct path to degradation and primitivism, resulting in a profound demographic and moral crisis.¹⁷

Back in 2005, Putin spoke his famous words about the collapse of the USSR as the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.” Now in this speech, he was talking about the collapse of communism as a string of chaotic events in which Russia lost track of its identity. He wanted to redefine Russia, to move forward. A month later, the Ukrainian Maidan protests began, and so did the war, initiated by Putin's “little green

¹⁷ Speech by Vladimir Putin on September 19, 2013, Valdai International Discussion Club, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>.

men.” This was the start of a new course for the Kremlin. And so Putin’s third term began in 2012 with two flagship projects: a return to Christian roots and traditional values, and the invasion of Ukraine.

At the same time a new Russian military strategy emerged, the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine. General Valery Gerasimov doesn’t look serious—that is, if we took away his uniform and medals, no one would think he was a military man or could be an important figure at all. Yet this “unserious” Gerasimov has thought up something very serious, namely that there is no clear boundary between war and peace. What does this mean? That war does not necessarily have to be war as we know it, with tanks, helicopters and blood. We can use other means to wage war, and the best is chaos. Today this is widely called “hybrid warfare.” Gerasimov, in November 2012 the newly appointed Chief of the General Staff, could immediately test out this strategy in Ukraine. A year later, Gerasimov published an article on his theory of a new type of warfare in the Russian *Military-Industrial Kurier*. This piece was not initially noticed in the West, but Gerasimov wrote: “The very ‘rules of war’ have changed. The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. [...] All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character.”¹⁸ Chaos is meant to create a permanent state of anxiety: without knowing exactly who the enemy is, it’s impossible to successfully defend against them.

“The predominant view among experts is that the primary characteristic of [hybrid warfare] is the coordinated use of diplomatic, military, humanitarian, economic, technological and informational means,” writes Michał Wojnowski in the Polish *Internal Security Review*.¹⁹ Another of these means should be “the potential for protests”—this is Gerasimov’s conclusion from an analysis of the “color revolutions.”

¹⁸ Valery Gerasimov, “The Value of Science is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations,” tr. Robert Coalson, *Military Review*, January–February 2016, p. 24.

¹⁹ Michał Wojnowski, “Koncepcja „wojny nowej generacji” w ujęciu strategów Sztabu Generalnego Sił Zbrojnych Federacji Rosyjskiej [The Concept of a ‘New Generation of War’ as Understood by the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation],” *Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego*, 13/15, p. 13.

Thus hybrid war combines military and nonmilitary means. Here no one declares war on anyone, it simply slowly begins on its own. And by someone else's hands.

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When the war in Ukraine began in 2014, it was hard to imagine that the Gerasimov Doctrine could also be used against Western states. And yet this is just what American intelligence was hearing. The informant was a high-placed Russian official with access to circles close to Putin. During the Maidan protests of spring 2013, this informant “told his American contact that the Kremlin was planning a wide-ranging, multifaceted campaign to attack Western institutions and undermine Western democracies,” write Michael Isikoff and David Corn in their book *Russian Roulette*. “The clandestine operation was to include cyberattacks, information warfare, propaganda and social media campaigns. Here was the Gerasimov doctrine at work.”²⁰

No one worried about this news because it remained beyond the limits of imagination. Let's recall that at the same time as the hybrid war was beginning in Ukraine, the upscale Warsaw restaurant Sowa & Przyjaciele was bugged. The result—embarrassing recordings of senior politicians from the governing Civic Platform party, documented by Grzegorz Rzekowski in his book *In a Foreign Alphabet*—allowed Jarosław Kaczyński's PiS to weaken their opponents and win the 2015 elections. Trump also won in 2016 thanks, in part, to the Kremlin's help.

The war the Kremlin is waging has one goal: to destroy the geopolitical balance of power in the world and weaken NATO, the position of the United States and that of the European Union. There are various ways this can occur. Through dehumanizing Ukrainians, their culture and language; promoting fascist narratives and anti-Semitism; attacks on the Ukrainian government, portraying it as incompetent, corrupt and unworthy of Western support. Also by rewriting Soviet history, whitewashing Stalin's image or denying his mass crimes while emphasizing the role of the Soviet Union in the

²⁰ Michael Isikoff, David Corn, *Russian Roulette: The Inside Story of Putin's War on America and the Election of Donald Trump*, New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2018, p. 86.

victory over Nazi Germany. But another method is the glorification of Russia as a global defender of true Christian values, morality and the family.

When it gets the chance, Russia also likes to blame the West for waging a “cold war” and to portray the sanctions imposed for attacking Ukraine and annexing Crimea as turning back the clock to that period in history. Russia criticizes the West for “losing its moral compass” and its decadence, mocks Western democracy and the concept of human rights, and also accuses it of double standards. One successful method of propaganda warfare is publicizing the West’s economic problems, supporting anti-establishment groups and far-right or far-left ones too (depending on history and prevailing attitudes in the given country). It has worked fantastically, not least in the simultaneous attack on Syria and provocation of a wave of refugees, all the while highlighting the West’s failure to cope with global challenges like terrorism or migration. I offer this long inventory as per a report by Kateryna Smaglyi and Ilya Zaslavski. In reality it’s much longer.²¹ All this, as Grzegorz Rzeczkowski wrote in *Polityka* before his book was published, is no longer “a hybrid war with military means going hand-in-hand with informational or cyber aggression, but total war waged behind the scenes, meant to induce a permanent state of anxiety and chaos, thus leading to the weakening and collapse of political and social systems.”²²

OUR LADY OF CZĘSTOCHOWA AS A WEAPON

One of the weapons in this “backstage war” has even been Poland’s revered religious icon, Our Lady of Częstochowa. She was used by Igor Ivanovich Beloborodov (b. 1980), an analyst associated since 2013 with the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies

²¹ Kateryna Smaglyi and Ilya Zaslavski, “Hybrid Analytica: Pro-Kremlin Expert Propaganda in Moscow, Europe and the U.S.: A Case Study on Think Tanks and Universities,” Institute of Modern Russia, October 2018, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59f8f41ef14aa13b95239af0/t/5c6d8b38b208fc7087fd2b2a/1550682943143/Smaglyi_Hybrid-Analytica_10-2018_upd.pdf.

²² Grzegorz Rzeczkowski, “Jak Putin stworzył nową Armię Czerwoną [How Putin Created a New Red Army],” *Polityka*, June 26, 2018.

(RISS).²³ This is important because it turns out that RISS is the very link connecting many of the strands of this book. But let's take it one step at a time.

RISS is considered the brains behind many of the Russian Federation's intelligence operations, including interference in US elections. As one highly placed person in American intelligence told Reuters: "Putin had the objective in mind all along, and he asked the institute to draw him a road map."²⁴ Or actually two maps. One toward victory for the most pro-Russian candidate. The second laying out an attack on the elections' legality, if—as widely expected—Hillary Clinton won. RISS took similar action in Bulgaria, where in the 2016 and 2020 elections they successfully placed the pro-Russian Rumen Radev in the presidency. And also in Bosnia, where they supported a Serb who denied Serbian war crimes. They also performed well preparing a would-be coup in Montenegro in 2016, as Russia threatened the small Balkan country with freezing a cooperation project if Montenegro joined NATO.²⁵

But first, in late 2012 and early 2013, RISS carried out an operation in Poland, with Beloborodov himself as middleman. At the time, the head of RISS was Lieutenant-General Leonid Reshetnikov (Ret.). He'd previously led the Analysis and Information Department of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (known as the SVR) and was the Kremlin's main advisor on foreign policy.²⁶ He and his colleagues composed Putin's first aggressive speech on the West, the one given in Munich in 2007.

Igor Beloborodov is not a pawn in the RISS. In 2013 he was named Director of the Demographic Division, responsible, among other things, for issues of migration and ethnic-religious problems, hardly secondary subjects in our times. Before that (from 2005 to 2013) he was director of the Institute for Demographic Research in Moscow,

²³ A profile of Igor Ivanovich Beloborodov at the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies: <https://riss.ru/profile/beloborodov/>.

²⁴ Ned Parker, Jonathan Landay, John Walcott, "Putin-linked think tank drew up plan to sway 2016 US election – documents," April 19, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-election-exclusive/putin-linked-think-tank-drew-up-plan-to-sway-2016-us-election-documents-idUSKBN17L2N3>.

²⁵ See: Christo Grozev, "Balkan Gambit: Part 2. The Montenegro Zugzwang," Bellingcat, March 25, 2017, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/03/25/balkan-gambit-part-2-montenegro-zugzwang/>.

²⁶ Bio of Leonid Reshetnikov on the RISS website: <https://riss.ru/profile/prime/>

based out of the President's office,²⁷ and also editor of the website www.demographia.ru. He's been a man working here and there on the Kremlin's behalf.

A few months later, on November 15, 2011, Beloborodov creates an account on Facebook and posts his first photo. It's a reproduction of an anti-abortion poster showing a pregnancy test and a woman's hand, a baby in the background, and the caption: "Ты еще думаешь, а я уже люблю тебя. Подари мне жизнь" (You're still considering, but I already love you. Grant me life.)²⁸ For another few months, his account stays dormant. Until spring of 2012. A month after Putin is elected President of Russia for the third time (on March 4), Beloborodov appears at a conference organized by the Polish branch of Human Life International in Łódź.²⁹ While this international organization has an office in Poland, it has mainly operated within Russia. The head of the Polish division, Ewa Kowalewska, for years has had numerous contacts with the Russians.

After the end of the conference in Łódź, Igor Beloborodov's Facebook account comes to life. He uses it to actively promote "From Ocean to Ocean," a pilgrimage of a copy of the image of Our Lady of Częstochowa, also known as the Black Madonna.³⁰ A caption under one of the photos suggests that Beloborodov belongs to the organizing committee of this global pro-life campaign.

²⁷ You can find some of his articles at: <https://riss.ru/profile/beloborodov/>

²⁸ Post by Igor Beloborodov on Facebook on November 15, 2011, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=187793637973513&set=ecnf.100002286345890&type=3&theater>, last entry on 16 May 2022.

²⁹ See post by Igor Beloborodov on May 7, 2012: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=297349687017907&set=ecnf.100002286345890&type=3&theater>, last entry on 16 May 2022. And here is a second photo from Częstochowa: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=297345447018331&set=ecnf.100002286345890&type=3&theater>.

³⁰ Post by Beloborodov on May 9, 2012: "International pro-life team in the second meeting of the Organizing Committee of the world campaign in defense of life 'From Ocean to Ocean.'" 5 May 2012. Częstochowa. Poland. Additional comment by IB: "'From Ocean to Ocean' is the Pilgrimage of the Icon of Our Lady 'Częstochowa'. From the border of Russia through Europe the route will be about six thousand km. and will ran through Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Croatia, Italy, Austria, Lichtenstein, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, Great Britain, Ireland, France, Spain and Portugal... and in spring will go to America", <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=298396536913222&set=ecnf.100002286345890&type=3&theater>, last entry on 16 May 2022. In the picture is Ewa Kowalewska from the Polish division of Human Life International.

On May 11, 2012, the icon arrives in Moscow in a van from Poland.³¹ That same day, Beloborodov visits the Serbian embassy in Minsk, Belarus.³² A few days later he's in Rostov-on-Don. At the university there, he gives a lecture organized by the St. Andrew Foundation, led by Vladimir Yakunin, a friend of Putin's from his old Leningrad days.³³ In this book we'll encounter Yakunin and his foundation more than once.

But let's get back to the pilgrimage of the Black Madonna. This is a microcosm of all the typical characteristics of our story: a representative of a Kremlin-linked institution suddenly turning into a religious activist. We also have an ultra-Polish symbol, the icon of the Black Madonna, being used to represent shared Russian and Polish values. We also have a surprising change—after all, normally the Orthodox Church takes a skeptical, and sometimes even hostile, view of the Catholic Church's presence in their territory. But here unexpectedly is a copy of an image sacred to Polish Catholics, starting its journey around the world from Vladivostok. And this just after Poland's President Lech Kaczyński (the twin brother of Jarosław Kaczyński, chairman of PiS) and his wife Maria Kaczyńska were killed in a plane crash in Smolensk, Russia in 2010; a time when Russophobia in Poland is reaching its peak, when everyone is fixated on the investigation and wild conspiracy theories about birch trees and alleged bombs onboard the Tupolev. But it turns out Poles were incredibly easy to approach. Igor Beloborodov, the *spiritus movens* of the operation, takes pictures of himself in various places on the pilgrimage and posts the photos on his profile. The pilgrimage travels from Vladivostok to Krasnoyarsk, Minsk, Riga, Marijampolė, Warsaw, and then south to Portugal, spreading the pro-life message at symposiums and events with young people

³¹ Post by Igor Beloborodov on May 11, 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=299441823475360&set=ecnf.100002286345890&type=3&theater>, last entry on 16 May 2022.

³² Post by Igor Beloborodov z 11 maja 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=299435090142700&set=a.187793634640180&type=3&theater>, last entry on 16 May 2022.

³³ Post by Igor Beloborodov on May 15, 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=302044176548458&set=a.187793634640180&type=3&theater>, last entry on 16 May 2022.

on the way.³⁴ It's Our Lady of Częstochowa harnessed for a geopolitical mission—traveling with people from a Putinist institute around Russia, Europe and then the world.³⁵

Also at this time, in mid-August 2012, a few months after starting the pilgrimage, Patriarch Kirill's historic trip to Poland takes place. This is the first-ever visit to our country by such a senior representative of the Russian Orthodox Church. Kirill was welcomed boisterously not only by the Polish Bishops' Conference, but also President Bronisław Komorowski. And it just so happens that sometime afterward, the Archbishop of Przemyśl, Józef Michalik—who signed a letter with Kirill on cooperation between the Churches—starts increasingly evoking the term “gender ideology.” As Elżbieta Korolczuk, a researcher and colleague of mine from the Polish Women's Strike, explains: “This phrase was adopted more or less around 2010–2012. In Polish it started appearing around 2013 in articles on Catholic websites, and Michalik used it in 2014.” Instead of talking about gender studies—academic research on cultural gender, meaning how femininity and masculinity manifest themselves in culture—they started talking about “gender ideology.”

“Gender ideology”—which the Patriarch brought in his diplomatic bag and which stayed as a guest with the Polish Bishops' Conference, before making it all the way to the Vatican—is a clever tool for conducting the Kremlin's geopolitics. This concept sows hate and damages society, but at the same time isn't seen as related to the Kremlin or its policies. And what about the Patriarch's visit bringing the Polish and Russian faithful closer together? I ask Jędrzej Morawiecki about this. He says: “In the regions of Russia that I've been to, there was none of that to be seen. Besides, I know that since 2012 there's been an intensification of patriotism and Orthodox clergy have been punished

³⁴ “Częstochowa Madonna in Vladivostok: praying ‘from ocean to ocean’ for life against demographic winter,” *AsianNews*, June 14, 2012, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Cz%C4%99stochowa-Madonna-in-Vladivostok:-praying-from-ocean-to-ocean-for-life-against-demographic-winter--25030.html>.

“Con la Madonna di Czestochowa: si prega per la vita, contro l'inverno demografico,” *Corrispondenza Romana*, July 15, 2012, <https://www.corrispondenzaromana.it/con-madonna-di-czestochowa-da-oceano-ad-oceano-si-prega-per-la-vita-contro-linverno-demografico/>.

“От Владивостока до Португалии пройдет крестный ход против абортов,” *primorye24.ru*, May 22, 2012, <http://primorye24.ru/news/post/51540-ot-vladivostoka-do-portugalii-proydet-krestnyy-hod-protiv-abortov>.

³⁵ Here is a list of countries and places visited: <https://www.fromoceanoocean.org/documentary%20films>.

for contact with Catholic ones; I know one who was stripped of his parish for it, he was living at someone else's apartment. Local FSB officers strengthened their collaboration with Orthodox clergy, 'non-traditional' religions started being persecuted as competition for Orthodoxy.”

* * *

The image of Our Lady of Częstochowa travels all through Russia, makes its way to Poland, then sets off further west. At this time, on April 4, 2013, Beloborodov is in Warsaw. In what capacity? Is he already working for RISS? I don't know in which month he moved from the Demographic Institute to RISS, but their website says Beloborodov started working for them in that very year, 2013. In Warsaw he stays in the Catholic Home at 49 Nowogrodzka Street, which also holds the Warsaw Metropolitan Court, the Institute for the Prof. J. Rötzer Method of Natural Family Planning, the Foundation for the Construction of the Temple of Divine Providence, and the Warsaw office of the conservative Catholic magazine *Sunday Guest*. We can tell the address from a photo posted by Beloborodov of snow-covered roofs and a view of nearby St. Barbara's Church. Less than a week later, a car carrying the icon reaches Fatima, Portugal. We can see Beloborodov in a photo in front of the Domus Pacis hotel in the rear of the sanctuary, and in the next picture too, right by the ocean. This is the last stop on the European pilgrimage. The icon has traveled—Beloborodov reports—sixty-five thousand kilometers, appeared in four hundred towns and cities in twenty-three countries, and on the way has met four million people.³⁶

The pilgrimage allowed him to get to know the environment and strengthen relationships, and while at the same time Beloborodov was serving “as one of the main liaisons for the Russians their plan to change the narrative on LGBTI-rights in Central

³⁶ See posts by Igor Beloborodov on April 9 and 10, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=444972908922250&set=ecnf.100002286345890&type=3&theater>; <https://www.booking.com/hotel/pt/domus-pacis-blue-army.pl.html>, last entry on 16 May 2022.

Europe” according to the researcher and LGBT activist Rémy Bonny.³⁷ What narrative was Beloborodov promoting? He says “homosexuality is the new dictatorship of our times” or that “homosexuality is worse than fascism.” Moreover, in interviews Beloborodov repeatedly talks up Poland, for instance as a country that limited access to abortion as early as 1933.³⁸ He’s supported by Sputnik, a so-called open-source active measure of Russian intelligence, meaning the Kremlin’s propaganda outlet abroad, amplifying actions by Ordo Iuris and the Polonia Christiana community targeted at LGBT people:³⁹ “In the twenty-first century Poles fear LGBT people more than any threat from Russia. This is the conclusion we must draw after seeing the results of a survey by OKO.press.”⁴⁰ Transforming the government’s Smolensk Russophobia into homophobia in a few years is a remarkable success. Beloborodov writes directly: “The only hope that remains is in Poland, Hungary and Italy, who are opposing gender theory despite harsh pressure from the European Union.”⁴¹ Or he lays out his argument directly: “Poland’s position reflects Russia’s official views. Despite Poland’s official Russophobia, traditional family values are indisputably a priority for both countries, and this sets modern Poland apart in the general European context.”⁴² On Tsargrad TV,

³⁷ Rémy Bonny, “Russia’s Homophobic Ideology Infiltrated in Polish Politics,” October 28, 2019, <https://remybonny.com/2019/10/28/russia-poland-lgbti/>.

