

War and Peace: Orthodox Icons and Putin's Politics of the Sacred

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In Lev Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, the icon of the Smolensk Mother of God is carried behind the army as protectress and patriot. Soldiers run to bow to the icon and the battle-weary General Kutuzov himself kneels before the image traditionally credited with Russia's victory over Napoleon. This blend of military imagery and religious symbolism is not unusual in Russia, where "palladium" icons—notably, but not limited to, the Kazan, Smolensk, and Vladimir Mother of God types—have long stood on the front lines of military, political, and cultural battles.¹ Throughout the tsarist period "[t]he production and reception of an icon were not simply attributable to the iconography and the individual believer, respectively, but involved broader religious, cultural, and even political processes."² Since the fall of the Romanov dynasty no Russian or Soviet leader has capitalized more on the image of Orthodox icons than Vladimir Putin, whose extensive public engagement with icons has produced a post-Soviet political lexicon that signals his political will and favor.³ More broadly, Orthodox icons in Russia—with their intense symbolism and propensity throughout history to assume national significance beyond the ecclesiastical context—have become for Putin a form of political discourse that conveys a loose ideology of the sacred in foreign and domestic affairs.⁴

1. On the political and social significance of icons in Russia, see Amy Singleton Adams and Vera Shevzov, eds., *Framing Mary: The Mother of God in Modern, Revolutionary, and Post-Soviet Russian Culture* (Dekalb, 2018); Marcus C. Levitt, *The Visual Dominant in Eighteenth-Century Russia* (Dekalb, 2011), 14–40; Valerii Lepakhin, *Ikona i Ikonichnost'* (Saint Petersburg, 2002); David B. Miller, "Legends of the Icon of Our Lady of Vladimir: A Study of the Development of Muscovite National Consciousness," *Speculum* 43, no. 4 (October 1968): 657–70.

2. Vera Shevzov, "Scripting the Gaze: Liturgy, Homilies, and the Kazan Icon of the Mother of God in Late Imperial Russia," in Mark D. Steinberg and Heather J. Coleman, eds., *Sacred Stories: Religion and Spirituality in Modern Russia*, (Bloomington, 2007), 61. On Byzantine roots of icons' functions see Aleksei Lidov, *Ierotopiia: Prostranstvennyye ikony i obrazy paradigmy v vizantiiskoi kul'ture* (Moscow, 2009); and Dmitrii Likhachev, *Russkie letopisi i ikh kul'turno-istoricheskoe znachenie*, (Moscow, 1947).

3. On iconographical imagery in Soviet Russia, see Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley, 1997) and Anita Pisch, *The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929–1953: Archetypes, Inventions and Fabrications* (Acton, Australia, 2016).

4. On the flexibility of "soft power" see Andis Kudors, "Russian World: Russia's Soft Power Approach to Compatriots Policy," *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 81 (June 2010): 3; Sinikukka Saari, "Russia's Post-Orange Revolution Strategies to Increase its Influence in Former Soviet Republics: Public Diplomacy po russki," *Europe-Asia Studies* 66, no. 1

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Contemporary concepts like Aleksei Lidov's "hierotopy," Sergei Avanesov's "cultural-semiotic transfer," and semiotic studies on Orthodox icons provide a theoretical framework to describe the mechanism through which Putin's language of the icon creates sacred time and space.⁵ Within this framework, the following principles emerge: the icon is intrinsically spatial and essentially political; interaction with icons is an act of creativity and generates the "sacred"; ritual engagement with icons builds social constructs like national identity and political alliances, as well as defining disputed territory, whether that be a land mass or historical narrative.

The present study uses these same principles to examine over twenty years of data about Putin's encounters with icons as a symbolic language of political discourse on the "sacred" that ultimately devolved into Russia's violent escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War (2014-present) in February 2022. It considers how semiotic signaling through iconographical forms allows Putin—like earlier leaders of Russia—to strengthen his political power by sacralizing his leadership, a dynamic acknowledged by supporters and challenged by opponents via a similar lexicon of iconographical imagery. Next, it demonstrates how Putin re-sacralized Russian territory beyond Moscow with Christmas visits to midnight church services, where his interaction with icons highlights national security priorities for a domestic audience. Finally, the essay shows how Putin's soft power use of icons establishes "sacred" (and thus defensible) space beyond Russia's national borders, underscoring the fundamental relationship between violence and the sacred.⁶

The political semiotics of icons (the ultimate insider's language) uses religious symbolism to communicate non-ecclesiastical meaning and relies on deep historical associations between icons and political power in the Russian cultural consciousness. By the fifteenth century, such links allowed Moscow, thus imagined as "sacred empire," to claim the mantle of "Third Rome" from a captive Constantinople.⁷ Four hundred years later, the early Soviet state invoked familiar iconographical forms—albeit stripped of religious significance—to construct its own language of power.⁸ This "language of symbolic practice and communication" was readily understood in Soviet Russia's "highly visual culture dominated, above all, by icons of the Russian Orthodox Church."⁹ It allowed the Bolsheviks to invoke iconographical imagery in posters and visual propaganda in order to ideologically shift the center

(January 2014): 62; Greg Simons, "Perception of Russia's Soft Power and Influence in the Baltic States," *Public Relations Review* 41, no. 1 (March 2015): 3.