³⁸ Igor Beloborodov, “О демографической ситуации [On the Demographic Situation],” June 16, 2011, <https://echo.msk.ru/blog/beloborodov/785109-echo/>.

³⁹ A petition to Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, see: “MA, Stop dyktaturze LGBT! Stań w obronie naukowca zwolnionego za wykład Homoseksualizm a zdrowie [MA, Stop LGBT Dictatorship! Stand in defense of a researcher fired for a lecture on Homosexuality and health],” *PCh24*, <http://www.pch24.pl/stop-dyktaturze-lgbt--stan-w-obronie-naukowca-zwolnionego-za-wyklad-homoseksualizm-a-zdrowie,72504,i.html#ixzz67AC9sWx9>. I am referring to the Ordo Iuris newsletter of October 17, 2019 signed by Jerzy Kwaśniewski.

⁴⁰ Anna Sanina, “LGBT czy Rosji? Kogo bardziej obawiają się Polacy [LGBT or Russia? Who do Poles fear most?],” *Sputnik*, September 25, 2019, <https://pl.sputniknews.com/opinie/2019092511099021-lgtb-czy-rosji-kogo-bardziej-obawiaja-sie-polacy-sputnik-polska/>.

⁴¹ Interview with Igor Beloborodov by Vladimir Kozhemyakin, “Время трансгендеров. Почему в Европе разрушают традиционную семью? [Time of the Transgenders: Why is the Traditional Family Being Destroyed in Europe?],” *Argumenty i Fakty*, no. 42, October 16, 2019, https://aif.ru/society/people/vremya_transgenderov_pochemu_v_evrope_razrushayut_tradicionnuyu_semyu.

⁴² Igor Beloborodov, “Европейцы бегут в Россию, спасаясь от ювенальной юстиции и «гомосексуальной диктатуры» – эксперт [Europeans are Fleeing to Russia, Saving Themselves from Juvenile Justice and “Homosexual Dictatorship”—Expert],” *Tsargrad.tv*, February 13, 2019, https://tsargrad.tv/news/evropejcy-begut-v-rossiju-spasajas-ot-juvenalnoj-justicii-i-gomoseksualnoj-diktatury-jekspert_184178.

owned by the oligarch Konstantin Malofeyev,⁴³ Beloborodov states that people are fleeing Western Europe en masse to the East to save themselves from juvenile courts, aggressively sexualized education and homosexual dictatorship.⁴⁴ In Russia, he says, “thank God, thanks to the stance of the president, parliament and legislation, we have fought off the expansion and homosexual propaganda among children and young people.”⁴⁵ And he adds that in the West the family has collapsed and now “it is fashionable to be Russian.”

Was the pilgrimage of Our Lady of Częstochowa a cynical plan hatched by RISS or the Demographic Institute to win over the Polish and European anti-choice community?

* * *

Beloborodov was born in Moscow, but since the spring of 2019 he lives in Tiraspol, one hundred kilometers northwest of the Ukrainian city of Odessa. Tiraspol is the capital of Transnistria, a Kremlin-controlled part of Moldova whose independence has never been recognized by the international community. The region’s inhabitants are emigrating in large numbers looking for work and a better life. So what is someone who had a good job in Moscow doing there? We can see from his profile on Facebook that he started working for an analytic-informational center founded in 2014 by RISS and that today he’s its “executive director.”⁴⁶ He still works in the “pro-life,” orthodox field, maintaining close relations with the authorities of the self-proclaimed Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (Transnistria’s “official” name), on behalf of the idea that “Russia

⁴³ Often also spelled “Malofeev.”

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Tatyana Medvedeva, “Модно быть русским [It’s Fashionable to be Russian],” April 21, 2015, <http://portal-kultura.ru/articles/country/99198-modno-byt-russkim/>.”

⁴⁶ Known in Russian as the Днестровско-Прутский Информационно-Аналитический Центр (The Dnister-Prut Informational-Analytic Center), see: <https://riss.ru/article/2771/>.

and Transnistria are united.”⁴⁷ He also collaborates with the T.G. Shevchenko Pridnestrovian State University, while finding time to work with youth (through the Zvezda movement⁴⁸) promoting Russian stances and organizing contests for schoolchildren to win a kids’ trip to “Friendship Camp” in Serbia, the most pro-Russian country in the Balkans.⁴⁹ Apart from all this, his Facebook profile says he also works for the regional division of “Double-Headed Eagle” (a double-headed eagle is the emblem of Russia). It turns out that in November 2019 it was reported that the head of Double-Headed Eagle in Moscow was selected to help get a newly founded “patriotic” troll factory in Russia off the ground.⁵⁰ The organization is meant to “cleanse Russian history of slanders and distortions” as well as promote to young people a historical education in the spirit of monarchism. It is headed by Malofeyev along with Beloborodov’s retired boss from RISS, Leonid Reshetnikov. Interesting lineup.

But that’s not all. As the Russian website Open Media found, quoting a political scientist working in Putin’s administration, Double-Headed Eagle has connections with neo-Nazis from an organization of tattooed white supremacists called Grandfather Frost. In November 2019, Polish media reported the deportation of a member of this group, the bodybuilder Konstantin B., who was attempting to radicalize neo-Nazi circles

⁴⁷ See: <https://riss.ru/article/2771/>.

⁴⁸ See their Facebook page, which has many posts from Igor Beloborodov: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/omd.zvezda/>, last entry on 16 May 2022.

⁴⁹ Десять юных приднестровцев выиграли поездку в Сербию [Ten Transnistrian Young People Won a Trip to Serbia], *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya*, June 5, 2019, <https://novostipmr.com/ru/news/19-06-05/desyat-yunyh-pridnestrovcev-vyigrali-poezdku-v-serbiyu-0>.
Also: В Тирасполе наградили победителей конкурса «Как вечно пушкинское слово» [In Tiraspol the Winner of the ‘How Eternal the Words of Pushkin’ Contest was Named], *Novosti Pridnestrov'ya*, June 11, 2019, <https://novostipmr.com/ru/news/19-06-11/v-tiraspole-nagrادили-pobediteley-konkursa-kak-vechno-pushkinskoe>.

⁵⁰ This was reported by Open Media: Vyacheslav Yakovlev, “«Двуглавый орел» и православные тролли: как медиаимперия бизнесмена Малофеева пытается захватить интернет [“Double-Headed Eagle” and Orthodox Trolls: How the Media Empire of Businessman Malofeyev is Trying to Capture the Internet], *Open Media*, November 15, 2019, <https://openmedia.io/infometer/dvuglavyj-orel-i-pravoslavnye-trolli-kak-mediaimperiya-biznesmena-malofeeva-pytaetsya-zaxvatit-internet/>.

See also: Klementyna Suchanow, “Po co Rosji nowa patriotyczna fabryka trolli [What Does Russia Need a New Patriotic Troll Factory For?],” *Polityka*, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/swiat/1933926,1,po-co-rosji-nowa-patriotyczna-fabryka-trolli.read>.

in Lower Silesia.⁵¹ And a few months earlier, in September, the leader of the “Russophiles” group—linked with Double-Headed Eagle—was accused of espionage in Bulgaria. Earlier, relations between these groups had been strengthened by Reshetnikov himself, who speaks fluent Bulgarian and studied that country’s history academically. So it looks like Beloborodov got redeployed to a new section.

JOURNALISTS ON THE FRONT LINE

Do we remember what it was like with Trump? For years he’d been in the orbit of the Russians’ interests. He was interested in doing business with them, too. His first visit to Moscow was in 1987. He returned in 1996, looking for a site to construct a hotel. As Seth Abramson reports in his book *Proof of Collusion: How Trump Betrayed America*, in 2002 the winner of the Trump-run Miss Universe contest was a woman who might have been a lover, or at least an object of fascination, of Putin’s. This is Oxana Fedorova, a police officer and former Miss Saint Petersburg. According to a witness who contacted Abramson, Trump himself chose the winner.

In 2013 the Miss Universe contest took place in Moscow. Trump flew over to attend. Before long, word started going around about building a Trump Tower Moscow. On this visit, Russian intelligence services are meant to have acquired so-called “kompromat,” meaning compromising material on the future president (of his excesses with prostitutes). Kompromat, a tool used for decades by the KGB, was always very effective.

By the time Trump is a candidate for the White House, he’s surrounded by interesting people. The head of his campaign is Paul Manafort, who previously worked for then-president of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich. Before that Manafort was, among other things, an advisor to Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire, a country not known its great

⁵¹ See: “Grupa Dziadka Mroza. Rosyjski neonazista werbowal członków spośród polskiej skrajnej prawicy? [The Grandfather Frost Group: Did a Russian Neo-Nazi Recruit Members from the Polish Far Right?]” *Dziennik*, November 26, 2019, <https://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/wydarzenia/artykuly/613781,grupa-dziadka-mroza-neonazista-rosja-skrajna-prawica.html>.

concern for human rights. Manafort, while still an advisor to Yanukovych, simultaneously lobbied politicians and businessmen in the US and Europe. Telephone surveillance of his daughters revealed that during the Maidan protests he advocated a violent resolution, setting the Berkut riot police on protesting people.⁵² Later it was proved that during the American presidential election, he was passing on information and data to a person that the FBI considered connected to Russian intelligence. In March 2019, an American court sentenced Manafort to almost four years in prison for tax and banking scams. He was found guilty of acting against the interests of the United States.

Sarah Kendzior, a researcher on authoritarian regimes familiar with Manafort and his activities, talked about him on MSNBC:

“He’s been indicted for crimes that he committed decades ago. Why didn’t they indict him before? Why did the media not go after Manafort as soon as he was selected as the campaign chairman, instead of putting him on the Sunday shows like this was a normal thing? None of this was normal. People have normalcy bias. They think, okay, if it’s really that bad, if he’s really that much of a criminal, clearly someone would do something about it. Well guess what? No one did anything and now you have a Russian asset as the president of the United States, backed up by a transnational crime syndicate masquerading as a government. That’s what you get when you don’t act in time.”⁵³

Trump couldn’t be investigated while serving as president, but a report by the prosecutor Robert S. Mueller (448 pages, the result of two months of work) on Russian interference in US elections left no doubt that Russia did interfere to make sure a candidate who suited the Kremlin would win.⁵⁴ In addition, the American House of Representatives impeached Trump after a scandal broke out in mid-2019 over him pressuring the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, to whom Trump decided to

⁵² Simon Ostrovsky, “Ukraine lawyer seeks probe of alleged hacked texts of Manafort’s daughter,” CNN, March 11, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/03/10/politics/ukraine-manafort-hacked-texts/index.html>.

⁵³ Sarah Kendzior, *AM Joy*, February 23, 2019 at 10:04 a.m., MSNBC.

⁵⁴ Report by Robert S. Mueller, “Report on the Investigation Into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election,” U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, March 2019, available here: <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5955118-The-Mueller-Report.html>.

refuse military aid unless Zelenskyy provided materials against Joe Biden, his potential rival in the 2020 elections. And also unless Zelenskyy supported the theory that it was Ukraine and not Russia that was behind the interference in the American election.

Today everything seems to fit into a logical whole, but when a former CIA director, three months before the election, became “convinced [...] that ‘Mr. Putin has recruited Mr. Trump as an unwitting agent of the Russian Federation,’”⁵⁵ nothing was done. The threat from Russian agents and agents of influence wasn’t taken seriously by the Obama administration. Obama “wanted to make sure whatever action was taken would not lead to a political crisis at home—and with Trump the possibility for that was great,” explain Michael Isikoff and David Corn in *Russian Roulette*. “The nation had had more than two hundred years of elections and peaceful transitions of power. Obama didn’t want that to end on his watch.”⁵⁶

The idea that a foreign country, Russia, might influence elections in a country like the United States seemed to journalists, and even more so to ordinary people, too fantastical to possibly be true. The subject was ignored because it would be seen as a conspiracy theory, something out of the Cold War era. “No one wanted to come off sounding crazy,” recalled Robby Mook, Hillary Clinton’s campaign manager. “It was hard to believe. It was Tom Clancy-ish and fictional.”⁵⁷ Before, it was that no one wanted to believe Russia had attacked Ukraine. These two are linked, because in Timothy Snyder’s opinion, Manafort was “now [bringing] east European tactics to the United States.”⁵⁸

When people from the team leading the Clinton campaign tried to get journalists interested, going around one-by-one to explain who Manafort was and show evidence of Trump’s links with Russia, “the response generally was, ‘That’s interesting.’ And then they looked at us like we were wearing tin-foil hats.”⁵⁹ Meanwhile an investigation into

⁵⁵ Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*, New York: Tim Duggan Books, p. 244.

⁵⁶ Isikoff and Corn, op. cit., p. 289.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 257.

⁵⁸ Snyder, op. cit., p. 236.

⁵⁹ Isikoff and Corn, op. cit., p. 263.

Russian influence on American elections reached hair-raising conclusions, revealing the energy in the Kremlin and at the same time the American empire's total lack of preparation for repelling this type of aggression. Craig Unger in *House of Trump, House of Putin: The Untold story of Donald Trump and the Russian Mafia* writes directly that this is a story about

one of the greatest intelligence operations in history, [...] through which the Russian Mafia and Russian intelligence operatives successfully targeted, compromised, and implanted either a willfully ignorant or an inexplicably unaware Russian asset in the White House as the most powerful man on earth. In doing so, without firing a shot, the Russians helped put in power a man who would immediately begin to undermine the Western Alliance, which has been the foundation of national security for more than seventy years; who would start massive trade wars with America's longtime allies; fuel right-wing anti-immigrant populism; and assault the rule of law in the United States. In short, at a time in which the United States was confronted with a new form of warfare—hybrid war consisting of cyber warfare, hacking, disinformation, and the like—the United States would have at its helm a man who would leave the country all but defenseless, and otherwise inadvertently do the bidding of the Kremlin.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Craig Unger, *House of Trump, House of Putin: The Untold Story of Donald Trump and Russian Mafia*, New York: Dutton, 2018, pp. 7–8.

The Russian-American Alliance

This operation was prepped just like the work on Trump and getting him elected president, meaning with plenty of patience. You plant the seed, watch it grow, and if it roots, then bam! You've got a good channel of influence. The Kremlin groomed Trump for "at least five years"—according to one of the first reports on the subject, delivered to the FBI by the British former MI6 agent Christopher Steele. Apparently Trump and his accomplices were useful to Putin as trustworthy sources of information about what Russian oligarchs were up to inside the United States. "In exchange for 'high levels of voluntary co-operation,' the Russians 'had promised' not to use their *kompromat* on Trump."⁶¹ Apart from the Trump channel, some other potentials were mapped out. Here I'll describe a particular example we might consider a model. It will help us understand how Russian intelligence was able to get inside conservative and nationalist circles. In the USSR members of such right-wing groups were persecuted, but outside the country, they were popular targets for influence agents. That included German neo-Nazis, in order to... accuse Germany of reverting to Nazism.

⁶¹ Isikoff and Corn, op. cit., p. 328.

Anton Shekhovtsov, a Ukrainian sociologist, described this infiltration of fascist movements. In *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir*, he analyzes the networks connecting European ultra-right movements as well as the Russian intelligence services' operations within the European ultra-right.⁶² Shekhovtsov devotes a great deal of space to Aleksandr Dugin. This Soviet dissident sociologist metamorphosed into an ideologue of Russian neo-imperialism and Eurasianism. Shekhovtsov shows that since the early nineties, Dugin—as an academic—has been in contact with representatives of European fascist movements. Even Putin himself, as a KGB agent in Dresden, collaborated with the neo-Nazi Rainer Sonntag (according to Shekhovtsov⁶³) and was in touch with the German Red Army Faction (according to Masha Gessen⁶⁴), which came to Dresden for KGB training sessions. As often happens in history, behind Dugin's ultra-right turn stood feelings of inadequacy. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, his wife Yevgeniya Debryanskaya left him for a woman, then somewhat later founded the first gay and lesbian alliance in the country.⁶⁵ Humiliated, Dugin—who also lost custody of his son—set off on another path. He joined the organization Pamyat' (Memory), which fantasized about the mystical rebirth of Russia and where he read *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. His separation from Yevgeniya turned out to be somewhat symbolic: as the USSR changed, Yevgeniya chose a libertarian path with a touch of anarchism, while he headed toward nationalism. What better synopsis of our times? The effects of Dugin's networking are plain to see, for instance in the Kremlin's close relationships with France's Marine Le Pen, Austria's Heinz-Christian Strache and Italy's Matteo Salvini.

After holding meetings in Europe with representatives of several neo-Nazi movements, in 1993 Dugin went to Spain to a conference of—as they were intriguingly

⁶² Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir*, Routledge, 2017.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 42.

⁶⁴ Masha Gessen, *A Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*, New York: Riverhead 2014, p. 65.

⁶⁵ Masha Gessen describes the story of Dugin and Debryanskaya in their book *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*, New York: Riverhead, 2017.

called—“esoteric Hitlerists” from the Thule Group.⁶⁶ On his second visit to Spain, in June 1994, he and representatives of Alternativa Europea signed the “National-Bolshevik Act.” This document is a mix of pan-European fascism, Spanish conservative revolutionary ideology and national syndicalism. Western nationalists were counting on the Russian faction to help them provoke an international ultra-right revolution that would liberate Europe from the leftist-democratic yoke. At the time this might have seemed like an ideological anomaly and Mr. Dugin’s private paranoia. Today it is becoming our reality.

Until a certain point, Dugin remained a marginal figure. His idea of Eurasianism—building an empire of Asian countries led by Russia, intended to oppose the Atlantic system (the US, the UK)—interested mainly academics as a curiosity. Much more attention went to Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who was politically active as the leader of the nationalist-populist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and the Deputy Chairman of the Duma. Zhirinovskiy launched the idea of a World Congress of Patriotic Families, intended to unite the global ultra-right movement. That was in 2003, but it would be a good while before his idea was put into practice. As Shekhovtsov writes in *Russia and the Western Far Right*, Zhirinovskiy’s initiative of creating a functional far-right international through which the Russian authorities would be able to influence the West “seems to have failed for one major reason which is bad timing.”⁶⁷ A second approach ten years later turned out much to be more durable. This time Zhirinovskiy got the support of the Church and conservatives. That doesn’t mean the fascist line was laid to rest. On the contrary, the religious and nationalist narratives were developed simultaneously and each one reached its own audience, until they merged somewhere around 2012–2013.