5. Aleksei Lidov, "Hierotopy: The Creation of Sacred Spaces as a Form of Creativity and Subject of Cultural History," in A.M. Lidov, ed., *Hierotopy: The Creation of Sacred Spaces in Byzantium and Medieval Russia* (Moscow, 2006), 9–31; Sergei Avanesov, "Sakral'naia topika russkogo goroda (2). Sofiiskii sobor: Sintaksis i semantika," *PRAXIMA: Problemy visual'noi semiotiki* 9, no. 3 (2016): 25–81. On the semiotics of the icon see Boris Uspenskii, *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon* (Lisse, Netherlands, 1976); Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Crestwood, 1982).

6. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, 1977).

7. Viktor Zhivov and Boris Uspenskii, "Tsar' i Bog: Semioticheskie aspekty sakralizatsii monarkha v Rossii," in Boris Uspenskii, ed., *Iazyki kul'tury i problemi perevodimosti* (Moscow, 1987), 54–55, 61–67.

8. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 12.

9. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 7.

of the “sacred” from concepts like the Third Rome and New Jerusalem to the Workers’ Paradise.¹⁰ Despite the efforts of the Soviet state to erase religious icons from daily life, the images remained persistent cultural referents.¹¹ By the post-Soviet 1990s, an ideological void reenergized the idiom of iconography, which again formed a visual and ritual lexicon that shaped public and political discourse on the spiritual “rebirth” and “renewal” of Russia and its common cultural values. The Putin administration has also used the icons’ symbolism as a “solacing factor” to rekindle a sense of national unity and reestablish Russia’s geopolitical significance, framing the language of icons in terms of national security.¹² Modern social media and the Kremlin’s website in particular provide a digital performative space where Putin curates his interactions with icons to characterize the messianic nature of his leadership and his understanding of Russia, its history, and its future in terms of sacred space and time.¹³

Icons and their sacred narratives (*skazaniia*) have long reflected major geopolitical shifts in Russian history—from the rise of Muscovy to fall of the Soviet Union—and the struggle for sacred space at the heart of political ideologies and the national consciousness.¹⁴ Taking advantage of post-Soviet nostalgia for familiar symbols and the well-honed ability of the populace to perceive the encoded rhetoric of Soviet-era “Aesopian” language, Putin was able to quickly develop the visual language of icons into a “special political code.”¹⁵ From the early 2000s, Putin promoted the icon as a symbol of a reborn Russia, a “sacred canopy” that unites citizens of the Russian Federation under a shared set of all-encompassing political, social, and spiritual values.¹⁶ Over the next two decades, as Russia’s President and Prime Minister, Putin’s official schedule included hundreds of public and ritual interactions

10. On the hierotopical re-creation of Jerusalem in Russia, see Avanesov, “Sakral’naia topika,” 88–110 and Aleksei Lidov, “Novye Ierusalimy. Perenesenie Sviatoi Zemli kak porozhdaiushchaia matritsa khristianskoi kul’tury,” in A. M. Lidov, ed., *Novye Ierusalimy. Ierotropiia i ikonografiia sakral’nykh prostranstv. Sbornik statei* (Moscow, 2009), 5–7.

11. On the tenacity of iconographical images, see Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton, 2018).

12. Punsara Amarasinghe, “The Depiction of ‘Orthodoxy’ in Post-Soviet Space: How Vladimir Putin uses the Church in his anti-Western Campaign,” *Open Political Science* 4, no. 1 (January 2021): 74. The January 2000 National Security Concept (*Kontseptsiiia natsional’noi bezopastnosti*) mentions spirituality over a dozen times.

13. On the icon’s performativity, see Bissera V. Pentcheva, “The Performative Icon,” *The Art Bulletin*, 88, no. 4 (December 2006): 631–55, and Marie E. Gaspar-Hulvat, “The Icon as Performer and as Performative Utterance: The Sixteenth-century Vladimir Mother of God in the Moscow Dormition Cathedral,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 57/58 (Spring/Autumn 2010): 174–85.

14. Adams and Shevzov, “Introduction: At Every Time and in Every Place: The Mother of God in Modern Russian Culture,” in Adams and Shevzov, eds., *Framing Mary*, 3–36; Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 1–19, 137–68; Smolkin, *Sacred Space*, 1–20; Vera Shevzov, “On the Field of Battle: The Marian Face of Post-Soviet Russia,” in Adams and Shevzov, eds., *Framing Mary*, 270–311; Miller, “Legends of the Icon.”

15. Lev Loseff, *On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature* (Munich, 1984), 16. See also Myron Rush, “The Role of Esoteric Communication in Soviet Politics,” in Myron Rush, ed., *The Rise of Khrushchev* (Washington, D.C., 1958), 88–94.

16. Harald Wydra applies Peter Berger’s concept of sacred canopy to Soviet political ideology in his *Politics and the Sacred* (Cambridge, Eng., 2015), 125–49.

with icons—a program of sacred symbolism that was perceived as a “fresh political tradition.”¹⁷ Averaging ten to twelve times per year, these engagements include the commemoration of holidays (Christmas, Easter, Epiphany, and the Day of National Unity); religio-cultural visits to icon exhibitions, restoration projects, churches, and monasteries; international meetings with the Russian diaspora, foreign leaders, and representatives of the Orthodox Church; and political events related to his own election and inauguration. Putin’s highly performative interaction with icons evoked a dual response. On one hand, it elicited imitation and compliance from his supporters, who accept the notion that such ritual carves out sacred Russian space. But the familiar image of Putin with an icon also provoked protests from others, who, ironically, appropriated icons and their visual language to counter Putin’s politics of the sacred (the Pussy Riot controversy provides a prime example).¹⁸ Both responses, however, demonstrate an understanding of the Orthodox icon’s complex symbolism and the role it plays in the struggle over what a reborn Russia might look like.

Blessing the Putin Administration: The Sacralization of the Monarch

Throughout Russia’s history, the identification of rulers and ruling families with certain icons endowed the monarch with authority that derived from rights considered political and religious. Putin is not perceived as “earthly tsar” in the tradition of Russia’s emperors. Nevertheless, his programmatic and ritualistic engagement with icons reanimates the messianic and imperial tradition in Russian politics by which the state is regarded as the sacred center of an exceptional nation with a uniquely redemptive mission.¹⁹ Already before his first inauguration, Putin linked himself and his presidency with icons closely associated with the Russian monarchy, like the Feodorov icon of the Mother of God.²⁰ Twice he sought the blessing of the Feodorov icon when he visited Archimandrite Ioann (Krest’iankin) near the Estonian border at the Pskov-Pechersk Monastery on May 2 and August 2, 2000.²¹ When Putin’s first

17. Natali’ia Melikova, “Riurik prichislen k “piterskim,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, at https://www.ng.ru/politics/2004-07-19/1_rurik.html?id_user=Y (accessed August 25, 2023).

18. On Pussy Riot’s use of icons, see Vera Shevzov, “Women on the Fault Lines of Faith: Pussy Riot and the Insider/Outsider Challenge to Post-Soviet Orthodoxy,” *Religion & Gender* 4, no. 2 (2014): 121–44.

19. Alicia Curanović, “Conventional Wisdom and Contemporary Russian Messianism. A Critical Verification,” *Vestnik MGIMO-Universiteta* 64, no. 1 (2019): 28–44.

20. The Feodorov Mother of God icon has been associated with the Romanov dynasty since 1613. By 2019, observers noted a range of contemporary social, political, and religious uses for the Feodorov Mother of God icon (Aleksei Fedorov, “Drugaiia istoriia Feodorovskoi ikony Bozhiei Materi,” *Krai rodnoi*, <http://radilov.ru/krayrodnoy/1459-history-fedorovskoy-bojey-materi.html> (accessed August 9, 2023).

21. Putin’s visits coincided with Russia’s efforts to prevent NATO expansion in the Baltics (Mark Kramer, “NATO, the Baltic States and Russia: A Framework for Sustainable Enlargement,” *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1944–)* 78, no. 4 (October, 2002): 731–56.

election victory fell on this icon's feast day (March 27), its role as protectress (*pokrovitel'nitsa*) of Russian leadership was noted in several sources sensitive to such correlations.²² Inauguration day in 2000 was equally rich with iconographical symbolism; the date was shifted to a feast day of the Iveron icon of the Mother of God (May 7), a "gatekeeper" (*vratar'nitsa*) icon of the Kremlin.²³

From thereon in, as both Russian President and Prime Minister, Putin continued to invoke the history and symbolism of icons to strengthen the association between the sacred and his administrations. A prime example and one of Putin's first acts as president-elect was the modified choreography of the inaugural ceremony that introduced the now standard prayer service (*moleben*). This service includes the veneration and presentation of icons that symbolically emphasize important attributes of Putin's leadership—especially the task of defending and protecting the nation. At this brief service in 2000, Patriarch Aleksii II (Ridiger) gifted the Kremlin two icons of the types that, like the Iveron, have traditionally hung over the Kremlin's most revered gates—the icon of Saint Nicholas of Mozhaisk for the Nikolskie Gates and a mosaic *Savoir Not Made by Human Hands* icon for the Spasskie.²⁴ He also presented Putin with two "northern" icons, the Tikhvin Mother of God, a "protectress" (*zastupnitsa*) icon associated with Russia's tsars and Russia's perceived status as "Third Rome," and the icon of Sainted Aleksandr Nevskii.²⁵ The Patriarch first suggested the exceptionalism that would soon take shape in Putin's presidency when, presenting the latter icon, he voiced the hope that "the defender (*zashchitnik*) and protector (*pokrovitel'*) of the Russian lands Saint Aleksandr Nevskii would likewise act as a heavenly defender (*nebesnyi pokrovitel'*) of the President and his administration."²⁶ In 2004, Patriarch Kirill (Gundiaev) offered Putin the blessing of the Tikhvin Mother of God icon, whose triumphant