According to Dugin’s philosophy, Russia is meant to be the “savior” of other nations and therefore will unite conservatism’s adherents. Meanwhile Putin himself is the “katechon.” What does this mean? Mikołaj Ratajczak explains this is a term taken from St. Paul’s Second Epistle to the Thessalonians and used today in political theology

⁶⁶ Shekhovtsov, op. cit., p. 44.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 59.

to mean “an authority restraining a personal evil active in the world, thereby postponing the end of history.”⁶⁸ In short, Putin is meant to—in Dugin’s view—save the world from the coming Antichrist.⁶⁹ That Antichrist, meanwhile, is secularism in Western countries, particularly the United States.

For a certain period Dugin became the Kremlin’s ideologue, after which he was removed from political influence and replaced with other, equally nationalistic ideologues. Despite this he maintained his position as the main director of international cooperation on the ultra-right. He became a professor at the Sociology Faculty of Moscow State University, where he organized “academic conferences” with purely political subtexts. His views entered the bloodstream and still meld with Putin’s designs to build an Asian union as an alternative to the European Union. Currently Dugin has found a solid safe haven: a TV channel, owned by the oligarch Konstantin Malofeyev, known as Tsargrad or “City of the Tsar.” I’ve already mentioned Malofeyev, who sponsored the 2014 invasion of Ukraine, and we’ll return to him again.

* * *

Just like nationalist and fascist circles, American ultraconservative Evangelical communities began to be infiltrated. Steven L. Hall, a thirty-year veteran of CIA secret operations in the USSR and Eastern Bloc noted: “a Russian intelligence officer would know [...] that any time you have anything to do with an American religious organization, [...] that the American security services — the FBI, the CIA, and even local law enforcement — are very, very reticent to investigate and to look into those organizations.”⁷⁰ In his view, American religious conservatives—due to their ideological

⁶⁸ Mikołaj Ratajczak, “Powstrzymać zło. Teologia polityczna kościoła wobec osób LGBT+ [Restraining Evil: The Political Theology of the Church Toward LGBT+ People],” *Codziennik Feministyczny*, August 26, 2019, <http://codziennikfeministyczny.pl/ratajczak-powstrzymywac-zlo-teologia-polityczna-kosciola-wobec-osob-lgbt/>

⁶⁹ Robert Duncan, “Holy Russia? Believers debate Putin’s record as a Christian leader,” *The Long Island Catholic*, <https://licatholic.org/holy-russia-believers-debate-putins-record-as-a-christian-leader/>

⁷⁰ Jonathan Larsen, “CIA Vet: Russian Ties to Prayer Breakfast Part of Influence Operations,” *TYT*, January 16, 2019, <https://tyt.com/stories/4vZLCHuQrYE4uKagy0oyMA/40yVZncN5BceZNONtLQpd9>.

similarities with Russian conservatives and this historical reluctance to investigate religious groups—make attractive targets. He sees these organizations as part of the Russian influence operation. By bringing together scraps of scattered information, interviews and the findings of FBI investigations, along with statements from experts, it's hard not to get the same impression.

* * *

In the nineties, Russia opened up to the world, but the country's intelligence services held to a tradition described by the former Soviet military intelligence officer Viktor Suvorov. "Unable to recruit foreigners in potentially unfriendly countries, operational intelligence officers sought out and found other means of establishing contact with persons of interest. They took every opportunity to approach foreigners visiting the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact States about collaborating. They dedicated much attention to students at Soviet universities and specialists who came to the USSR on foreign delegations."⁷¹

The case I want to describe started with Russian sociologists from Lomonosov Moscow State University. Anatoly Antonov, who worked there, wrote to the American sociologist Allan Carlson, who belonged to ultraconservative circles in the Lutheran Church. He is a professor and author of a book declaring that feminism and homosexuality will lead to the depopulation of the United States and a crisis of the family (*Family Questions: Reflections on the American Social Crisis*). I e-mailed Carlson and asked if he was surprised when he received an invitation from Antonov to Moscow. He replied: "Yes, I was surprised to receive an invitation in late 1993/early 1994 from Prof. Antonov to come to Russia. I was gratified to learn that they had secured a copy of my *Family Questions* book and that they found its arguments relevant to the Russian situation."

⁷¹ Viktor Suvorov, *Szpieg, czyli podstawy szpiegowskiego fachu* [Spy, or The Basics of Espionage], Poznań 2017, s. 89. Quote translated from the Polish edition.

The community of these Russian sociologists, Dugin and Antonov, turns out to be key to this story. We must remember that sociology was in the days of the USSR, and is in Russia today, under the special supervision of the state. “The notion of sociology as a science in servitude of the state dominates in Russia,” writes the St. Petersburg sociologist Viktor Voronkov. “The state strives to control not only higher education in universities but also research programmes in academia.”⁷² Therefore sociologists are under pressure and have to carry out the policies of the government. As it was under the USSR, so it is in the Russian Federation. Under the Soviet Union, intelligence agents worked at universities, keeping an especially close watch over foreign students and trying to recruit them.

KGB trainees practiced recruitment as part of their homework, so-called task number six. Suvorov explains it entertainingly: “You had to really recruit someone, no more, no less,” and do it in your spare time, on Sundays and holidays. Students were summoned and each got a task: “You—factory, you—construction office, you—main administration in a ministry, and you—find a person from a specific institution who has access to secrets and get those secrets from them. You can tell the recruit everything about yourself, except the truth. Pretend to be whoever you want, just get the secrets!”⁷³ The training leader, Vladimir Ivanovich, “kept saying regretfully: you can’t recruit everyone. Then he would add instructively: but you have to strive for it.”⁷⁴ One of the officers who graduated from such a school, who recruited Colombian students in Dresden and in the mid-nineties ended up with a post at Leningrad State University, was Vladimir Putin. This was before he took a crucial step in his career and moved to Moscow to become head of the FSB. At the university he was Assistant Chancellor of

⁷² Viktor Voronkov, “Russia’s Independent Sociology Under Pressure,” Zentrum für Osteuropa und international Studien, November 2018, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/archiv-2018/russias-independent-sociology-under-pressure>

⁷³ Suvorov, op. cit., p. 139.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 222.

Foreign Relations and “such positions had traditionally been reserved for KGB appointees.”⁷⁵

What does that tell us about Carlson’s visit to Moscow State University? He certainly couldn’t have arrived in Moscow unnoticed and was sure to have been observed.

Recently Carlson made public his journal from that visit.⁷⁶ It appeared alongside an article by Michael Casey stemming from investigations around Trump. Meanwhile, the investigative journalist Glenn Simpson was presenting his findings to Congress: “I would say broadly speaking, it appears that the Russian operation was designed to infiltrate conservative organizations [...]. They targeted various conservative organizations, religious and otherwise, and they seem to have made a very concerted effort to get in with the [National Rifle Association].”⁷⁷

The media’s attention focused on the issue of the NRA, a powerful lobbying organization, due to the FBI’s arrest in July 2018 of Maria Butina, a redheaded Russian agent who infiltrated the organization as a student and was active in it during Trump’s presidential campaign. But by concentrating on the president, they overlooked the thread of conservative and religious organizations that Casey had pointed out. The publication of Carlson’s diary was intended to cast more light on this subject.

Casey spoke to Carlson, who acknowledged that the Russians made contact unexpectedly, “out of the blue.” In his journal he described the whole course of his visit to Moscow in 1995. First is the story of his lost luggage, then a description of the capital in winter, because it was January, dark and cold. Carlson is greeted by Anatoly Antonov, a professor and head of the Sociology Department at Lomonosov Moscow State University. Carlson includes summaries of their conversations and his impressions of the people and places. We get a description of the dorm-style visiting faculty flat, where

⁷⁵ Gessen, op. cit., p. 95.

⁷⁶ Michel Casey, “Russians and the American right started plotting in 1995. We have the notes from the first meeting,” ThinkProgress, June 19, 2018, <https://thinkprogress.org/history-of-christian-fundamentalists-in-russia-and-the-us-a6bdd326841d/>

⁷⁷ Ibid.

he gets a room and a shared bathroom, and of the water, which isn't potable. There's also a cockroach scampering away. Antonov is presented as "an amiable man, age 55, with some halting English." He takes good care of Carlson. "His interest in my work, I concluded was genuine." The gentlemen quickly get to the heart of the matter. Antonov is anxious about the demographic situation in Russia, but "on the abortion issue, his views are complex." The Russian professor explains that referring to the ninety percent of the female population who had experienced an abortion as murderers would be "difficult now." Carlson learns at a later demographic talk: "Average *male* life expectancy had now fallen to 57 years. If *current* figures held for another 25 years, the population of the Russian Federation would *fall in half!*" (original emphasis).

* * *

I'm curious about this man, Antonov. When I go to Moscow fourteen years after Carlson's visit, in similar environmental circumstances in January, I phone him. Antonov answers quickly, saying in a sickly voice that he's broken his leg and can't meet. His English is poor. Later I try to go to the Sociology Department at Moscow State University, but guards stop me in a passage. I show them my passport, which I have to carry because at any moment I can be asked for my documents. But that's not enough. They send me to a window to get a *perepustka*—a pass. It looks as though the 1980s never ended. A woman scrupulously pages through a square-ruled notebook as she clutches my passport. I learn that in all state universities, foreigners must make an appointment with the institution in advance. My name isn't on the list, so I can't go in.

Since 2012, a law on "foreign agents" has been in force in Russia. Every organization that receives money from abroad must register as a "foreign agent." You can see this is a very broad concept. As a potential agent I can't enter the massive building of Moscow State University, as large as the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw. I can't stop by the library, I can't even see a hallway and look in the faces of the students, much less warm myself by a radiator on a day in January that's cold as hell.

AN AMERICAN TRANSFER TO THE EAST

On his visit to Moscow, Carlson got the idea of creating the World Congress of Families, or WCF. Carlson tells me about this initiative via e-mail: “The initial meeting in January 1995 was with Antonov, [Viktor] Medkov, and Ivan [Sh]evchenko. They proposed the idea of a Congress; it matched some thinking I had been doing.” The conversation was continued at the home of Shevchenko, an artist and chairman of the Orthodox Brotherhood of Scientists and Specialists (“FAVOR”). Shevchenko told Carlson—as he notes in his diary—that he “wanted to talk ‘business.’” Carlson writes: “He sought help in organizing/recruiting for an international conference on the family planned that summer at an Orthodox monastery [*sic*], near Moscow. I replied that I had been thinking, myself, about working to convene a conference of fairly compatible ‘pro family’ groups from across the globe, to serve as a kind of informal Congress of Families [...].”

Quite a coincidence, right? I asked Carlson to explain. I was intrigued that a collaboration between academics would lead to the creation of an activist movement. He replied: “Initially, the questions were scholarly: Why were family systems breaking down in both post-communist Russia and in the West? How did the causes of this differ? What would be the demographic consequences? With that said, my organization—then called The Rockford Institute—had been founded to bridge the domain of scholarship and the domain of cultural-political activism.”

After his visit to Moscow, Carlson went on to Prague, where he met with Pavel Bratinka, the Czech Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs. As he writes in his diary: “At one point, Bratinka said (with approval) that the Czech Republic would have to get rid of its farmers to enter the European community. A little imp made me say that the Czechs might be better off if they kept their farmers and stayed out of the E.C. He was horrified by the thought.”

The first World Congress of Families would take place, in fact, in Prague in 1997. It was financed mainly thanks to Carlson’s efforts. Despite the engagement of Russians

and an expansive network of international connections, only Americans sat on the board of the WCF.

* * *

Shortly after the collapse of atheist communism, American conservative Evangelical organizations attempted to build bridgeheads in the new Europe. Apart from the WCF, other religious organizations started filling Russians' spiritual void. Some were founded in Russia, but conditions there—bureaucracy and corruption—forced them to relocate, like Human Life International (HLI) did, to Poland. The intention was to work from there all over the East. But one Evangelical legal organization did manage to open a Moscow office. This was the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ). In 1990 it concurrently opened offices in Strasburg (the European Center for Law and Justice—ECLJ) and Moscow (the Slavic Center for Law and Justice—SCLJ). In any event, hundreds of thousands of dollars moved from the United States to Europe and Moscow.⁷⁸ In the US, the organization's lawyers now work on causes such as defending the right of anti-abortion activists to make speeches in front of abortion clinics, or fighting against buffer zones around the buildings. In Russia during the Pussy Riot “scandal” they called for a harsher ban on offending religious sentiment (which hitherto had only resulted in a small fine). This turned out to be effective, because the women got two years in a penal camp. One of the SCLJ's Moscow lawyers and Evangelical activists, Vladimir Ryakovsky—who had worked for years as an advisor on human rights and media regulation for Putin—helped to draft such a law.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ David Corn, “How a Right-Wing Group Led by a Trump Lawyer Is Funding a Russian Activist Tied to the Putin Regime,” *Mother Jones*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/10/how-a-right-wing-group-led-by-a-trump-lawyer-is-funding-a-russian-activist-tied-to-the-putin-regime/>.

Tatev Hovhannisyanyan, “Revealed: Trump's top lawyer funds Putin-linked religious lobbyists in Russia,” *OpenDialogue*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/revealed-trump-lawyer-funds-putin-linked-religious-lobbyists-russia/>.

⁷⁹ See: <https://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/religious-right-freedom-and-liberty-group-aclj-backed-russian-gay-propaganda-and-blasphemy-bans/>

THE FAMILY

Someone else who penetrated the “Wild East” was Doug Coe, familiar to viewers of the documentary series *The Family*, which premiered in the fall of 2019 on Netflix (directed by Jesse Moss). According to legend, Coe—“the most powerful man in the world no one has heard of”—in the early nineties traveled through sixteen European countries in sixteen days, meeting with their leaders.

The Family, according to its members, is an elite non-organization, operating non-openly, with membership only by invitation or recommendation. It was founded in 2006 by around three hundred fifty men, including presidents and senior politicians from around the world. Their stated goal is a “worldwide spiritual offensive” and in fact the creation of a patriarchal model of power. A recurring refrain in their conversations is “war.” “Spiritual war.”

The Family, known officially as the Fellowship Foundation and sometimes as the Brotherhood, avoids spotlights and TV cameras; it works behind the scenes. The world learned of its existence from a book by Jeff Sharlet published in 2008, titled *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power*. Sharlet wrote that the Family’s tentacles reach from Japan to Nigeria. Every single president from Dwight D. Eisenhower to Barack Obama shook Doug Coe’s hand.

The Brotherhood’s people have done their best to reach senior politicians around the world and draw them into the organization to ensure it influence, money and the opportunity to achieve its fundamentalist goals. Yet until the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Brotherhood was absent from Eastern Europe.

Members of the organization find “populist fundamentalism” distasteful, viewing it as a “fairy tale” for the masses. They, the chosen ones who belong to the closest circle around Jesus, are ordained to follow orders directly from God—in other words, by also bypassing democracy. In the Family, all are brothers or friends who place incredible value on discretion and are fascinated by authoritarian methods of rule. For instance, while fighting communism, they adopted its own methods of operation, dividing

themselves into conspiratorial “cells” of five people each—exclusively men—allegedly for group prayer.

“The cell has ‘veto rights’ over each member’s life,” writes Jeff Sharlet, “and everyone pledges to monitor the others for deviations from Christ’s will. A document called ‘Thoughts on a Core Group’ explains that ‘Communists use cells as their basic structure. The mafia operates like this, and the basic unit of the Marine Corps is the four man squad. Hitler, Lenin, and many others understood the power of a small core of people.’”⁸⁰

The Family rejects laws made by humans and all secular regulations. Its members aren’t interested in morality or ethics, considering temporal laws to be actually sinful. Does that sound like the recipe for a dictatorial regime? Yes, it does. The Family believes its members are soldiers in a “spiritual war.”

* * *

The history of the Family goes back to the 1930s. It was created by businessmen terrified of labor union strikes who started working more tightly together to suppress them. Their mentor, the Norwegian-born Methodist minister Abraham Vereide, focused on interpreting the role of Jesus as a caretaker not for the poor, but for the wealthy, who were “chosen” to rule over the ordinary. In this interpretation, Jesus is a revolutionary who supports strong individual leaders. According to the beliefs of Vereide, his successors and students, leaders are chosen not by voters, but by God. So even if they do something obviously evil (commit treason or rape), the Family defends them because they are chosen; earthly laws don’t apply to them.

The “friends” of the Family have included some unpleasant types, such as the Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi or Idi Amin, nicknamed “Black Hitler” and “the butcher of Uganda.” There have also been South American, Indonesian and Korean dictators. What’s more, the association with Hitler isn’t baseless in this case: Doug Coe

⁸⁰ Jeff Sharlet, *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power*, Harper Collins, 2008, pp. 44–45.

admired the strength of conviction in Hitler, Lenin and Bin Laden, as well as the obedience and loyalty of the Mafia. The Family doesn't mind blood on someone's hands; everything that might seem evil can be justified by God's will.

In Washington in 1953, under Cold War conditions, Coe started organizing the National Prayer Breakfast. This was intended as a peculiar response to the atheism of the USSR. Since then, every US president has attended these breakfasts, as have numerous international guests. The informal gatherings are intended for casual networking and "religious diplomacy." As it happens, since 2013 Prayer Breakfasts have been organized in Moscow as well—with the blessing of the "converted" Putin, who sends New Year's greetings to its attendees every year.⁸¹ Putin's words at the Valdai Club about the fall of the west and its rupture with Christian tradition are the main message on the homepage of this initiative.

Thus we have a remarkable symbiosis—American Evangelicals in Moscow being treated with great prestige, the cream of the country's politics coming to their events, while these same Evangelicals started praising the Russian president en masse in Western media. The anticommunist Cold War rhetoric disappears; Russia is no longer evil. Putin becomes "the lion of Christianity, the defender of Christian values" (Bryan Fischer on American Family Radio); "Russia, Putin and the Orthodox Church has now lifted themselves up as the moral leader of the world" (Sam Rohrer, American Pastors Network); Putin is "protect[ing] his nation's children" (Franklin Graham, Samaritan's Purse).⁸²

For Dugin, Putin is the katechon; for the Family, the "Wolf King" chosen by Christ.

* * *

⁸¹ See the site of the National Morning Prayer Foundation in Moscow, where every year they publish scans of Putin's New Year's greetings, e.g. in 2015: <https://www.fondnum.ru/english/articles/putin-01-2015>.

⁸² *The Family*, op. cit., at 28 mins.

The liaison between the Family and Russia is Doug Burleigh, who replaced Coe after his death in 2017. Burleigh went to the USSR on a scholarship back in 1965, and still travels to Russia to this day. It was he who tried to evangelize Russia after perestroika. “The Lord as a college student sent me [there],” he recalls. “They choreograph[ed] all the things you do. You know, you had a guide and everything. It was very restricted.”⁸³ What story does an American who speaks Russian and who couldn’t escape the watchful gaze of the KGB or the CIA have to tell?