22. See, for instance, Feodorov, "Drugaiia istoriia" and Ferapont, Metropolitan of Kostroma and Nerekht (Kashin), "Materialy po istorii chudotvornoi Feodorovskoi ikony Bozhiei Materi i Kostromskogo kremliia v nachale XX veka: Chast' 3. Okonchanie," *Ipat'evskii vestnik* 18, no. 2 (2022): 42–74.

23. The Iveron or "Gate-Keeper" Mother of God icon has traditionally been housed in the Iveron Chapel at the Resurrection Gate entrance onto Red Square. In 2000, Orthodox "Bright Week" (*Svetlaia sedmitsa*), when the icon is celebrated, began on Sunday, May 7.

24. In May 2010, restorationists removed bricks to discover the original sixteenth-century icons of the Savior and Saint Nicholas over their respective Kremlin gates, adding to the "miraculous" history of the icons' protective role. At the Savior icon's dedication, Patriarch Kirill noted, "Now that we've got the icon back, our country secures additional defense," Mikhail Antonov and Nikolai Isayev, "Long lost Jesus icon in Kremlin restored to view," Reuters, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-icon/long-lost-jesus-icon-in-kremlin-restored-to-view-idUSTRE67R0ZH20100828> (accessed August 22, 2023).

25. The Tikhvin icon of the Mother of God reportedly appeared to fishermen on Lake Ladoga in 1383, later understood as a sign of Mary's choice of Russia as the "Third Rome." The protective Tikhvin icon was removed to Chicago during WWII and "refused" to return until after the fall of Soviet communism. Its return was spearheaded by Putin and met with great fanfare (*The Return of the Icon*. United Kingdom: Great Takes Television, 2005. DVD). The icon of Saint Aleksandr Nevskii commemorates his military victory over the invading Catholic Swedes in the battle of the Neva on July 15, 1240. Both icons are understood to be guardians of the Russian north (Shevzov, "Field of Battle," 273).

26. "Torzhestvennyi moleben v sviazi s vstupleniem novogo Prezidenta Rossii v dolzhnost' otsluzhil Patriarkh Moskovskii i vseia Rusi Aleksii Vtoroi v Blagoveshchenskom sobore Kremliia, kuda po zavershenii ofitsial'noi tseremonii inauguratsii proshel Vladimir

return to Russian soil from Chicago that same year was timed to coincide with national elections. This practice of blessing the president with icons continued through Putin's 2018 inauguration.²⁷

Since his first inauguration, as a new millennium began and Russia focused on its "rebirth" (*vozhrozhdenie*), both iconographical and verbal language used to describe the Putin presidency has echoed the dynamics of sacralization. When Patriarch Aleksii II requested during the inaugural prayer service in 2000 that the president "remember the enormous responsibility of the leader before the people (*narod*), history, and God," he sent a clear message about the quasi-sacerdotal nature of Putin's presidency.²⁸ Over the course of Putin's presidential administrations, the evolution of ritual at the inaugural prayer service has underscored this message. By 2018, no longer accompanied by his wife or Dmitrii and Svetlana Medvedev, Putin entered the Annunciation Cathedral alone and stood with the clergy throughout the ceremony.²⁹ The well-scripted choreography of the inaugural prayer service suggested a liturgical role for Putin, who kissed and bowed to an icon as a correlate of the traditional anointment that conferred priestly status on the monarch. With the restoration of icons to its gates and towers and religious rituals included in the inaugural festivities, the Kremlin under Putin seemed once again to represent not only the seat of Russia's political power, but its sacred center as well.

For Putin, the most potent use of the iconographical image was the sacralization of his own leadership beyond inauguration day. Putin's inaugural prayer service is held in the Kremlin's Assumption Cathedral rather than the Dormition Cathedral (where Russian emperors were anointed and enthroned), but parallels with coronations are notable.³⁰ Most striking is the new ceremony's familiar invocation of what Viktor Zhivov and Boris Uspenskii call the "semantics of sacralization"—the ritual symbolism of coronations that represented the power of Russian monarchs in messianic terms and created affinities between them and heavenly archetypes.³¹ Seventeenth-century changes to such ceremonies in Russia evoked Byzantine ritual gestures that endowed emperors not just with priestly status (akin to the Roman concept of *pontifex maximus*), but with the imagery and charisma of God, Christ, the Mother

Putin," Website of the President of Russia, May 7, 2000, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/38090> (accessed June 21, 2023).