The Russian strain of the Family attracted attention during the scandal over the twenty-something-year-old “student” Maria Butina, actually a Russian agent palling around with the NRA, and who also—though this slipped past observers at the time—infilitrated the Prayer Breakfasts. Part of this behind-the-scenes collaboration between the Kremlin and the Family we can reconstruct thanks to legal proceedings, which give us a look into Butina’s correspondence as acquired by the FBI during the investigation against her, as well as press publications and the documentary series *The Family*. This is what happened.

Aleksandr Torshin, a corpulent Russian with the look of a provincial apparatchik, approached old Doug Coe and said to him (likely through an interpreter, because he doesn’t speak English): “Now I need your help. We want for certain leaders to meet. We think you are the only person who can get them together.”⁸⁴

Torshin is one of the leading politicians of the Putinist United Russia party and also Deputy Governor of the Russian central bank. He has repeatedly dodged imprisonment—in 2013, the Spanish authorities sought to arrest him on accusations of mafia connections and money laundering. Yet instead of doing time behind bars, Torshin became the main speaker at the Breakfasts, holding forth on family values, initiating prayers and making the case that peace on Earth was essential: “We don’t have that much time, as we see how frequently these days the world is approaching the precipice of another world war.”⁸⁵ Watching a recording of his speech, packed with

⁸³ Doug Burleigh from the documentary series *The Family*, dir. Jesse Moss, Netflix, 2019, episode 3, at 22 mins.

⁸⁴ The words of Lars Rise in *The Family*, op. cit., ep. 3 at 26 min.

⁸⁵ Excerpts of Torshin’s speech are available at: <https://www.fondnum.ru/english/articles/rmpb-2015>.

references to Jesus, it's hard not to be reminded of the plenums and conferences of the Communist Party Secretaries. Except socialism has been transformed into religion, and gloomy eyes peering out from under bushy eyebrows have given way to broad American smiles. The politician relating the anecdote about Torshin's conversation with Doug Coe adds that the Russian "was very nervous" and "started to try to flatter Doug": "We know that you are the most powerful person in the world." To which Doug replied: "I have to protest against that description. I am just a friend." As a sign of that friendship, Doug took off his watch and gave it to Torshin, who removed his own and gave it to Doug, saying: "Putin gave me this watch, but from now on I will have this American watch."⁸⁶ If this sounds like dialogue from *The Godfather*, that's not without reason.

Things picked up speed in 2017 (not long after Trump assumed the presidency), when Doug Burleigh, "the Russian liaison," met with redheaded Maria Butina and Torshin. Burleigh asked Torshin (Butina was translating) how many people they wanted to invite to the Breakfast in Washington. Ten, Torshin replied.

Butina would later write in an e-mail that these people are "VERY influential in Russia"⁸⁷ and they were coming to establish a "back channel" between the Kremlin and the United States government.⁸⁸ In another e-mail she made the case that "a new relationship between two countries always begins better when it begins in faith."⁸⁹

After the Prayer Breakfast another "private meeting" took place, for which she presumably thanked Burleigh afterward. That same year, speaking at the Moscow Breakfast, Burleigh predicted "a breakthrough in relations between Russia and the USA."⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Words of Lars Rise in *The Family*, op. cit., ep. 3 at 26 min.

⁸⁷ US Department of Justice, "Affidavit in Support of an Application for a Criminal Complaint," Case 1:18-cr-00218-TSC, p. 14, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1212441/download>

⁸⁸ Emily Belz, "Bad connections?" *World Magazine*, July 30, 2018, https://world.wng.org/2018/07/bad_connections.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Trockmorton, Warren, "National Prayer Breakfast Organizer Doug Burleigh Predicted Putin and Trump Would Become Friends," <https://wthrockmorton.com/2018/07/18/national-prayer-breakfast-organizer-doug-burleigh-predicted-putin-and-trump-would-become-friends/>.

By 2018, sixty Russians came to Washington for the Breakfast. When journalists asked if any collusion was taking place, Burleigh laughed that it was collusion between the Russians and Jesus.⁹¹ But the joke turned sour when the Jesus-colluding agent Maria Butina later ended up convicted.

According to documents from the FBI investigation into Butina, Doug Burleigh helped the young Russian and her Russian Foreign Ministry guardian, Torshin. That being said, “helped” is putting it diplomatically. The FBI’s findings, presented in court by Special Agent Kevin Helson, include several quotes from Butina’s e-mail correspondence revealing highly risky actions by Burleigh, who is described in the document as “U.S. Person 2.” In an e-mail on September 16, 2016, Butina writes to him suggesting they quickly organize a “friendship and dialogue” dinner: “we only have 2 month [*sic*] left before the US elections and it’s the time for building an advisors team on Russia for a new president.”⁹² After the Washington Prayer Breakfast in 2017, she thanked Burleigh for inviting the Russian delegation, saying: “Our delegation cannot stop chatting about your wonderful dinner. My dearest President has received ‘the message’ about your group initiatives and your constructive and kind attention to the Russians,”⁹³ i.e. twelve “important political advisors to Russian President Putin, university presidents, mayors, and substantial private businessmen.”⁹⁴ What message about what initiative was conveyed to her “dearest President?” What on earth might the goal of a back channel be? And isn’t it strange that a Russian spy should help form a team of advisors for an American president?

The Prayer Breakfast in 2017 took place a few months before an American court convicted Butina of espionage on behalf of Russia. Butina pleaded guilty and begged for mercy. She served a sentence of eighteen months and then was deported to Russia. But

⁹¹ A video of Doug Burleigh’s speech is available on Warren Throckmorton’s blog: “The Fellowship Foundation’s Doug Burleigh Jokes About Russian Collusion With Jesus,” <https://www.wthrockmorton.com/2018/07/23/the-fellowship-foundations-doug-burleigh-jokes-about-russian-collusion-with-jesus/>.

⁹² US Department of Justice, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

after her release, Aleksandr Torshin remained her guardian, despite himself becoming a subject of prosecutor Robert Mueller’s investigation—there were rumors he’d used the NRA for illegal money transfers to support the Trump campaign.⁹⁵

Butina, a “representative of the Russian Federation’s informal diplomacy”—as the Justice Department affidavit described her⁹⁶—learned from Torshin, and he consulted every step of the way with the Russian Foreign Ministry. Direct messaging him on Twitter, she called their actions a “game” that they would “win.” She stated that Torshin was playing a “key role” in all this and added: “I will not manage without you.” “I am just starting in this field. I still have to learn and learn from you!” Her master reassured her: “This is hard to teach. Patience and cold blood + faith in yourself. And everything will definitely turn out.”⁹⁷

But it didn’t turn out well for Butina. Or maybe it turned out just well enough?

* * *

This sounds like the plot of a spy movie, but reality can be much funnier. In fact some of the Russian delegation of 2017, instead of networking, “were inattentive or disrespectful —talking on their phones, or complaining that there wasn’t alcohol.” After the breakfast, Burleigh spoke to Torshin about it: “Brother, we should invite people who really want to be there.” Torshin apologized.⁹⁸ An anonymous Russian source commented to a CNN journalist: “I suppose the majority of members of the (Russian) delegation don’t want to pray; they want to mingle” and might be there to “try to solve their own problems, that

⁹⁵ Justin Miller, “Kremlin Used NRA to Help Trump in 2016, Democratic Senate Report Says,” *The Daily Beast*, November 12, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/kremlin-used-nra-to-help-trump-in-2016-says-senate-intelligence-committee>.

⁹⁶ US Department of Justice, *op. cit.*, p. 6

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁹⁸ Belz, *op. cit.*

is—their name possibly appearing in future sanctions lists.”⁹⁹ The Russians were pretending they were there for God. The comments of most American journalists I read suggest that the Russian infiltration of this organization seemed to catch the Americans completely off guard, and they ended up being slyly taken advantage of. But if we are dealing with the dictatorial élite of the twenty-first century, such as the Family, could they permit themselves such naïveté? Can we even talk about naïveté here?

Don’t forget that the head of today’s Family is a “Russian liaison.”

“We grew up in the environment that it was prohibited to meet with the foreigners,” says Peter Sautov, an organizer of the Moscow Prayer Breakfasts. “So we had a huge interest for everything what is American. And Americans was like the people from the moon. In the early ’90s, a lot of Evangelicals came to Russia. Not just Billy Graham.”¹⁰⁰ The Wild East was struck by a deluge of evangelism. And business arrived quick on its heels. But Russia was able to take great political advantage of this phenomenon. As we remember from CIA veteran Steven L. Hall, the American intelligence services were reluctant to investigate religious organizations.

Hall, who retired from the CIA in 2015, explained to journalists the case of religious organizations: “If I’m a Russian intelligence officer and I’m looking to plug in [...] there’s a couple of good things that are going to attract my attention about the NRA, the National Prayer Breakfast, y’know, the religious right.”¹⁰¹ On the one hand: connections with the world of the arms business and trade in the NRA, on the other: access to the global political elite via group “breakfast” prayers...

CHANNEL 1, CHANNEL 2

⁹⁹ Tim Lister, Mary Ilyushina and Frederik Pleitgen, “Big Russian delegation anticipated for prayer breakfast in Washington,” CNN, February 8, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/02/07/politics/russia-delegation-washington-prayer-breakfast/index.html>.

¹⁰⁰ Words of Peter Sautov, *The Family*, op. cit., ep. 3, at 9 min.

¹⁰¹ Larsen et al., op. cit.

To better understand the whole situation, we have to realize that there are probably various parallel channels of Russian influence in the neoconservative world. They might either not know about one another, or outright compete with one another. So for this reason Allan Carson, of what we might call Channel 1, when asked by a journalist whether he knew the leaders of the Russian prayer breakfasts, said no.¹⁰² Would the Family be Channel 2?

The channels operate on different levels and sometimes intersect. We don't ultimately know how many there are. After Trump came to power, many fundamentalist alleged Family members of the Family ended up in his circle, starting with his second-in-command, Vice President Mike Pence (Channel 2). But one of his legal advisors was the head lawyer for the American Center for Law and Justice (which also has a branch in Moscow): Jay Sekulow, someone connected with Channel 1, the World Congress of Families. Sekulow defended Trump during the FBI investigation into—you guessed it!—Russian interference in American elections. Sekulow has been in the ACLJ since 1991 and as a lawyer had previously handled constitutional issues, not criminal ones. The legal community was surprised to see him promoted, since he wasn't viewed as experienced or prepared for that type of task. During his court appearances or on television he could be aggressive and easy to throw off balance.¹⁰³

During this whole exchange of opinions, and above all of political favors, between the Kremlin's people and American conservatives, both sides derived some benefit. The Russians gave the American Evangelicals a sense of power they didn't have at home and then helped them elevate a president who suited both sides. From the Americans, the Russians learned social engineering and language.

It was the Evangelicals who helped the Russians refine anti-gay language in Russia. There they no longer talk about "gays," but instead accentuate "traditional

¹⁰² Belz, op. cit.

¹⁰³ Steve Benen, Jay Sekulow, "Trump's unlikely lawyer," *The Washington Post*, June 19, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/06/19/jay-sekulow-trumps-unlikely-lawyer/>.

values,” “protecting children,” “the natural family,” leading later to legislative initiatives directed against LGBTQ people as alleged corrupters of children.¹⁰⁴

The result? In 2013 Russia introduced legislation banning the promotion of “homosexual propaganda.” Active on the Russian side on this issue was Professor Antonov (Channel 1), who admitted: “Unlike other European countries, we refused to ratify proposals supporting adoption of children by gays.” Nor did he conceal that the World Congress of Families “was happy that Putin stood up against the European governments. It’s our influence on Putin and his administration.”¹⁰⁵

When Allan Carlson’s colleague Larry Jacobs was asked whether the World Congress of Families contributed to the Russian victory on this issue, Jacobs laughed and said, “Yes, I think that is accurate.” And he goes further: “The Russians might be the Christian saviors of the world.”¹⁰⁶ It sounds pompous, but saving the world doesn’t come for free. Larry Jacobs was managing director of the WCF and in 2013–2014 the Russians paid him five thousand dollars a month to... design a conservative web page. A sidenote: the money came from the St. Basil Foundation, run by the oligarch Konstantin Malofeyev. The intermediary was the Spanish organization CitizenGo. Invoices and reports about this are available in “The Intolerance Network,” a set of documents collected by WikiLeaks.¹⁰⁷ The web page Jacobs was designing was called HocVinces.info; it no longer exists. But Jacobs will no longer tell us this story, nor be held to account like Jack Hanick, one of the founders of Fox News and who even moved to Moscow at the invitation of, an in exchange for payment from, Malofeyev. Jacobs died in 2018, but in 2022 Hanick was arrested by the FBI on charges of violating US sanctions against Malofeyev by working for the oligarch.

¹⁰⁴ Hanna Levintov, „How US Evangelicals Helped Create Russia’s Anti-Gay Movement,” *Mother Jones*, February 21, 2014, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/02/world-congress-families-russia-gay-rights/2/>

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ See: [#searchresult](https://wikileaks.org/intolerancenetwork/?q=In+Hoc&count=50&sort=0).

The World Congress Of Families

At the World Congress of Families, organizations gathered from the US, Russia, Spain—in total, over eighty countries. The Congress was founded by representatives of various denominations: Lutheran, Catholic, Mormon, Baptist, Orthodox. We learn from a WCF declaration that: “the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.” Members of the Congress are fighting for “the natural family,” understood as “a union between a man and a woman.” This sounds mild, but nevertheless the Human Rights Campaign named the WCF “one of the most influential American organizations involved in the export of hate,” yet one received warmly in countries such as Russia.¹⁰⁸ It is also an extremist organization “promoting and coordinating the exportation of anti-LGBT bigotry, ideology, and legislation abroad.”¹⁰⁹ In 2014 the Human Rights Campaign’s and other organizations jointly declared the WCF, as well as Allan Carlson’s Howard Center, “hate groups.” The

¹⁰⁸ Human Rights Campaign, “Exposed: World Congress of Families: An American Organization Exporting Hate, June 2015 Update” [https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/WCF_Report_REV_6-17-15_FINAL_\(1\).pdf](https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/WCF_Report_REV_6-17-15_FINAL_(1).pdf)

¹⁰⁹ Human Rights Campaign press release: “Exposed: The World Congress of Families,” Aug 25, 2014, <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/exposed-the-world-congress-of-families>

director of HRC, Ty Cobb, stated clearly: “They praise Vladimir Putin as the standard-bearer for traditional ‘family values’ and honored a Nigerian activist who claims LGBT advocates conspire with the terrorist group Boko Haram [...]. Hate is not an American value, and we must expose and work to stop the World Congress of Families and their extremist allies.”¹¹⁰

Since the birth of the WCF in 1997, each of its gatherings has taken place in a different country in Western Europe or the US, and once in Sydney, Australia (2013), though none went by without protest. In Amsterdam (2009), the building hosting the Congress was splashed with paint. In 2012 in London, when the WCF tried to rent a space for a conference titled “One Man. One Woman: Making the Case for Marriage for the Good of Society,” they were rejected. In Australia in 2013, the national conference of the WCF was met with protests. The Australian Senate passed a resolution denouncing the conference after several members of parliament and government representatives announced they’d be speaking there. But in Eastern Europe (Warsaw 2007, Moscow 2014, Budapest 2017, Chişinău 2018), the WCF receives strong support from governing circles. In Warsaw, the Fourth WCF Congress was held in the Palace of Culture and Science, the city’s most iconic skyscraper, under the honorary patronage of President Lech Kaczyński. It was the first time a politician of that stature had engaged with the WCF. The founders of the Congress, Anatoliy Antonov and Allan Carlson, spoke during the sessions. One speaker, former President of the Southern Baptist Convention Paige Patterson, expressed his concern that nowadays sixty percent of university students are women: “In a few years men will increasingly be underrepresented among the intelligentsia and will gradually cede leadership in many areas to women.”¹¹¹

As part of the Congress, a conference took place in the Polish parliament organized jointly by the lower house and the Senate. In the end, Warsaw was the largest WCF gathering yet: 3,900 people attended. It marked the start of exporting so-called pro-family thought in Eastern Europe. Here Poland played a disgraceful role.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Bob Allen, “Vandals Target Group Planning Pro-Family Gathering in Amsterdam,” *Baptist News*, August 4, 2009, <https://baptistnews.com/article/vandals-target-group-planning-pro-family-gathering-in-amsterdam/>.

To once again quote the HRC report: “WCF has held large conferences in Poland and Ukraine to connect ‘pro-family’ activists and encourage the passage of anti-LGBT legislation. In Ukraine, WCF inflamed concerns that joining the European Union would force the country to accept marriage equality. The group supported legislation, which did not pass, that would have banned discussion of homosexuality in Polish public schools and lobbied against marriage equality legislation in Albania and Romania.”¹¹²

Another important Congress took place in Madrid on May 25, 2012, where cooperation was established among Eastern, Western and Southern Europe. It all started with Vladimir Yakunin, who in 2010 first invited the managing director of the World Congress of Families, Lawrence D. Jacobs, to a forum he was organizing on the island of Rhodes. Yakunin is a close friend of Putin’s from his Leningrad days in the KGB, and he worked for years as an agent at the UN in New York (from 1985 to 1991). With his reputation for trustworthiness, in the nineties he helped found Rossiya Bank, where the former KGB and its people—including Putin—hold their fortunes. Then he was the head of Russian Railways. Since the attack on Ukraine in 2014, he is under US sanctions, but he enjoys freedom and connections in Berlin, where a few years ago he found himself a safe haven, since “Russia has recruited allies in German chancellor Angela Merkel’s ‘inner circle’ and in Austrian intelligence services,” as Mikhail Khodorkovsky testified to the European Union Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Interference.¹¹³ Berlin also hosts the headquarters of Yakunin’s Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute, described by *The Insider* as an organization for money laundering and sowing disinformation; meanwhile Yakunin, according to Khodorkovsky, “is used to identify potential Kremlin allies among European elites.”¹¹⁴ Just after the fall of the USSR, Yakunin and his wife “found God” and converted to Orthodoxy, so he is also active in religious organizations that, in actual fact, since the attack on Ukraine in 2014 have simply served the Kremlin’s geopolitical aims.

¹¹² HRC report, op. cit., p. 6.

¹¹³ Andrew Rettman, “Russia Penetrated Merkel’s ‘Inner Circle’, Khodorkovsky Says,” *EUObserver*, May 11, 2021, <https://euobserver.com/world/151825>.

¹¹⁴ Anastasia Kirilenko, “From the KGB to Russian Railways: The Long and Winding Road of Vladimir Yakunin. Part 1,” *The Insider*, December 16, 2021, <https://theins.ru/en/corruption/247201>.

We learn from a note found in documents hacked by ACABGang and posted on Wikileaks in the summer of 2021¹¹⁵ that Yakunin invited the WCF's Larry Jacobs to the Rhodes Forum, a meeting of politicians and experts organized on the Greek island. Jacobs talked about the forum as an alternative to the UN model, but others call the Rhodes Forum a right-wing international. In Rhodes, Jacobs got an offer to speak in Moscow, where he would later say that the Russians could be true allies of American Evangelicals. As he met more and more nice Russians, whether at the Russia Forum in Washington or at events in the Russian Embassy in the US,¹¹⁶ he started to speak out more boldly about Putin as "the one defending laws and morality consistent with the freedom in the U.S. Constitution."¹¹⁷ He also gave numerous interviews to Russian media, which leveraged his statements for propaganda, met with authorities of the Orthodox Church, and also saw himself as having influence on Russian anti-LGBT legislation.

The ultimate bond between Russia and the WCF was forged at the 2012 Congress in Madrid. Somehow, since then the WCF has found itself doing much better, with Congresses happening annually, not every two or even every five years, as before. Vladimir Yakunin's wife Natalia started attending meetings of the WCF organizing committee, which Jacobs chaired. In time, the Russians started being represented on the WCF board by Alexey Komov, and his organization Family Russia became a permanent partner of the Congress, paying an annual contribution of \$2,500, just like Malofeyev's St. Basil the Great Foundation and Yakunin's foundation, which sometimes appears in documents under the name of one of its programs: Sanctity of Motherhood. Two years after Madrid, the 2014 WCF congress would be organized in Moscow at the Kremlin. According to a story told to me by one attendee of the Moscow Congress, Russian intelligence services used the gathering to recruit influence agents. This was

¹¹⁵ All the documents linked with the figure of Lawrence Jacobs are available in the dossier "The Intolerance Network" on Wikileaks at: <https://wikileaks.org/intolerancenetwork/tree/part-1/Proyectos/In%20Hoc%20Signo%20Vinces>.

¹¹⁶ See Lawrence Jacobs's report for June–September 2013 on Wikileaks: <https://wikileaks.org/intolerancenetwork/files/11207>.

¹¹⁷ HRC report, op. cit., p. 12.

done so openly and persistently that my source sighed with relief when he was finally on the flight back home. Therefore the bonds forged in 1995 by exploiting Carlson's naïveté did not go to waste—years later they proved useful for achieving the Kremlin's geopolitical goals.

* * *

The most interesting Congress of all is the one that was meant to take place in Moscow in 2014: meaning at the same time as Russia's annexation of Crimea. Preparations took a couple years, because—the organizers complained—the West's view of Russia was still distorted by prejudice.

Moscow got to host the Congress thanks to the work of Alexei Komov, Antonov's former student. This is the same Komov I've mentioned before in this book, a collaborator of Malofeyev's—a specialist in financing the war in Ukraine. Just as Komov succeeded Antonov on the Russian side, later on the American side, Brian Brown succeeded Carlson as president of the WCF. Young Komov brought new energy to WCF circles. From then on, things would get interesting.

First in 2011 Komov organized a demographic conference in Russia, a test for his skills, which was attended by Carlson, Larry Jacobs and also the Russian politician Yelena Mizulina and Svetlana Medvedeva, wife of then-president Dmitriy Medvedev. This helped the Americans network with key figures in the Kremlin and the Duma and transfer their know-how to their Russian partners. Within two weeks of the event came the introduction of the first anti-abortion laws since the fall of communism in Russia (abortion providers had to devote 10 percent of any advertising to describing the dangers of abortion, and it was made illegal to describe abortion as a safe medical procedure). Later Mizulina would be behind the introduction of anti-gay legislation in Russia in 2013. She's also known for her peculiar opinions, such as that "even when a man beats his wife it doesn't hurt as much as humiliation hurts a man."¹¹⁸ She calls for a

¹¹⁸ Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, "Vladimir Putin Has One Reliable Set Of Allies: Russia's Iron Ladies," *The Guardian*, March 22, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/mar/22/vladimir-allies-russias-iron-ladies-useful-anti-feminists>.

complete ban on abortion, though only twelve percent of women in Russia support such an approach.

Larry Jacobs, a colleague of Carlson's and the WCF board member responsible for media relations (and also paid handsomely by the Russians) was thrilled by the results. When in June 2013, the lower house of the Duma passed a bill banning "homosexual propaganda" in Russia, Brian Brown from the Moscow Congress planning committee met with Mizulina. He was accompanied by Jack Hanick, another committee member and a former Fox News producer. For the first time, the fundamentalists' demands were being met, at express speed, with binding legislation. This is what made the Americans envy the Russians the most. They had no Putin of their own to give them the green light. They'd have to wait another few years for one to come along. And his victory would be supported by the real Putin himself.

On his first day in power, Trump withdrew American financial aid for NGOs around the world that performed abortions or even offered information about them—because there was clearly nothing more important going on in the world that the new president should deal with.

To prepare WCF in Moscow, Komov collaborated with Beloborodov, but each in his own area. Sometimes they appeared together, such as at the Congress in Tbilisi a few years later, in 2016.¹¹⁹ We can see this clearly on the guest list for the Moscow World Congress of Families, acquired by the Russian hackers' collective Shaltai-Boltai. It opens with names recommended by Beloborodov, which take up considerable space. They are mainly people from the world of politics, such as the Hungarian minister Katalina Novák. In addition there are people from Mongolia, Moldova, Hong Kong, Slovakia, Kenya, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Congo. Komov's guests are mainly from Italy, but his list is much shorter and includes no politicians. It looks suspiciously as though Beloborodov himself oversaw putting the lists together, first filling them up with contacts he could have obtained from government-adjacent circles.

¹¹⁹ See: <https://twitter.com/CodaStory/status/732470753942114304>. Also attending the WCF Congress in Tbilisi were Polish PiS senator Antoni Szymański and French far-right politician Marion Maréchal, see: <https://dfwatch.net/marion-marechal-le-pen-listed-among-speakers-to-tbilisi-conference-42399>.

The whole Congress would have been perfect, a great success to celebrate, if Russian “little green men” hadn’t attacked Ukraine. Barack Obama denounced the attack and the Moscow WCF was officially cancelled. The Americans had to pull out due to the sanctions the US and Europe imposed on many Russian politicians, including Yakunin who decided to take matters into his own hands. Yakunin financed the congress under a new name: “Large Family and Future of Humanity” [sic]. “The Russians wanted to show that they had contacts and they mobilized,” explains Ewa Kowalewska from Human Life International in Gdańsk in a conversation with me. She has been working with the Russians since the 1990s. “A few rich people banded together, and there are a lot of rich people there. They called it a forum, because it had to have a different name, but everything took place exactly according to the formula of the WCF Congresses. Malofeyev played a side role, it was the Yakunin women who did the work.”¹²⁰

MALOFEYEV THE OLIGARCH

One speaker at the Moscow “forum” was Konstantin Malofeyev, then already sanctioned by the EU (and today also the US, Montenegro and Ukraine).¹²¹ Malofeyev is a Russian billionaire who hopes to see Putin made into a tsar (“everyone wants Putin to carry on forever.”¹²²) He believes history took a wrong turn in 1917 and therefore what’s needed is to return to the roots, meaning the Russia of the tsars. In his office hangs a portrait of Alexander III, remembered in Poland as a foreign occupier and virulent Russifier. Under his reign, pogroms increased and a secret police was created to surveil and suppress the opposition.

¹²⁰ Ewa Kowalewska described her twenty-five years of work for Human Life International and contacts with Russia in the book *Światłość w ciemności wschodu* [Light in the Darkness of the East], HLI, 2018.

¹²¹ Shaun Walker, “‘Russia’s Soul is Monarchic’: Tsarist School Wants to Reverse 100 Years of History,” *The Guardian*, March 6, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/06/russia-revolution-tsarist-school-moscow-nicholas-ii>.

¹²² Ibid.

Malofeyev was baptized in college, at the age of twenty. This is how he tells the story himself: “I came to Orthodoxy during a wonderful period in history—perestroika, when the communist propaganda had ended, but the liberal kind hadn’t yet started.”¹²³ I didn’t get to speak to him while I was in Moscow (his assistant told me: “I’m very sorry, but it wasn’t possible to organize a meeting with Mr. Malofeyev owing to his very busy schedule.”) But I was interested in what music he listens to, what books he reads—this man of my same age who became an oligarch, is responsible for aggression in Ukraine and rules over fundamentalist circles. Luckily, Malofeyev talked about his reading in an interview for Russian *Forbes*. He kept praising the era of perestroika, when “people hadn’t yet forgotten how to read, the ‘Pepsi generation’ hadn’t yet grown up, and so in those days, by reading formerly banned Russian philosophers and writers—[Aleksandr] Solzhenitsyn, [the Orthodox thinker Nikolay] Berdyayev, [the monarchist Ivan] Solonevich, [Ivan] Ilyin—I came to the wise understanding that since I was Russian, that meant I was Orthodox.”¹²⁴

For us, the most interesting item on this reading list is Ivan Ilyin, a Russian fascist ideologue from the 1920s and ’30s and a monarchist active when Russia was under communist rule. Ilyin of course had to emigrate and died in Zürich in 1954. Now he’s an inspiration for Putin. His praise of violence and force inspires the Russian president.

Timothy Snyder, in *The Road to Unfreedom*, also sees Ilyin as someone whose thought directly influences Putin’s methods of rule. This is how Snyder summarizes Ilyin’s theses:

“The first [thesis] was that social advancement was impossible because the political system, the social system, is like a body. So you’re a cell, you’re an embryo, you’re an organ, you have a place in this larger body, and freedom means knowing your place. That’s what freedom means.”

¹²³ Yuliya Taratuta and Konstantin Malofeyev, “Не вижу ничего плохого в православном чекизме,” *Forbes* (Russian edition), June 25, 2015, <https://www.forbes.ru/forbeslife/292319-konstantin-malofeev-ne-vizhu-nichego-plokhogo-v-pravoslavnom-chekizme>.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

Secondly, for Ilyin, “democracy is a ritual. So we can vote, but we only vote in order to affirm our collective support for a leader. The leader is not legitimated by our votes or chosen by our votes, the voting is just a ritual by which we collectively, every couple of years, endorse a leader who has emerged from some other place.”

And thirdly: “the factual world doesn’t count. It’s not real. [...] The only true thing is Russian nationalism. The only hope to bring the whole world together is that somehow Russia—which is an innocent victim of the rest of the world—will somehow restore itself in some totalitarian form and then bring order back to the world.”¹²⁵

In brief, these are Ilyin’s conclusions: freedom is about knowing your place, elections are only for show, and facts contradict one another, so the only thing that counts is a strong leader and playing to emotions. So what if Ilyin, an enemy of Bolshevism, is the patron saint of Putin, a leader who’s bringing back the figure of Stalin and nostalgia for the USSR? Details, details. To show you how powerless we are against these ideas, Ilyin hasn’t been translated into Polish. So we in Poland don’t even know what lies behind the thinking of the Russian President. And how can we cope with something we don’t know?

* * *

Malofeyev came into his money dubiously, entirely *à la russe*.¹²⁶ In 1998, after graduating from law school, he started working in banking. At the same time I was graduating from college and starting a PhD on Gombrowicz, before racing off to Argentina two years later. Meanwhile Malofeyev was fairly quickly accumulating his fortune. He’s one of the young wolves who came of age in the nineties and got to make

¹²⁵ Timothy Snyder, “The fascist philosopher behind Vladimir Putin’s information warfare,” <https://bigthink.com/videos/timothy-snyder-the-fascist-philosopher-behind-vladimir-putins-russia/>.

¹²⁶ In 2011, a London court seized a portion of Malofeyev’s capital in connection to a lawsuit filed by the Russian VTB Capital. Malofeyev is also alleged to have operated a scam in a venture in France, see: Agathe Duparc, “Les casseroles de Konstantin Malofeev, oligarque russe soutien du Front national,” *Mediapart*, February 21, 2016, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/210216/les-casseroles-de-konstantin-malofeev-oligarque-russe-soutien-du-front-national?onglet=full>.

See also: “Profile: Konstantin Malofeev,” December 4, 2017, <https://www.underminers.info/publications/2017/12/5/profile-konstantin-malofeev>. This is a site run by Russian activists and experts living outside the country.

the most of that. In 2005 he founded his own investment firm, Marshall Capital Partners. He had already gained experience at MDM Bank and knew the finance head of the largest telecommunication firm in Russia at the time, Svyazinvest. In 2009 he joined the company's board. Svyazinvest owned a fifty-one percent share in Rostelecom, in which Malofeyev acquired a seven percent share. Rostelecom would eventually absorb Svyazinvest and become the most powerful telecom on the Russian market. To get into this kind of business in Russia, with companies co-owned by government agencies, you have to: 1) have friends in high places and 2) give something in exchange.

Malofeyev already had a friend in the Kremlin: Igor Shchegolev, Minister of Telecommunications, who had access to Putin. And he had another route to the president through the monk Tikhon (Georgiy Shevkunov), known as the president's confessor and sometimes outright as "Putin's Rasputin." Malofeyev told *Forbes*: "We've got a lot of joint projects with Father Tikhon," and mentions exhibits on the Rurik and Romanov tsarist dynasties.¹²⁷ Malofeyev also had another access point to the leader. As reported by the investigative website Bellingcat,¹²⁸ he knew Putin's former chief propagandist, Vladislav Surkov, whose responsibilities included conducting hybrid information warfare during the 2014 attack on Ukraine. Their relationship is confirmed by leaks from Surkov's e-mail inbox.¹²⁹

I wondered how Malofeyev came up in Surkov's correspondence. Alya Shandra, a Ukrainian journalist and Euromaidan activist, who has thoroughly examined the full leak and reported on it, was my guide.

¹²⁷ Yulia Taratuta, op. cit.

¹²⁸ Christo Grozev, "The Kremlin's Balkan Gambit: Part I," *Bellingcat*, March 4, 2017, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/03/04/kremlins-balkan-gambit-part/>.

¹²⁹ Information on the leak and a link to download Surkov's e-mails can be found at: "SurkovLeaks: 1GB mail cache retrieved by Ukrainian hacktivist," *Informnapalm*, October 25, 2017, <https://informnapalm.org/en/surkovleaks/>. Also see the report by Alya Shandra and Robert Seely, "The Surkov Leaks: The Inner Workings of Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine," Royal United Services Institute for Defense and Security Studies, 2019, <http://euromaidanpress.com/2019/07/16/surkov-leaks-report-on-russias-hybrid-war-in-ukraine-published-at-rusi-institute/>. For my interview with Alya Shandra, see: Klementyna Suchanow, "Hakerzy kontra Putin. Włamanie do poczty Kremła," *Magazyn Świąteczny Gazety Wyborczej*, 17 sierpnia 2019, <http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/7,124059,25091858,hakerzy-kontra-putin-wlamanie-do-poczty-krem-la.html>.

“Malofeyev is not very engaged in Surkov’s operations, he only appears once,” she replied. “It has to do with Donbas. A document comes from the address of his Marshall company, sent by one of his employees, with a list of candidates to appoint to the pro-Russian government in Donbas. Who ought to be put in place as prime minister, ministers, etc. It looks as though Surkov and Malofeyev were working via different channels.”¹³⁰

Surkov is on the government channel. Malofeyev must have belonged to another, extra-Kremlin, circle, and therefore enjoyed greater freedom of action than the propaganda chief. As we can see, the Kremlin was taking Malofeyev’s suggestions into account on an incredibly serious subject, one playing out in an extremely sensitive situation on the international arena.

* * *

In 2007, Malofeyev founded the St. Basil the Great Foundation with a budget of \$40 million. Among other things, it runs a school intended to prepare the future élite of the Russian monarchy. Portraits of the tsars peer down at the children from the school walls, and the hallway is dominated by a statue of Catherine the Great. “The lessons include scripture studies and Latin, and the school’s history textbooks were specially commissioned, to avoid the positive view of much of the Soviet period given by the standard Russian textbooks.”¹³¹ Monarchist references even appear in the Safe Internet League funded by Malofeyev’s foundation. According to its official principles, its goal is banning pornography and protecting children from it (as well as from drugs and scenes of violence). But in reality its main goal is to control the internet.

The company Kaspersky Lab helps the League produce anti-pirating software. The Lab’s founder Eugene (Yevgeniy) Kaspersky graduated from a KGB academy and

¹³⁰ Klementyna Suchanow, „Hakerzy kontra Putin” op. cit.

¹³¹ Shaun Walker, op. cit.

worked in intelligence, and his company has been accused of spying for Russia.¹³² By 2017 the US authorities had ordered that his software not be used, and the European Parliament also warned against it. After the new attack on Ukraine by Russia in 2022, they were joined by the intelligence services of Germany and the UK.

In 2012, when the new era of Putin's reign arrived, the world of business became even more tightly bound up with the interests of the state. The same with public media—which from then on was to stop aiming for objectivity and only to serve the state. At this time, many employees were fired from Kaspersky Labs (purges also took place at the TV station Rossiya Sevodnya—the goal was deepening links “with Russia's military or intelligence services.”¹³³) This is just the time when the Safe Internet League arose and it has to be seen in that context.

* * *

At the 2014 WCF “forum” taking place in Moscow under a new name, Malofeyev was one of the first to speak. He said Putin's arrival was a sign from God. He quoted the president's words and added: “One organization called many of us present here Nazis, fascists, only because we appreciate family values. For instance, in Ukraine, our fraternal country, the association agreement with the European Union didn't get signed last year because the Ukrainians found out they would have to permit homosexual propaganda and gay parades.” This was one of the arguments with which Russia saturated Ukrainian public debate, one of the ways they sought to prevent Ukraine from tying itself to the West and drawing the country away from Russia.

I've mentioned several times that Malofeyev was one of the oligarchs who played a key role in the invasion of Ukraine and Crimea, financing and sending his own people there. But what was this role exactly? An expert on the war in Donbas explained it to me. We met up in Moscow, not far from the skating rink at the Clean Ponds, nicer than the

¹³² Carol Matlack, Michael Riley, Jordan Robertson, “The Company Securing Your Internet Has Close Ties to Russian Spies,” Bloomberg, March 19, 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-03-19/cybersecurity-kaspersky-has-close-ties-to-russian-spies>.

¹³³ Ibid.

one at the Patriarch Ponds famous from Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and, incidentally, not so far from the headquarters of Malofeyev's company Tsargrad. By the Clean Ponds it's more homey, less "posh." This area was home to one Russia's few newspapers—*Novaya Gazeta*—before it ceased publication in 2022.

Over hot soup, because the temperature was below freezing, a journalist and researcher who I'll call A. A. told me about Malofeyev's role in the Kremlin's jigsaw puzzle. As one mini-tram after another rolled by outside the window, I felt like I had landed in the Moscow of the 1930s.