27. Patriarch Kirill gifted Putin a "Tenderness" (*umilenie*) Mother of God in 2012 and an eighteenth-century icon of the Savoir in 2018.

28. "Torzhestvennyi moleben," 2000.

29. "Patriarkh Kirill sovershil moleben po sluchaiu vstupleniia v dolzhnost' Prezidenta Rossii V. V. Putina," YouTube channel of the Russian Orthodox Church, May 7, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knbCOatJ_Ug (accessed June 21, 2023).

30. For example, Artem Krechetnikov, "Ot koronatsii do inauguratsii," BBC News, May 2, 2012, at https://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2012/05/120430_inauguration_traditions (accessed June 21, 2023) and "V den' inauguratsii prezidenta Rossii patriarch Kirill sovershit moleben," TASS, May 6, 2018, at <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/5180109> (accessed June 21, 2023).

31. Zhivov and Uspenskii, "Tsar' i Bog," 66.

of God, and the saints.³² After the coronation, the process of sacralizing Russia's emperors and empresses continued to draw on iconographical imagery through visual and written texts like portraiture, prayers, and odes, and panegyric literature that imbued the leader with God-like qualities.³³ Notably, these forms of textual sacralization (which also reinforced the notion of the divine legitimacy of rulers with classical references) did not always align with the gender of the leader. In works by Aleksandr Naryshkin, Aleksandr Sumarokov, and Mikhail Lomonosov, for example, Catherine II and Elizabeth are described as "earthly God" (or Zeus) while Peter is compared to the virgins who went to meet the bridegroom (or Pallas Athena).³⁴

Putin's supporters and opponents alike quickly turned to the language of icons to amplify or challenge the dynamics of sacralization. As Zhivov and Uspenskii note, the semantics of sacralization emerge most clearly in the conflicts that arise between those who drive the cult of leadership and those who oppose it. Whether arguing for sacralization or claiming blasphemy, both sides use a similar lexicon.³⁵ Thus, when Putin's popularity wanes and the voices of the opposition are loudest, the idiom of the icon intensifies and its use grows more prevalent. This tendency was particularly obvious during the 2011–12 election cycle when widespread popular protests garnered a strong response from Putin's backers. A case in point is the "Prayer to Putin" (*Molitva Putinu*) released online on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday in October 2012 by the "National Committee +60" (Natsional'nyi komitet +60), the extreme pro-Putin activist group that continues to propose such sacralizing ideas as the production of an icon of Putin himself.³⁶ For its prayer, the group repeated much of Nikolai Gogol's "Prayer" (*Molitva*), first published in 1894 by the Kyiv-Pechersk Monastery as "Hymn to the Most Holy Virgin Mary the Mother of God" (*Pesn' molitvennaia ko Presviatoi Deve Marii Bogoroditse*). The implicit comparison between the subjects of both works—the Mother of God and Putin—offer an unlikely and perhaps unintentionally ironic imitation of the sacralizing texts of earlier centuries.³⁷ (Table 1)

32. Zhivov and Uspenskii, "Tsar' i Bog," 60–72. See also Brenda Meehan-Waters, "Catherine the Great and the Problem of Female Rule," *The Russian Review* 34, no. 3 (July 1975): 305–7; and Boris Uspenskii "Liturgicheskii status tsaria v russkoi tserkvi: Priobshchenie sv. Tainam (Istoriko-liturgicheskii etiud)," in "Kamen' Kraegg' l'n": Rhetoric of Medieval Slavic World, a special issue of *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 19 (1995): 686–731.

33. Zhivov and Uspenskii, "Tsar' i Bog," 75–88; Levitt, *Visual Dominant*, 29–63; Stephen Lessing Baehr "The 'Political Icon' in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Russia," *Russian Literature Triquarterly* 21 (1988): 61–79; and *The Paradise Myth in Eighteenth-Century Russia. Utopian Patterns in Early Secular Russian Literature and Culture* (Stanford, 1991), 14–40.

34. Levitt, *Visual Dominant*, 28–63; Zhivov and Uspenskii, "Tsar' i Bog," 85–86, 104, 117, 128.

35. Zhivov and Uspenskii, "Tsar' i Bog," 64–79.

36. Formed in Saint Petersburg in 2012, the group has also called on the Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch to recommend the "sacralization of Putin's body after death." See "'National'nyi komitet +60' schitaet, cho telo Putina posle smerti sleduet peredat' RPTs dlia sacralizatsii," NewsRu, January 14, 2021, at <https://www.newsru.com/russia/14jan2021/putinsacr.html> (accessed June 21, 2023).