"It's a very unclear situation," says A. A. "because Malofeyev doesn't the only power here. By deciding to annex Crimea, the government took a big risk, which is why they preferred to send someone there from outside government circles. Malofeyev was in that category. As far as proof of the war being financed by Malofeyev, of course there isn't any, that's the nature of dark money in Russia—there's no way to trace it. It's almost certain that Malofeyev gave some money toward forming nationalist groups that headed for Ukraine. But I think that his main role was to inspire think tanks promoting the strategy of annexing Ukrainian territories. Malofeyev had connections at least with Igor Strelkov (his real name is Igor Girkin). Strelkov worked in Malofeyev's private security firm. He's his man."¹³⁴

Strelkov is the man with a mustache, slicked-back hair and khaki pants who you might remember from TV news reports on the pro-Russian separatists in Donbas. Strelkov claimed he was the one who started the war in Ukraine. It turns out he's also an agent of the Russian military intelligence agency. In 2014 he led a separatist operation in Donetsk, Ukraine and became Minister of Defense of the breakaway Donetsk People's Republic, then later Chief of Staff to the pro-Russian separatists.

"But that doesn't mean Malofeyev is the main power in the Kremlin's orbit at all," explains A. A. "He's just one of many who sympathize with the cause. They're not at all a homogenous group, on the contrary, they fight with one another. Putin is never open, he hears out some and then others, he doesn't say what he thinks, and they try to guess his

¹³⁴ See e.g.: <https://www.ft.com/content/84481538-1103-11e4-94f3-00144feabdc0>.

wishes. Malofeyev might also have had a meeting with Putin, but his strategy is definitely not simply the strategy of the president.”

The Financial Times reported that Malofeyev’s company, then still known as Marshall Capital Partners, provided financial support for the illegal armed and mercenary groups used by Russia in the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Donbas. In addition, Malofeyev is close to Sergey Aksyonov, who organized the referendum on Crimea joining the Russian Federation and who became Prime Minister of Crimea. Malofeyev’s former head of public relations, Aleksandr Boroday, in turn became Aksyonov’s media advisor.¹³⁵ Later he was named prime minister of the Donetsk People’s Republic.

Wherever we look, we can clearly see Malofeyev’s money or people. To him, the war in Ukraine seemed like “a war against hordes marching under the banners of the Antichrist with Satanic slogans.”¹³⁶ In these words we hear the echo of Dugin’s philosophy. Incidentally, Professor Dugin also played his own behind-the-scenes role in the war Russia was waging on its neighbor. To him it was a “holy war.” This is not a coincidence, because thanks to a leak of Dugin’s assistant’s e-mails we know that Malofeyev, and Komov as well, are in constant touch with Dugin and consult with him on various activities,¹³⁷ and in recent years Dugin has even worked for Malofeyev’s TV station.

The Ukrainian government linked Malofeyev’s aid to the shooting down of a Malaysian Airlines flight that left Amsterdam in July 2014 with 283 passengers and 15 crewmembers. Finally Strelkov confessed his responsibility for the attack. For his actions, Malofeyev was sanctioned by the EU, US and Ukraine. But his name also appears in the context of the extreme right. He organized a secret meeting in Vienna to which he personally invited prominent far-right politicians—Austria’s Heinz-Christian

¹³⁵ Serhiy Shcherbyna, Yuriy Vinnichuk: “Связи ДНР: украинский бизнес работодателей террористов,” *The Insider*, June 10, 2014, <http://www.theinsider.ua/business/53be43058f8ec/>.

¹³⁶ Dmitriy Sokolov-Mitrich, V. Leybin, “Оставить Богу место в истории,” *Русский Репортер*, March 4, 2015, https://expert.ru/russian_reporter/2015/06/ostavit-bogu-mesto-v-istorii/

¹³⁷ See the leak: <https://search.ddosecrets.com/search?leaks=ce4cd1f1-4d63-4ae0-adee-078e96196a9e&q=komov> published on Distributed Denial of Secrets.

Strache and France’s Marion Maréchal—as well as Dugin, who made the “passionate case that only a united far Right could save Europe from gay Satan.”¹³⁸ Even people from Marine Le Pen’s National Front warned that Malofeyev was “un pourri” (a crook) and not to be trusted—a conversation during a sitting of the European Parliament with a National Front politician back from Moscow was filmed from a distance by Canal+ and interpreted by a lip reader.¹³⁹

Malofeyev was also behind Komov’s activities in Italy and the promotion of Matteo Salvini, a man often described as a fascist, as a leader of the European right. But when asked about fascism, Malofeyev responded: “What am I supposed to say? [...] I’m not fascist? I don’t eat babies for breakfast? An Orthodox Christian cannot be fascist. Russians suffered from Nazis more than any other nation in the world.”¹⁴⁰

* * *

It’s too bad I didn’t meet Mr. Malofeyev. I could have asked him how he turned from a Soviet college student into a devotee of the tsar. Or also, for instance, about the articles his think tank Katehon published about the Polish protests in defense of independent media in December 2016, when I and my friends made the spontaneous decision to block PiS members of parliament from driving out of the parliamentary hotel. One of Katehon’s analysts, Andrew Korybko, had this to say about the protest: “It’s unclear exactly how many Poles sincerely oppose the current government and which of them are just recruited by Soros- and German-backed ‘NGOs’, whether through payments or the tantalizing allure of partaking in a ‘revolution’ against a ‘dictatorship.’”¹⁴¹ When you’re a cynical schemer yourself, it’s hard to believe that someone else might act selflessly. Alya Shandra tells me what that cynicism looks like from the inside, after investigating the e-

¹³⁸ Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, op. cit., p. 196.

¹³⁹ Agathe Duparc, op. cit. The Canal Plus recording in which you can hear the conversation between two National Front MEPs, including Aymeric Chauprade, is here: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3c32zo>.

¹⁴⁰ Courtney Weaver, “Malofeev: The Russian Billionaire Linking Moscow to the Rebels,” *Financial Times*, July 24, 2014, <https://www.ft.com/content/84481538-1103-11e4-94f3-00144feabdc0>.

¹⁴¹ Andrew Korybko, “In Defense of PiS,” *Katehon*, December 21, 2016, <http://katehon.com/article/defense-pis>.

mails of Vladislav Surkov¹⁴²—to remind you, the éminence grise of the Kremlin, responsible for pro-Russian propaganda during the attack on Ukraine. These e-mails, acquired by Ukrainian hacktivists in 2016, show the scale of Kremlin operations in Ukraine—from financing leaflets and banners for election campaigns to founding their own propaganda media. Surkov even personally chose the chairs to set out at a press conference. I calculated, based on Shandra’s report, that “in Kharkiv, for a protest they paid 1,500 dollars for the participants, five hundred went to bribes for the police, one thousand to organization and another thousand for the organizers. Bribes for journalists were set lower, five hundred to one thousand dollars. The election campaign in Kharkiv was 120,000. A roundtable in Odesa: five thousand; a protest operation for one hundred people: 5,000; for three hundred people: 15,000.”¹⁴³

According to Shandra, Surkov is a key strategist. But people below him were clearing his path and acquiring money for his “activist” enterprises. Alya Shandra divided them into two groups. “The first work for ideological reasons, because they share the Russian vision of the world and want Ukraine to be part of Russia. They’re trustworthy influence agents—that’s what they’re called professionally in intelligence—and they can become officers who will direct work in the field. The second category are people who do it for money. One thing surprised me—all this looked like applying for grants. As if some NGO sent an application for a project, but the goal of the grant was to destroy Ukraine.” Incidentally, sometimes these “activists” are called “project curators.”

When this is how you do politics, it’s probably hard to believe that there might be societies out there where it’s not the KGB, the CIA or dastardly Soros arranging protests. It’s as if a priori denying anyone has free will or noble impulses.

* * *

Malofeyev’s Katehon website publishes analyses on many subjects, including a little material about Poland. The same author, Andrew Korybko, sums up the case of Poland

¹⁴² Suchanow, “Hakerzy kontra Putin,” op. cit.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

by pointing out that although Jarosław Kaczyński is Russophobic, “at the same time Russia and its multipolar partners would benefit the most if the Color Revolution is crushed and PiS succeeds in reforming the EU.”¹⁴⁴

The idea of a multipolar world order is promoted by a forum organized by Vladimir Yakunin. It’s a world where, as during the Cold War, there is no single empire and Russia and China can replace the United States. As pragmatists, followers of this geopolitical ideology—a milder version of Dugin’s “Eurasianism”—believe that Poland and its current government, despite their “obsessive” Russophobia, could prove useful to Russia, particularly by “reforming” (read: weakening) the European Union, which in their judgment has no chance of leading the world because of Ukraine, Brexit and problems with immigration (which Russia, incidentally, has in part provoked itself).

Russia has specialized in hybrid provocation of conflicts. It practiced this method in Chechnya and then in Georgia, until the invasion of Ukraine by “little green men” took place. Yet while all this occurred within the borders of the former republics of the USSR, the Kremlin is doing its utmost, in an equally invidious way, to influence the politics of countries in the remainder of Eastern Europe, which they still consider their geopolitical dominion. This is the game Malofeyev is useful for. So is Vladimir Yakunin, the former president of Russian Railways, Putin’s close friend and the founder of the St. Andrew Foundation, with which Malofeyev’s foundation collaborates.

But Yakunin is also in charge of much larger international projects. Let me tell you about them.

A HYBRID WARRIOR

The Kremlin uses various avenues to conduct its foreign policy. “The intelligence agencies’ channels have served to build a network of influence agents and financing for

¹⁴⁴ Korybko, op. cit.

operations supporting the Kremlin’s policies,” write Jolanta Darczewska and Piotr Żochowski, specialists in internal security in Eastern Europe.¹⁴⁵

What are these channels? There’s of course the foreign ministry, diplomacy.¹⁴⁶ The intelligence services (the FSB, SVR, and GRU) also further the state’s aims. There’s also the ministry of defense and Putin’s whole administrative sector, along with the media—a community of “experts” and friendly voices. There’s the business channel. But there’s also a new channel: the faith community and religious activity.¹⁴⁷ It’s this religious channel that I’m focusing on in this book. It is one of the least researched and analyzed “active measures in the current disinformation war.”¹⁴⁸ It’s also the last known, but at the same time is the most important “area of confrontation between Russia and the West, oriented toward destroying the (administrative-political, socio-economic and cultural-philosophical) foundations of targeted countries.”¹⁴⁹

* * *

We might find this “religion” channel surprising. After all, we all see Russia through the lens of communism, and communism means zero religion. The power of stereotypes is clearly strong. That’s why after my articles about the right wing, some protested that connecting antiabortion movements with Putin’s policies was proof of my incompetence and meant I was crazy. But first of all, it’s 2022. Second of all, I’m interested not in stereotypes but facts. In Russia, a country with a centralized governing power wielded with an iron fist, there is no room for coincidences. How could Malofeyev get away with his antics without permission?

¹⁴⁵ Jolanta Darczewska, Piotr Żochowski, “Środki aktywne. Rosyjski towar eksportowy,” Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, Warsaw 2017, p. 8.

¹⁴⁶ This is shown excellently in a graphic in Mark Galeotti’s report, see: “Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages its Political War in Europe,” European Council on Foreign Relations, Sept 1, 2017, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/controlling_chaos_how_russia_manages_its_political_war_in_europe.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ For more, see: Jolanta Darczewska, “Środki aktywne jako rosyjska agresja hybrydowa w retrospekcji. Wybrane problemy,” *Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego*, 2018, no. 18, pp. 40–67.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 61.

Darczewska and Żochowski, as well as Mark Galeotti—a professor, a specialist in Eastern Europe, especially security and crime, and a consultant for the European Council—classifies Malofeyev and Yakunin’s foundations as active tools of hybrid warfare.

It would be helpful for us to define the term “active measures.” Firstly, this is not a new concept, it was developed in the 1920s by former tsarist secret police officers who fed into the Cheka, the secret police of the new communist authorities.¹⁵⁰ Later, active measures were used alongside intelligence activity as a successful weapon of the Cold War era. Today they are back in use, and Malofeyev is one of these so-called “aktivki,” to be set in motion when the time is right. The word “aktivka” is incidentally the origin of the operation officers’ term “aktivist,” in this interpretation not a defender of human rights, but a person carrying out an action. So let’s watch out for these “activists.”

One of the ways “active measures” are used is to “create tension in international relations [...] by supporting nationalist sentiment, xenophobia, separatism and nationalist extremism [and] religious radicalism.”¹⁵¹ Active measures, today also known as hybrid techniques, are oriented toward manipulating the consciousness of societies the Kremlin considers hostile. These measures can be legal or illegal, overt or covert. Initially reconnaissance is done on the situation in the attacked countries” and “subcontractors” are selected. A “subcontractor” does not need to be aware of their role or a reason to work according to the “party’s” plan. As Darczewska and Żochowski write, a thorough analysis shows that in Russia the “academic Marxist worldview” very quickly gave way to an “academic geopolitical worldview” and, as during the Cold War, this was enshrined as foreign and security policy doctrine.¹⁵²

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¹⁵⁰ Marek Świerczek, “Wojna hybrydowa jako strategia polityczna. Próba analizy historycznej na przykładzie działań ZRSS wobec II RP,” *Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego* 2017, no. 16, pp. 81–97.

¹⁵¹ Aleksandr Bartosh, “Разведка России в противостоянии гибридным угрозам,” *Независимое*, Oct 6, 2017, http://nvo.ng.ru/spforces/2017-10-06/1_968_scouting.html.

¹⁵² Darczewska and Żochowski, op. cit.

Active measures are used today in hybrid warfare, as Alexander Bartosh, an expert at the Russian Academy of Military Science, describes. In such a war, strictly military operations may not take place at all, and the war could be drawn out for many years. “For a certain time the aggressor state does not reveal itself, does not mobilize on a large scale, seeks to wage war by proxy, uses mercenaries and private military firms, activates internal irregular formations, a ‘fifth’ column and influence agents.” As we’ve seen, this is how both Malofeyev and Yakunin operate. The goal of hybrid warfare is to “destabilize the administrative-political, socio-economic and cultural-philosophical spheres.”¹⁵³ Parallel, independent centers might be engaged without being aware of one another. But we’ll never be able to address all the methods of hybrid warfare—for its success depends on surprise.

Our most important takeaway from this presentation of hybrid warfare is the fact that a “religious channel” can participate as well. So when we hear excessively hotheaded talk about values, it should be a red flag. “The cultural dimension of information activities, which the Russians are exploiting (by highlighting the superiority of traditional Russian spiritual values and moral norms),” warns Darczewska, “camouflages their political dimension.”¹⁵⁴ We think we’re dealing with religious activities, but in reality it could be the political operations of a foreign state. The goal is to “disarm” an enemy by provoking “a situation in which internal actors will realize the goals of the external operator, i.e. become subcontractors for these tasks while being entirely convinced they are implementing their own agenda.”¹⁵⁵

AMBASSADOR KOMOV

Because Malofeyev is under many sanctions, he is often represented abroad by Alexey Komov. Malofeyev is the bad cop, mild Komov is the good one. But both are equally

¹⁵³ Bartosh, op. cit.

¹⁵⁴ Darczewska, op. cit.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

dangerous. Komov was the main organizer of the Moscow edition of the World Congress of Families, held in the Kremlin at the very moment when the Russian Federation was using its “active measures” in Ukrainian territory in the form of “little green men.” So a portrait of Komov would be helpful.

Komov, who not only studied sociology under Antonov, but also did his PhD with him, is a child of the early 1970s. He still grew up in the Soviet era, but his youth coincided with the 1990s and Russian society reveling in Western liberalism. Back then, Komov was a nightclub owner and to this day he knows many Russian celebrities. He admits he was a born liberal. He got an MBA and his research on the functioning of stock markets was later used to set stock market regulations in Russia. A handsome, tastefully dressed forty-something with a boyish grin—anyone would think they were sitting across from a businessman on his lunch break, not a representative of extreme fundamentalism. Komov used to do yoga, but when his guru got cancer, he lost faith in its effectiveness. Since then he’s considered yoga the work of Satan. Komov got baptized and now he has a large family: a wife and six children. He’s most likely an example of a popular genre of Russian, until recently infatuated with the West, but now disillusioned with it. Part and parcel of that disillusionment for Komov was growing close to the congregation of Dmitriy Smirnov, a popular priest famous for his provocative statements, such as that “atheists should commit suicide” because “there’s no point in ‘living, learning and fighting’ if all that happens after death is that burdock sprouts up. Better to go straight to the grave.”¹⁵⁶ In 2013 Smirnov was made Patriarch Kirill’s deputy as Chairman of the Patriarch’s Commission on Family Matters, the Protection of Motherhood and Childhood. He was also a member of the Ministry of Defense council. He died in 2020.

Latterly it was Father Smirnov, not Professor Antonov, who served as Komov’s master. Komov has a clear need for masters in whom he can believe.

* * *

¹⁵⁶ Roman Ukolov, interview with Dmitriy Smirnov, “Блуд, разврат и незнамо что. Протоиерей Дмитрий Смирнов об экстрасенсах, содомии и подарках прихожан,” Lenta.ru, July 11, 2015, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2015/06/11/smirnov/>.

It's the frosty January of 2019. We meet on Bolshaya Bronnaya Street, in the Forte jazz club. It's not far from the Patriarch Ponds, where Berlioz in *The Master and Margarita* explained to the poet that Jesus didn't exist. There, an international conference is taking place on home schooling, in which Alexey Komov is taking part. He receives me with the ease of an old hand at élite gatherings. I say old, but there is much youth in his movements. He first addresses me in Polish, and I him in Russian, but then we talk in English. We establish immediately who is who. Komov admits he Googled my name, so he knows I'm the author of a book on Gombrowicz. He comments that there was an exhibit on him in Moscow in the nineties, but he isn't very popular there. I know that if he's Googled me, he's most likely seen a photo of a woman being seized on the sidewalk by Polish police, so I make no effort to hide my views.

I realize that Komov is going to be careful. In 2014 the Russian hackers' collective Shaltai-Baltai revealed the contents of his private correspondence with Malofeyev, as well as Malofeyev's with Dugin. After the "pro-family" congress that took place in the Kremlin, an American woman got in touch with Komov after her return from Moscow to the United States. She complained she was being investigated by the American intelligence services and asked for help. Komov brought the matter to Malofeyev, suggesting they make the most of it and go to court under the pretext of "persecution of Christians." He argued: "Can discuss the plan of action with Brian [Brown, head the National Organization for Marriage] to start? We can attract our best lawyers from the Alliance Defending Freedom or HLSDA, start collecting signatures under the appropriate petition all over the world through CitizenGO and launch a large-scale campaign in the press about this egregious case. It can turn out to be an excellent nationwide campaign, the guys from Personhood deal with such cases. If you do not

answer with dignity, then they will break down and terrorize the entire American movement. What do you think?”¹⁵⁷

As we can see, it's no problem to enlist ADF and CitizenGo. This is what fundamentalist collaboration looks like from within. Yet even Malofeyev was skeptical. He thought the woman might be a plant. Komov looked into her and agreed. So I'm not surprised at his caution. For me, this is the first time talking to someone from the other side.

* * *

After establishing our positions, we sit down on tall stools by the bar. Komov starts with a warning that will keep coming up in various ways during our conversation.¹⁵⁸

“I hope you will not portray us as very bad monsters.”

“I would like to understand, because I am not part of this world, and those people don't like to talk to people like me. And I think that's wrong, we should be talking to each other.”

After a while, he warns again:

“I hope that you will represent objectively and truthfully what I'm going to say.”

Komov is aided by fluent English and experience in the world. As he tells me, he received his education in various countries.

“When I was in the sixth grade, my father worked in London, so I was in London for a year or so, and so I already knew the other side of life. Also my father was a diplomat, he worked in Cuba, so I was there for the last two years of high school. I love Cuba. I lived there for two years. I graduated from the Russian school in Havana. It was the last years of the Soviet Union. And then Gorbachev came to Cuba and we were on

¹⁵⁷ See: “Хакерская группа «Анонимный интернационал» опубликовала тайную переписку Дугина и его пособников,” InformNapalm, November 3, 2014, <https://informnapalm.org/3592-dugin-war/>. See also: H el ene Barth el emy, “How the World Congress of Families Serves Russian Orthodox Political Interests,” Southern Poverty Law Center, May 16, 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/05/16/how-world-congress-families-serves-russian-orthodox-political-interests>.

¹⁵⁸ Translator's note: quotations of Komov and the author from this interview have been edited for grammar, length and clarity.

Fifth Avenue, waving, and there were Fidel and Gorbachev in an open convertible car, passing people waving flags...” He laughs.

Later as I listen back to the conversation and check various pieces of information, I also find the school in Havana that Alexey attended. Its students were the children of Russian VIPs, who in Facebook groups and blogs think back on their time in Cuba as paradise and do their best to stay in touch with one another. There are no entries from Komov. I find a page with posts of various memories, archives, photos of the school: a large colonial-style building at the corner of Eighteenth Street and Thirty-First Avenue. In front of it is a little row of palms; everything is in relatively good shape, by Havana standards.¹⁵⁹ A charming, shaded patio, wooden blinds in the windows, a sports field surrounded by red-blossomed trees, well-dressed children, nice teachers. It looks truly idyllic. Alexey must have studied here from 1986 to 1989.

This is what he tells me about his later life: “I was living in the US and also in the UK for some time, and then I was going to Spain, to Germany frequently, to England, so I speak most of the European languages.” He got an MBA in the UK and also studied at the State University of New York in the nineties.

I feel comfortable talking to him, although I know appearances can be deceiving. We talk a lot about Soviet roots and our generation’s youth. I do my best to feel out how much certain experiences connect us and how much they divide us.

“What happened that Russian people started becoming religious?” I ask, maybe too bluntly. I don’t know if that’s the right question.

“I think it’s because people were lacking some national identity, some philosophy or ideology. So it was feeling this gap, and people were tired of purely materialistic, stupid explanations that we’re only materialistic animals, we act in our materialistic interests and it’s only material wellbeing... And actually in the last decades of the Soviet Union no one seriously believed in communist ideas, Marxist-Leninist ideas.”

Here I agree with him. There was the same sentiment in Poland. I remember my teachers in the late eighties going through the motions of certain rituals and we feigned certain things too. When my Polish teacher told me to perform for May Day on the little

¹⁵⁹ See: <http://cubanos.ru/photos/foto080?pid=8069>.

square of my town, and recite a patriotic poem about rifles and shooting, I refused, and there were no repercussions. Although nobody in school ever really refused. There was an agreement: they knew we weren't doing it seriously, and so we agreed to do it. But I didn't feel like performing in a farce that I hadn't even written myself.

"What was your feeling about this system?" I ask.

"I didn't like it," he replies.

"I thought it was something false," I say.

"False and ugly," he agrees. "Because I looked at the buildings, and the buildings they were producing were really boxy, very unpleasant, not nice-looking buildings. And I looked at any building that was built before the communist revolution and it was beautiful, whether a palace or a church or anything, even a wooden house. But what the communists were producing was really ugly, so I knew from an aesthetic standpoint there must be something wrong with these people. And plus there wasn't much freedom of expression, you always felt this pressure of the system because people on the street, when you exit from your house, they would look at you in a strange way if you were dressed in a non-Soviet way, or if you liked the wrong type of music..."

"What was your music at that time? What was your favorite?"

"It was different at different times. Some rock music, I don't know, other types of music. I never was really a huge fan of anything, although I knew most of the music, some rap music as well. The band Kino was popular, Viktor Tsoi, a Russian band in the late eighties."

I myself love Viktor Tsoi, so there's a thread of understanding between us. I listen to him sometimes in Poland, but in Moscow he's required listening, every day. Tsoi wrote the song "Мне не нравится город Москва" ("I Don't Like the City of Moscow") and I'm reminded of it as I listen to Комов. But one of Tsoi's best known songs and also one of my favorites is "Звезда по имени солнце" ("A Star Called the Sun"): "And for two thousand years—war / War without particular reason / War is the work of the young / A cure for wrinkles."

* * *

On one website for alumni of the Soviet school in Havana, I find a video from 1987 filmed on the grounds of the Soviet embassy. It was made by a student encouraged by his budō martial arts teacher.¹⁶⁰ The movie even has a plot. A gang of rock ‘n’ rollers have beaten up a young boy. It has all the makings of a battle of good versus evil. But the script somehow goes off in different directions, and no wonder—the story is needed to present the skills of the teacher’s students.

Alexey appears in a school dance scene. Boys from the gang watch the party mockingly. I recognize Alexey right away. He hasn’t changed much. Nowadays he has the same youthful movements and eyes. A red t-shirt, light-colored jeans and a red bandana for his hair, which is a little longer than now. He’s dancing in a group, we can see he likes it; then a slow dance with a girl. Suddenly the bad boys interrupt the dance and play their own music on the cassette player. It’s the then-popular, somewhat scandalous band Twisted Sister. Interestingly, Alexey is the only one of the good students who dances with the gang members to this glam-metal, slightly queer music. Later we see the boys on the mats at practice, and at the end the whole group appears with their coach. This is a commemorative photo. Alexey stands along with them in the last row. As the credits roll, Viktor Tsoi plays: his song “A Star Called the Sun.” That song about war. War for two thousand years.

I tried to find out about Alexey’s father. What was he doing in Cuba? What even was his name? With Russians this is fairly easy to work out, because they use patronymics: a middle name based on their father’s name. But Alexey practically never uses his. Only after long searching do I manage to find an interview where he’s introduced as Alexey Yuryevich Komov.¹⁶¹ So his father’s name is Yuriy.

I find Yuriy Aleksandrovich Komov and various publications under his name, all from after the fall of communism. One from 1992, issued by a children’s publisher, *Портреты без рамок (Portraits Without Frames)* tells the story of well-known

¹⁶⁰ See: http://cubanos.ru/videos/v4_01.

¹⁶¹ “Алексей Комов в Кишинёве: «Пора поставить последнюю точку в отношении к коммунизму»,” AVA, April 12, 2014, <https://ava.md/2014/04/12/aleksey-komov-v-kishineve-pora-postavit/>.

twentieth-century Americans. The book exudes perestroika-era rhetoric. The Americans speak with human voices: “we and they are citizens of different continents, but one planet.”¹⁶² The remainder are novels co-written with other authors, plus translations of British and American popular fiction.¹⁶³ The final translation is from 2011. It’s a collection of mystery stories liked by Alfred Hitchcock. Yuriy Komov also wrote an introduction about Hitchcock’s work and life.¹⁶⁴ All these books are somehow linked by the motifs of Hollywood stars, America and cinema.

It's impossible not to ask what his father's job was. I found an interview where Komov talked about his youth: “My father worked for a long time in London as a diplomat, and we lived in Cuba for four years.”¹⁶⁵ When I ask Alexey about this by e-mail, he avoids answering directly. I only learn once again that his father was a diplomat and is long since retired. The Russian embassy in Havana doesn't answer my e-mail inquiries about Yuriy Komov. I check official lists of Russian ambassadors in Havana¹⁶⁶ and also look through reports by the Polish intelligence services from the embassy in Cuba, available in the Institute of National Remembrance—no Komov ever appears. When I ask around among Russian Cuba experts, they say Yuriy Komov's work as a journalist or translator, his knowledge of foreign languages and the subjects he dealt with form the ideal résumé of a KGB officer. What's more, Viktor Suvorov, whose book describes the trade of a Russian GRU spy, mentions that in military intelligence they held to the principle that children couldn't join the same service. But in the KGB there was a completely different approach—children of intelligence officers most often followed in their parents' footsteps.

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¹⁶² See: http://publ.lib.ru/ARCHIVES/K/KOMOV_Yuriy_Aleksandrovich/_Komov_Yu.A..html

¹⁶³ See: <https://librusec.pro/a/104879>.

¹⁶⁴ See: <http://www.you-books.com/book/Yu-Komov/Temnye-allei-slavy>.

¹⁶⁵ Anton Pospelov, “Мировые элиты, неомарксизм и гендерная идеология. Беседа с послом Всемирного конгресса семей в ООН Алексеем Комовым,” Православие, September 5, 2013, <https://pravoslavie.ru/63855.html>.

¹⁶⁶ For instance, on the website of the Russian Embassy in Cuba: <https://cuba.mid.ru/posly-sssr-i-rf-na-kube>.

After being relaxed for a while, Komov moves from a lighthearted tone to an official one, as if remembering why we are meeting.

“When I got older, I came to realize that this road, this unchecked freedom, unlimited freedom, may lead to serious mistakes. Those mistakes are real and can badly damage a person. Now I think that there is common sense, tested by thousands of years, normal ways of doing things, and you cannot change nature. So I think there are only two genders, male and female. And they produce babies, reproduce, and they pass their values to the next generation.”

He returns to his youth and tells me how he become religious and a student of theology.

“We were young and were testing new things. Then came the turbulent nineties, which were rather hard times, in Russia in particular. Then when I got older, around the year 2000 or before, when I was about thirty, I came to understand that there is a creator who created this world. And so I became a Christian.

“How did you come to this understanding?”

“I studied different religions, I went to India, was doing a little bit of yoga, then I studied Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism. I was reading books about them, I was curious who had the truth. Also secular philosophy. And then, it was a miracle you can say, because it’s always a miracle when you start to believe in God. But this happened to me as well. And after studying an MBA and having a successful consultancy business, I started to be interested in theology, Christian Orthodox theology. I studied at the St. Tikhon Orthodox University here in Moscow, as distance learning. I went to Mount Athos [in Greece] many times, this special place, a monks’ republic where old tradition is preserved with no changes from the Byzantine Empire, for a thousand years. It was really an amazing experience. I started to understand the real priorities in life. I started to think, what can I contribute to do something good in my life, before I die? Not for money, but just to do something good. And we were hearing the alarming news that in the West there were strange things happening, moral decay, and people are saying there are fifty types of gender...” Now Komov sounds like he’s under siege.

Apart from drugs, this is his favorite motif. The subject of homosexuality is interwoven through our whole conversation. He tries to persuade me: “Non-traditional values, although they may seem on the surface as liberating and full of freedom, but actually they’re dangerous and you can cause self-destruction for yourself when you do it. So for example if you do drugs, if you do it too much, you damage your health. And we know statistically that homosexual relations very often lead to problems like depression or suicide attempts or alcohol or drug abuse.”

So I ask if he knows gay people and if he observes them being particularly vulnerable to suicide. He says no, he doesn’t know many of them. So I ask if he has had problems with drugs, because he so often raises the issue. He says no.

Komov perceives homosexuality as a “new totalitarianism.” I ask what that means to him.

“I think that totalitarianism is the imposition of one worldview on society. During communism it was done in a straightforward and violent way, in an aggressive way, now it’s done in a more soft, comfortable way. But the essence, at the end, and the result is similar. So if you’re not in line with the dominant ideology, you will be labeled as a reactionary, hater, that you want to damage other people. And you will be really oppressed and pushed to the margins of society. I think this is totalitarianism. I am against the United Nations and other institutions imposing the homosexual way of life on children, from kindergarten.”

* * *

My twenty-year-old friend, the queer activist Sebastian Słowiński, who has joined me on the trip to Moscow, is terrified when he discovers that on the popular gay app Grindr, people are setting up “fake dates.” Someone strings you along, arranges to meet with you, invites you home, then you get the shit beaten out of you. In the process you get filmed and the video gets made public. Public exposure.

At the legal march in Moscow on January 19, 2019 in memory of a pair of murdered journalists, an LGBT activist pulled out a rainbow flag. He was immediately

nabbed by the police. When we went out once at night to a club that holds gay party nights, at the entrance we were asked repeatedly if we knew and realized where we were on our way into. In an interview for the American journalist Hannah Levintova, Komov said: “As Russians, we want to warn people in the West of the dangers of this new totalitarianism [...]. There are influential lobbies that want to promote an aggressive social transformation campaign using LGBT activists as the means. We see it as the continuation of the same radical revolutionary agenda that cost so many lives in the Soviet Union, when they destroyed churches. This political correctness is used and will be further used to oppress religious freedoms and to destroy the family.”¹⁶⁷

While we were talking I might have been able to respect Komov’s “anti-homosexual sensitivity” if I hadn’t known that at the same time he could do an excellent job leveraging it for political ends. On October 13, 2013, a month before Euromaidan, Komov went to Kyiv with a WCF delegation (with Don Feder from the US, Srđan Nogo from Serbia and Fabrice Sorlin from France). They met with representatives of the All Ukrainian Parents Committee, who “expressed concern about the pressure brought to bear on their nation to accede to the homosexual agenda (including ‘gay marriage’) as a condition for membership in the European Union.”¹⁶⁸ The EU sets no such condition, but the WCF was glad to gin up panic about the “homosexualization of Ukraine.” This was one of the main propaganda lines meant to hamper Ukraine’s rapprochement with the EU.

Alongside a homosexual conspiracy, another threat is a conspiracy by George Soros. When we talk about domestic violence, Komov mentions that Soros’s money is behind a PR campaign against the “natural family” as the safest place for women and children.

“Do you have proof of George Soros’s participation?”

“Yes, there are annual reports of all the nations who George Soros’s Open Society has given to.”

¹⁶⁷ Hanna Levintova, “How US Evangelicals Helped Create Russia’s Anti-Gay Movement,” *Mother Jones*, February 21, 2014, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/02/world-congress-families-russia-gay-rights/>.

¹⁶⁸ “World Congress of Families Leadership Team Travels to Kiev, Ukraine,” *Christian News Wire*, October 22, 2013, <http://www.christiannewswire.com/index.php?module=releases&task=view&releaseID=73035>.

“And in Russia?”

“I’ve seen this data and it can be proven that they support many organizations to legalize drugs.”

“Drugs?”

“Yes, George Soros wants to legalize drugs.”

“But are you thinking of marijuana or other things?”

“Yes, first it’s light drugs, marijuana, others, but then will come more serious drugs because this is the same philosophy.”

“I would never say I was influenced by George Soros.”

“Not him directly. But did you read some books, did you watch some films, movies, TV?”

“Of course I’ve read many books and also many movies. But I’m trying to say that I’m intelligent enough to separate somebody’s imposition from my own thinking.”

“Everyone acts as a free person. You make your own choices, you act freely, it’s true. But the environment in which we operate is influenced by mass culture, films, conversations, university teachers.”

“That’s right but we can still think independently. And I wouldn’t say that women who are protesting in Rio de Janeiro are influenced by somebody. They must feel [the danger] on their own body, on their own skin.”

“Of course they feel this way, most of them do.”

“Finally we agree on something!”

“This #MeeToo movement, I think they’re just very much politically used. So women are used by these influential forces in order to destroy the traditional way of life. By these powerful lobby groups, like George Soros.”

“You say that all those many women in Spain, in Italy in the world going out in the street in protest against domestic violence are being used by somebody?”

“He has seventeen billion dollars to legalize drugs, to promote abortion rights, to promote women’s rights. Is that not a powerful group? We don’t have this money.”

“His organization in Russia was closed down, right?”

“In Russia, yes... I like women, I like them have all the freedom, but I don’t want them to be used by lobby groups to promote destructive agendas.”

* * *

In Komov’s statements there is a thread about a conspiracy: between the philosophers and sociologists of the so-called Frankfurt School and Hollywood. According to Komov—and I’ve now seen him recite this lesson in his international speeches—the Frankfurt School has dominated our perception. Founded in Germany in 1923, it researched Marxism and laid the foundations of critical theory (its leading representatives included Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm). Closed down after Hitler came to power, it developed first in France, then in the US. According to Komov, the Frankfurt School is at the root of the twentieth-century social revolution.

“The Bolsheviks were using the ideas of classical Marxism in their own interpretation and Engels, for example, wrote this famous work that family is a repressive institution of bourgeois society that has no place in the bright socialist future. Those radical revolutionaries after 1917 were implementing all the dreams of modern-day feminists or gays or sexual liberators. They had people walking naked on the streets, and [Alexandra] Kollontay was promoting free love. And they built houses that didn’t have kitchens and didn’t lock, because women were supposed to belong to everyone in the republic.”

“That’s not really feminism, it’s macho revolution,” I protest.

“Maybe, maybe,” he says, unconvinced. “There were some cases, seriously, when a citizen of a Soviet republic would come to the local communist authorities and be given a paper that he can have sex with any women he meets on the street because they don’t belong to any one man anymore. These radical ideas were implemented and then when Stalin pushed Trotsky and other radicals out, they came to the West and they formed the so-called Frankfurt School of Thought. And they worked further on Marxist ideas and merged them with Sigmund Freud’s ideas of pansexualism. And they came up—in the twenties, thirties, forties and fifties—with a new concept of sexual revolution,

drug revolution, hippie revolution, the feminist movement... They said we have to take the long march through institutions. As the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci said: we need to take control of Hollywood, mass media, universities, newspapers, television.”

“And did they manage to?”

“Yes. This is reality in the West, now. Hollywood is mostly controlled by neo-Marxists.”

“Do you really think they’re ideological people?”

“They’re driven by business, careers, by money, but if you start to say the things that I’m telling you, you will be stopped immediately. You can try, and you will see. I know it for fact. Because I have a lot of bad press in the West because of this, because all of us, we are called traitors, terrible fascists, exporters of hate.”