37. In early October 2022, enormous images of Mother of God icons projected on to Moscow buildings advertised Veronika Ponomareva-Korzhevskiaia's art exhibit "The Face

Table 1

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| "Hymn to the Most Holy Virgin Mary the Mother of God," Nikolai Gogol', 1846 ³⁸ | "Prayer to Putin," National Committee +60, 2012 ³⁹ |
| <p style="text-align: center;"><i>To You, o Blessed Mother!</i> <i>I dare to raise my voice,</i> <i>Washing my face with tears:</i> <i>Hear me in this mournful hour,</i> <i>Accept my fervent prayer,</i> <i>Deliver my spirit from trouble and harm,</i> <i>Fill my heart with tenderness,</i> <i>And guide me on the road to salvation.</i> <i>Let me be a stranger to my own will,</i> <i>Ready to withstand anything for God.</i> <i>Be the Protectress (pokrov) in my bitter lot–</i> <i>Do not let me die in sorrow.</i> <i>You are the prayer-giver for all of us</i> <i>Who come to you in in despair.</i> <i>O, defend me when I hear</i> <i>The awful voice of God's judgment,</i> <i>When comes the eternal end of time,</i> <i>And the trumpeting voice resurrects the dead,</i> <i>And the Book of Judgment will reveal</i> <i>The burden of my sins.</i> <i>For the faithful, you are the Impenetrable Wall</i> <i>and defense (ograda)!</i> <i>I pray to You with all my soul:</i> <i>Save me, Impenetrable Wall,</i> <i>Have mercy on me!</i></p> | <p>To you, faithful Vladimir! I dare to raise my voice, Cleanse me from all sin, Hear me in this mournful hour. Accept my fervent prayer Deliver my spirit from harm and trouble, Fill my heart with tenderness, And guide me on the road to salvation. I will not be a stranger to your will, Ready to withstand anything for God; Be the Pillar (<i>opora</i>) in my bitter lot, Do not let me die in sorrow. You are our own (<i>rodnoi</i>) prayer-giver for us And the defender of all who despair, O, help me, when I hear The awful voice of God's judgment, When comes the eternal end of time, The trumpeting sound resurrects the dead, And the Book of Judgment will reveal The burden of my sins. You are the reward (<i>nagrada</i>) of Holy Russia! I pray to you with all my soul. Our apostle of Peter's city, Have mercy on me!</p> |

A literary version of the *akafist* hymn, Gogol's text imagines a supplicant praying before the Impenetrable Wall (*Nerushimaia stena*) Mother of God icon that shows Mary at full height in the ancient *orant* or "prayer" pose of the intercessor (*zastupnitsa*). The Ukrainian-born Gogol' may have envisioned the impressive eleventh-century mosaic version in the apse of Kyiv's Saint Sophia Cathedral. This icon has remained undamaged since its creation and

of Mary—Images of Light" (*Liki Marii—Obrazy Sveta*), which opened on Putin's seventieth birthday. The campaign's timing, titles like "keeper," "defender," and (using part of Putin's name) "v puti" suggest similar and ongoing efforts to sacralize Putin's presidency. (Mikhail Bratsilo, "Svetovye ikony ukrasiat vsiu Moskvu v den' otkrytiia vystavki 'Liki Marii – Obrazy Sveta,'" *Moskul'tura*, October 4, 2022, at <https://moscultura.ru/news/2022/svetovye-ikony-ukrasyat-vsju-moskvu-v-den-otkrytiya-vystavki-likii-marii-obrazy-sveta> (accessed June 21, 2023).

38. Nikolai V. Gogol', "Pesn' molitvennaia ko Presviatoi Deve Marii Bogoroditse," in I. A. Vinogradov and V. A. Voropaev, eds., *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem*, 17 vols. (Moscow, 2009), 6:415.

39. The Meduza news website identifies Gogol's poem as a subtext for "Prayer to Putin," "'Prolei mne v serdtse umilen'e, na put; spasen'ia nastav'. Opublikovan tekst molitvy Putinu,'" at <https://meduza.io/shapito/2015/12/08/proley-mne-v-serdtse-umilenie-na-put-spaseniya-nastav-opublikovan-tekst-molitvy-putinu> (accessed January 1, 2023).

is regarded as the city's protectress, a role Gogol's "Prayer" underscores with ecclesiastical language referring to the protecting veil (*pokrov*) of the Mother of God and the defensive boundary (*ograda*) she provides.⁴⁰ In the "Prayer to Putin," allusions to Saint Vladimir Iaroslavich of Novgorod ("faithful Vladimir") and the "apostle of Peter's city" emphasize Putin's northern roots and, through the Gogolian subtext, characterize him in terms of the icon. In the "prayer," Putin assumes roles attributed to the Mother of God—intercessor, guide to salvation, and merciful defender of the faithful. The distinct descriptors (the Mother of God icon is "Protectress" and "defense" while Putin is "Pillar" and "reward") also link the subjects through the similarity of sounds in Russian; *pokrov* and *opora* echo each other in reverse (po-/op- and -ro/-or), while *ograda* and *nagrada* rhyme.