His voice grows agitated, like that of an unfairly accused child.

“I feel your side is imposing something,” I finally say.

“How, where?” asks Komov, surprised.

“For example in terms of reproductive rights. And you can see in these massive protests of women that it’s not only my opinion but it’s a popular feeling that there is some kind of imposition. And nobody’s discussing it with us.”

“You mean they want to impose, like, no abortion in Poland or what?”

“There was a bill in 2016 trying to introduce criminal punishment for abortions and miscarriages, which is around one-fourth of all pregnancies. There was a big protest and parliament rejected the bill. And it’s over, I mean this bill is over, but there are other ideas brewing. It’s interesting to see that you feel it as an imposition, I feel it as an imposition.”

“Look, either you believe in natural law and God, or that we’re completely free, so we can do whatever we want, our body’s our private property. We can ruin it with drugs or we can experiment, and there are no limitations. And I think that there is a conflict between those two positions and they take the form of different debates. Like one debate is between evolutionists and creationists. And another debate is between the pro-life and pro-choice movements. Women’s rights and traditional values.”

Finally in our conversation someone speaks the word “war.” Komov is the one who uses it, though I’ve had it in mind all along:

“There is a culture war. It’s a war of ideas,” he says.

“And you see it as a war?”

“It is a war. And we’re an oppressed minority now.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. We are the oppressed minority, and this feminist or, whatever, political correctness liberal progressive transhumanist, you may call it, side of the debate is in power. They have the money, they have control, they have mass media, television, Hollywood. So we’re like rebels now. And being feminist is the mainstream now.”

“But you are a rebel and you are fine. I’m a rebel and I got arrested. So, you know, who’s the rebel here?”

He wants to change the subject, but I press him further.

“Have you been arrested for your activities?”

“No.”

“There, you see, and I was. Something is off here.”

“Well, it can... Well there are different circumstances. Some people actually were hurt from our movement, were arrested.”

“On the basis of what?”

“Levan Vasadze, my Georgian friend, he was fighting against the communists and he got beaten up in the eighties, but for a different reason, anyway... So let me finish this story. There is this whole movement in the name of freedom to get rid of our gender identity. But the next step, I think, will be to get rid of our human identity, transhumanism will be the next phase of debate. So now they’re fighting for gay rights and in twenty years when you’re writing the second volume of your book, most probably it will be dedicated to transhuman rights and cyborgs.”

Nice friends Komov has. Levan Vasadze, a millionaire who made his fortune in Russia, is known in Georgia as a fierce enemy of the LGBT community as well as for his anti-European stance. Gangs affiliated with him attacked the Pride Parade in Tbilisi in

2019. He is really one of the ugliest faces of the anti-equality movement, and has been accused by Georgian politicians of having close ties to Russia or even of being a spy.¹⁶⁹

* * *

Behind us, wood crackles in the fireplace. The club is cozy and we could have a great conversation if not for the noise from the attendees of the education conference. So we have to raise our voices too, sometimes Komov leans into the Dictaphone so it picks up his words better. He does his best to explain everything clearly. Someone from outside, looking at us, wouldn't say we were in the middle of fighting a war. My collocutor keeps trying to be charming, which seems to me very genuine. I'm still in "I want to hear you out and understand as much as possible" mode. In a certain sense, I think, we are similar. We're building an international movement, we're liaisons to other countries, we're Slavs with a strong Latin American component, who still remember a different system and maybe therefore feel at home almost everywhere. We speak many languages and find it easy to connect with other people, we both value freedom.

Komov confirms my intuition: "I think that you and me, we are fighting for freedom, we just understand slightly differently the methods to reach it."

Komov thinks the West is exerting pressure, lighter than under communism, but it was still forcing people into political correctness.

I don't have such a problem with political correctness, even if sometimes I find it funny. In the end it's about showing respect to other people. Being PC is a question of form, it doesn't hurt anyone. I have a harder time putting up with the pressure religious believers exert, because that's about imposing rules on others—and, beyond that, legally sanctioning them so that a person no longer has a choice. If you aren't PC, at most you'll

¹⁶⁹ See: "Right-wing politician Vasadze: radiation poisoning could trigger my blood cancer," Agenda.ge, 3

September 2021, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/2518> or: "Right-wing businessman Levan Vasadze enters politics," Agenda.ge, 6 May 2021, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/1202>.

get boycotted or thought of as someone with no class. In the religious case, you can face serious legal consequences. That makes a difference.

But there's one more thing that connects us: I think that today we're losing this war. Komov thinks they're the ones losing. But I'm sure that in the end we'll win. Does he also believe in his own eventual victory?

We return several times to the topic of oppression:

“I can sense, having suffered under communist oppression, I don't want my children to live in that same—though maybe more comfortable, softer—world. You can travel, you can go to McDonald's, you can buy jeans or chewing gum, but still you're suffocating, and official science, or the official establishment, or mass media, or educational authorities are imposing their particular viewpoint on everybody. This is what we're fighting.”

“But when you are in power, you are imposing your values.”

“No, I wouldn't personally, I like freedom. I think that people should have freedom of choice. If evolutionists like to think that they came from monkeys, I have nothing against that. I think it's not true, but they have this right. But I want my children to have the right to believe that God created man. Because the scientific data is more supportive of this position than the monkey position. What we hear as 'fact,' quote unquote, is not fact, it is fantasy.”

Here, I admit, I ran out of patience. Komov's creationist disquisition went on much longer, but I'll spare my readers.

* * *

In the World Congress of Families, Komov plays the role of an ambassador. He attended for the first time in 2010. After he converted, he got in touch with Archpriest Dmitriy Smirnov and other dignitaries of the Orthodox Church. As a former student of Antonov's, he got sent to the United States, where the latest WCF gathering was taking place in Colorado Springs. Komov told me what it was like:

“I came there and I said, ‘hello, I’m Alexey Komov, a business consultant from Russia, let’s do a big World Congress in the Kremlin.’ They were like, what are you talking about? Who is this guy?”

“So you were not known in those circles?”

“No, I just came. I bought a ticket with my own money, my wife was asking, are you sure? I said, yeah, I think it’s a good idea! The WCF people and I started to be friends. We decided to make a regional, smaller demographic summit, ‘Family and the Future of Humankind,’ in Moscow in June of 2011. It took place in the former Institute of Marxism-Leninism.” He laughs. “It was very symbolic and had a lot of meaning for our American friends and other international friends, that now we were speaking for traditional values in this place. It was very successful.”

A man from nowhere offering a conference at the Kremlin? I furrow my brow.

The Americans came back from the Congress enchanted with Russia. They started universally praising the order there, while at the same time complaining about Obama. In July 2013, Austin Ruse, a member of the paramilitary Mexican cult El Yunque who (according to Victoria Uroz) helped that organization join various UN bodies, went to Moscow, maybe also to build up contacts with Russia. Ruse wrote a “Letter from Moscow” in which he denied that Russian LGBT people were in any way persecuted. After all, he saw a transvestite on the street who no one accosted. If the West was lying about this, he wondered, what else was it lying about? Yet the letter began with the following paragraph:

“I was telling a Latvian lady a short while ago about my trip to Moscow; that I was meeting with the Russian government to thank them for their strong pro-family position at the United Nations. She shook an ancient bony finger at me and said, ‘You cannot trust them. If they are for you, they are for you for other reasons. They are liars!’”¹⁷⁰

But who listens to old women? So, more and more diehard American conservative emissaries kept pouring in, and they kept strengthening their contacts with the Kremlin and Orthodox ideologues and activists. Komov became a liaison to many of

¹⁷⁰ Austin Ruse, “Letter From Moscow,” The Catholic Thing, July 26, 2013, <https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2013/07/26/letter-from-moscow/>.

them, but when I ask about him in Russia, no one knows him. He works on the outside. Others are at the forefront.

“We decided to make a bigger Congress, really in the Kremlin. That was the dream when I first came to Colorado.”

“You were the organizing force?”

“Yeah. I had this idea with some priests, Father Dmitriy Smirnov and Father Maksim Obukhov, who knew about the World Congress of Families before and told me about it. And Father Maksim, he’d been in Poland. He has many friends among Polish people, such as Ewa Kowalewska of Human Life International. Father Maksim recommended me to the World Congress of Families, he introduced me to Larry Jacobs, who died last year, he was a good man. And so I went to Colorado Springs, and then started to develop this together with Father Dmitriy and Father Maksim. And then we were planning the big World Congress of Families, the eighth one and really in the Kremlin. We had several years to prepare and we got support from some important people and we were really given this hall inside the Kremlin, where congresses of the Communist Party were held.” He laughs. “And then the second day was in Christ the Savior Cathedral, which was destroyed by the communists and then rebuilt. When I was small, I remember there was an open-air swimming pool in its place.”

He keeps being entertained by the collision of communism and the collapse of its symbols with the takeover of its spaces and significances by his circle of people.

“Is this the same church where Pussy Riot did their performance?” I ask.

“Yes, the same one. They have several conference rooms underneath the cathedral. And the third day, in the Duma.”

Later I ask him: “Do you feel like the ambassador for the World Congress of Families? You’re sometimes described as such. Are you following in the path of your father?”

For a moment he hesitates.

“Yeah, more or less,” he says somewhat reluctantly and quickly changes the subject.

* * *

We didn't know at that time about the documents published in mid-2021 on Wikileaks from a computer belonging to the Spanish organization CitizenGo and hacked by ACABGang. They confirm that Alexey Komov was a key liaison between anti-abortion organizations and Malofeyev and Yakunin. Hence how he ended up on the list of board members of CitizenGo.

Komov worked for both, according to a document available on Wikileaks. He presented propositions from both Malofeyev and Yakunin to a Spanish man, Ignacio Arsuaga, a well-known anti-abortion and anti-LGBT activist. The proposal concerned financing an ultra-right petition platform called CitizenGo, which was being set up at the time (in 2013). In fact on their website under "About Us" we read that "CitizenGO is wholly financed through small online donations made by thousands of citizens throughout the world," but this isn't true. At a minimum, the money for the launch came from the bank account of Malofeyev's foundation.

Documents from the leak show that Arsuaga and Yakunin have known each other at least since 2010, when Arsuaga was invited to the "alternative UN" at the Rhodes Forum, which Larry Jacobs also attended.¹⁷¹ The official invitation mentions, among other things, that President Dmitriy Medvedev is one of the supporters of the Forum, alongside the King of Jordan, the Vice-President of Syria, the chairman of a Chinese foundation, the former President of Iran and the former Prime Minister of France, Dominique de Villepin.¹⁷² There, Arsuaga gave a presentation titled "Family in Western World: Threats and Strategies," [sic] in which he very openly showed an outline of activities on the international arena, including in the UN, the EU and the Council of Europe, which—I think—must have earned him points with Yakunin, the former agent

¹⁷¹ Confirmation of Arsuaga's invitation to the Rhodes Forum in 2010 and related documents in "The Intolerance Network" on Wikileaks: https://wikileaks.org/intolerancenetwork/tree/%2Fpart-1%2FEventos+y+congresos%2FRhodes+Forum+2010%2FRhodesforum2010invitation_zip#f6955.

¹⁷² The invitation to the Rhodes Forum and a list of supporters is available in "The Intolerance Network" in Wikileaks: <https://wikileaks.org/intolerancenetwork/files/8982>.

at the UN.¹⁷³ On Wikileaks we can also find an e-mail from Ignacio Arsuaga to Komov from March 2013.¹⁷⁴ Arsuaga writes that he can send Komov a “business plan” and mentions needing a total of €556,000. The e-mail shows that, with Komov’s help, the concept of CitizenGo was even presented in the Vatican. Later, in an internal note from March 23, 2013, Arsuaga writes about the possibility of acquiring €100,000 from Malofeyev and a financial plan by Natalia Yakunina, presented by Alexey Komov.¹⁷⁵ Shortly thereafter an exchange of contracts takes place between CitizenGo and Malofeyev’s St. Basil Foundation for €100,000.¹⁷⁶ This amount was meant to go to CitizenGo’s activities, described as “promot[ing] human rights and protect[ing] the values of freedom, democracy and tolerance from the abuse and attacks to which they are subjected internationally, through the launch of a Web platform for online pro-life and pro-family campaigns of a global nature.” The contract also stated that CitizenGo would “help [Malofeyev’s foundation] increase its social support base in order to achieve the objectives that are shared by the two bodies.” What’s more, it also secured its own influence over CitizenGo by adding that Malofeyev’s foundation “shall join the governing organ (Board of Trustees) of the CITIZENGO foundation.” This is how Komov got on the organization’s board. Tax returns of the Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society—the organizer of the World Congress of Families—tell us that since 2016 Komov has also sat on that organization’s board, incidentally alongside Ignacio Arsuaga.¹⁷⁷ This makes him someone at the center of all the threads of Russian

¹⁷³ Ignacio Arsuaga’s presentation “Family in Western World: Threats and Strategies” presented at the Rhodes Forum in 2010 is available in “The Intolerance Network” on Wikileaks: <https://wikileaks.org/intolerancenetwork/files/16617>.

¹⁷⁴ See the e-mail by Ignacio Arsuaga from March 2013 in “The Intolerance Network” on Wikileaks: <https://wikileaks.org/intolerancenetwork/files/13347>.

¹⁷⁵ See note by Ignacio Arsuaga: <https://wikileaks.org/intolerancenetwork/files/3285>.

¹⁷⁶ See draft contract of March 2013 between the St. Basil Foundation and CitizenGo, titled: “Collaboration agreement between the CitizenGo Foundation and the charity fund of the St. Basil the Great for the implementation of general-interest activities,” <https://wikileaks.org/intolerancenetwork/files/13347>.

¹⁷⁷ See the Howard Center’s tax returns from the US Internal Revenue Service: <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/541788267/201841459349300539/full>. In the Howard Center’s last available return, from 2018, Alexey Komov still appears on the list of directors and advisors, see: https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/display_990/541788267/01_2020_prefixes_52-56%2F541788267_201812_990_2020012117048909.

infiltration into circles opposing abortion, opposing LGBT rights and undermining democracy in many European countries and the United States.

* * *

Alexey Komov has had many conversations like this one with me. This gives him a good grasp of the art of persuasion. I watched an interview with Poland's Media Narodowe from a few months before. Komov looks tired. The moderator struggles with English, but Komov is more open with him than with me. Asked what he thinks of Putin, Komov expresses his esteem for him. He calls him a "serious" politician, "the strongest leader, probably, in the world." When talking about Russian conservatives and monarchists, Komov uses the first person plural: "we would prefer that one day in Russia, when people are ready, monarchy is re-established because this is the more natural way to rule Russia." When asked about the unusually liberal abortion laws in Russia, Komov blames the still-strong liberal lobby in his country. It's actually "a minority, but they're very influential" and sponsored by George Soros. "Many women are rather feminists and, the way they think is from the Soviet Union, when they were having their rights and equality and all this."¹⁷⁸

When he pronounces the words "rights" and "equality," one can't shake the impression that his tone turns slightly mocking. As if these rights were baseless claims. But hadn't he assured me of his respect for women, for every person, as long as they didn't impose their views on the majority?

That's how this rhetoric works. They don't intend to punish gay people for homosexuality, just make their lives more difficult so they leave on their own. They fight for the rights of persecuted Christians, but at the same time Russia is delegitimizing Jehovah's Witnesses as an extremist group and persecuting Crimean Tatars for political reasons.

When I look through videos of Komov's speeches in Italy, I notice yet another type of language. He speaks at a conference of the neo-fascist Northern League (now

¹⁷⁸ Interview of September 12, 2018, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYJZPonbPcg>

known simply as the League) in Turin in 2013, inviting them to the Congress in Moscow. He gives the Italians greetings from their Russian brothers who, he assures them, support their values, and invites them to Moscow where “we hope that President Putin and Patriarch Kirill [...] will greet us.”¹⁷⁹

But I feel worst of all when I come across the film *Sodom*, which Komov promoted at a public event in Potenza. It’s an anti-gay documentary by Arkadiy Mamontov, in which gay people are called “sodomites,” or alternatively “perverts,” and presented as pedophiles. The director travels to London and does an interview about the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, which according to conspiracy theories is responsible for global cultural engineering, leading European youth into free love, orgies and so on. The narrator states darkly that “the psychological components of the so-called Ukrainian revolution—chants, behavior models, slogans—were also created here.” Later he says: “Children in homosexual families don’t look happy. The child’s soul feels that everything that’s happening around them contradicts nature’s law.”¹⁸⁰

The film is coarse propaganda, calling to mind movies made in the Third Reich. It premiered at the Moscow WCF in 2014. It ends with the slogan: “Moscow isn’t Sodom!”¹⁸¹ and light is brought to this broken world by the law against “gay propaganda” passed by the Duma and a wedding scene (of a man and a woman) in an Orthodox church. I find a few themes in the film that came up in our conversation (e.g. the story of the Russian family in Berlin whose father spent twenty-four hours in detention because he wouldn’t let his daughter go to sex education classes—a story which has been used extensively in Russian propaganda). I feel Komov might have been the main driving force behind the movie. He pushed the conference and was keen to be seen there. My suspicions are bolstered because he is the English-language narrator for the film.

¹⁷⁹ Convention of the Northern League in Turin, December 18, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsgJtcNZZwQ&t=11s>.

¹⁸⁰ *Sodom*, dir. Arkadiy Mamontov, 2015. English version available as of July 20, 2022 at: <https://archive.org/details/lgbt-exposed-hard-hitting-major-russian-tv-film-sodom-hd-eng-dub-1080p-25fps-h-264-128kbit-aac>. Quotations at 16:45 and 25:10, respectively.

¹⁸¹ *Sodom*, op. cit., at 57:00

I watched *Sodom* the same day I was listening back to the interview with Komov. The voice doing its best to politely answer my questions and assure me of respect blended with the words he spoke about horrible “sodomites.” That mild and elegant Komov was not only promoting but lending his voice to a product of classic propaganda, joining in this shameful tradition.

So Alexey has two faces: a nice one and an ugly one. He talks one way to “his” people, for instance a journalist from Media Narodowe or attendees of the Northern League conference, and a different way to outsiders like me. As he told me about how he found his path in life, how he rebelled as a young man, I almost started to like him. But when a minute later he was trying to disprove the theory of evolution, I started running out of patience. He talked with delight, relish. I was afraid that any minute he’d come out with anti-vaxx topics. But no. He was most preoccupied with home schooling, one of the subjects of the conference taking place in the room behind us. Before saying goodbye he added: “I wish all the best to all the women in the world.”

Alexey Komov seems to genuinely think that the path he has chosen is the right one. In an e-mail after our meeting, he refers back to the start of our conversation: “please send me your book when published, I hope that I’ll be able to show it to my children without being ashamed.”