Regardless of form and genre, ties between Putin and icons were clearly registered by the public and permeated public discourse on both sides of the political spectrum. Pussy Riot's "Punk Prayer" (*Pank moleben*, 2012) created a verbal icon that, in contrast with the "Prayer," entreated the Mother of God to "put Putin away."⁴¹ The group's detention generated like-minded street art, tee shirts, and internet memes that also used iconographical images.⁴² Broad public understanding of the semiotics of these icons in Russia is perhaps attributable to the ubiquity of their images. Historically, Orthodox icons in Russia were not bound to the churches and monasteries that housed them; they were frequently processed through streets and the countryside, building the perception of Russian expanses as sacred space or even, as Oleg Tarasov notes, a "Great Icon" itself.⁴³ Accordingly, Putin does not confine his ritual interactions with icons to the sacred center of political power behind the Kremlin walls, but performs them for receptive domestic audiences in the smaller Russian cities and towns he visits regularly on political, economic, and cultural working trips. No such event is more potent in iconographical symbolism and semantic richness than Putin's annual attendance at Christmas Eve services, where his association with icons underscores the sacerdotal nature of his presidency while reinforcing his role as protector of the nation. As he draws icons into politics in the Kremlin, Putin also draws politics into icons as he travels the country.

40. Gogol' draws from Kontakions 1 and 13 of the Akafist to the Most Holy Mother of God before the icon "Impenetrable Wall." On the link in *akafisty* between protective icons and Russian national interests, see Vera Shevzov, "Between Popular and Official: Akafisty Hymns and Marian Icons in Later Imperial Russia," in John-Paul Himka and Andriy Zayarnyuk, eds., *Letters from Heaven: Popular Religion in Russia and Ukraine* (Toronto, 2006), 251–77.

41. Shevzov, "Women on the Fault Lines," 128–29.

42. Artem Loskutov was arrested for his "Free Pussy Riot" poster, which featured the Mother of God in a balaclava, Artyom Loskutov at <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/artiom-loskutov-pussy-riot-icon> (accessed January 1, 2023). In September 2012, Putin critic Kseniia Sobchak used an image of the Iveron Mother of God to promote her liberal magazine *Style, New, Comments* (SNC) See "Kseniia Sobchak primerila na sebja obraz Bogoroditsy," *Izvestiia*, 13 September 2012, <http://izvestia.ru/news/535147> (accessed August 22, 2023).

43. Adams and Shevzov, *Framing Mary*, 20; Shevzov, "Field of Battle," 272; Oleg Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion: Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia* (London, 2002), 38–58.

Putin's Christmas Presence

Since 2002, Putin's ritualized visits to regional Christmas Eve church services have delineated sacred space (hierotopy) and time across the vast expanse of the Russian Federation. For the first two years of his presidency, Putin attended services alongside public figures and politicians at Moscow's Church of the Life-giving Trinity on Sparrow Hills (2000) and the Cathedral of Christ the Savior (2001). After that—except for four visits to his native St. Petersburg—Putin joined 150–300 worshippers in smaller towns and cities away from the capital.⁴⁴ The choice of venues for these visits is deliberate and can be read as a response to national concerns that include the desire to curate Putin's domestic image or cultivate local political influence, Russia's hosting of the Olympic Games, and military actions in Syria and Ukraine. As with the staging of post-inaugural prayers, the choreography of Putin's Christmas appearances has developed into a performative and politically charged ritual. After greeting townspeople outside, a casually dressed Putin enters the brightly lit church at midnight to the ringing of bells. He wishes worshippers a happy Christmas, lights a candle to the Nativity icon, and prays during the liturgy, surrounded by children. Some regard this “out of Moscow” (proch' ot Moskvy) policy as Putin's attempt to discourage perceived support for factions within his government that promote “Orthodox” ideology. “Time and time again at Christmas we see this picture,” writes one observer, “a lot of high placed officials are at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior (their make-up constantly changes), but the president is not among them.”⁴⁵ But this reading only goes so far, since Putin routinely attends Easter service in Moscow with the same government officials he purportedly avoids at Christmas.

Putin's practice of leaving the capital at Christmas is better understood as a carefully crafted “going out among the people” (vykhod v narod) that uses the lexicon of icons to curate Putin's image as the people's president (he is often asked by individuals for help in minor bureaucratic or financial issues) and the nation's palladium. Although palladium icons were traditionally perceived as military commander and sovereign, their tendency to be Mother of God icons can soften the image of the leader associated with it.⁴⁶ As in the 2012 “Prayer,” the role of intercessor and protector is underscored by milieus that link Putin with Marian icons. Almost half of the churches Putin has visited are associated with the Mother of God or house notable icons dedicated to her (Table 2).

44. Aleksandr Gamov provides numbers of parishioners in “Putin uslyshal zov predkov blagodarja ‘Komsomolke’?” *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, November 1, 2005, at <https://rusk.ru/st.php?idar=6268> (accessed June 21, 2023).

45. Iaroslav Rodin, “Rozhdestvo i Putin,” *Portal Credo*, March 17, 2017, at <https://www.portalcredo.ru/site/?act=comment&id=138> (no longer active).

46. Clemena Antonova, *Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon: Seeing World with the Eyes of God* (Farnham, Eng., 2010), 72; Averil Cameron, “The Language of Images: The Rise of Icons and Christian Representation,” *Studies in Church History* 28 (January 1990): 1–41.

Table 2 Putin's Christmas Visits (2002–2022); *As prime minister (2009–2012)

| Year | Church | Icon Gifted |
|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2002 | Holy Dormition Cathedral, Vladimir | |
| 2003 | Church of the Vladimir Icon of the Mother of God, Agapovka | |
| 2004 | Church of the Sign of the Mother of God | |
| 2005 | Church of the the Mother of God of the Sign, Suzdal' | |
| 2006 | Church of the Transfiguration, Yakutsk | |
| 2007 | New Jerusalem Cathedral, Istra | Saint Serafim of Sarovsk |
| 2008 | Church of Saint Procopius the Righteous, Ustiug ⁴⁷ | |
| 2009 | Sretenskii Cathedral, Petrozavodsk | Kazan Mother of God |
| 2010 | Church of the Holy Martyrs Alexander and Antonia, Kostroma ⁴⁸ | |
| 2011 | Cathedral of the Pokrov of the Mother of God, Tversk | Pokrov Mother of God |
| 2012 | Church of the Transfiguration, Saint Petersburg | Smolensk Mother of God |
| 2013 | Church in Honor of the Peschanskii Mother of God Icon, Sochi ⁴⁹ | |
| 2014 | Church of the Image of Christ the Savior Not Made by Human Hands, Sochi | Christ the Savior Not Made by Human Hands |
| 2015 | The Church of the Pokrov of the Holy Mother of God, Voronezh | Christ Pantocrator |
| 2016 | Cathedral of the Pokrov of the Mother of God, Tversk | Smolensk Mother of God |
| 2017 | Church of the Redeemer, Novgorod | |
| 2018 | Church of Saints Symeon the God-Receiver and Anna the Prophetess, Saint Petersburg | Two-tiered icon including The Birth of the Most Holy Mother of God and The Resurrection of Christ |
| 2019 | Church of the Transfiguration, Saint Petersburg | Icon on Christ Pantocrator |
| 2020 | Church of the Transfiguration, Saint Petersburg | Tikhvin Mother of God |
| 2021 | Church of Saint Nicholas on Lipno, Novgorod | Christ Pantocrator |
| 2022 | Church of the Icon Not Made by Human Hands, Novo-Ogarëvo | |

To mark the occasion of his visit, Putin most often (55 percent of the time) gifts an icon of the Mother of God. In a notable example, he attended the 2013 Christmas services at the Saint George-Trinity Women's Monastery in Lesnoe, near Sochi, where six out of its seven churches are dedicated to

47. The Church of Saint Procopius the Righteous honors the Annunciation icon of the Mother of God.

48. A liturgy was held in this church for the Zemskii Sobor (the meeting of representatives of Russian lands and estates) on the morning of their election of Mikhail Romanov as Tsar on March 14, 1613, now the feast day of the Feodorov or "Romanov" Mother of God icon.

49. The church is now called the Church of the Life-Giving Trinity and of the icon of the Peschanskaia Mother of God.

the Mother of God and her icons (the Vladimir, the Burning Bush, Assuage My Sorrows, Softener of Evil Hearts, the Peschanskaia, and the Abbess of Mount Athos). The Kremlin website chose to publish four photographs from the service that show Putin with a small crowd inside the cozy, candlelit Church in Honor of the Peschanskaia Mother of God icon (located in the same building as the Church in Honor of the Vladimir Mother of God icon and the Church in Honor of the icon of the Mother of God Abbess of Mount Athos). In this series of images, the camera angle narrows progressively until it captures Putin in the familiar pose of a Mother of God icon (Figure 1).⁵⁰ While its composition actualizes the symbolic connection between Putin and the icon, the photo also reflects iconographical principles. Unlike earlier crowd shots, the attention of the people in the photograph is now drawn in various directions, which introduces the element of multiple perspectives that results in continual eye movement of the viewer of icons.⁵¹ The woman in the green headscarf and more traditional dress has re-positioned herself closer to Putin; her downward gaze directs attention to Putin and the boy. Her clothing adds both an archaic feel to the image and introduces the life-affirming green that figures so prominently in icons of the nativity.⁵²

The publication of this image unleashed an online spate of mock captions that suggested the boy may have been frightened by the encounter.⁵³ But Putin's Christmas greeting to the nation underscored the true intentions of the iconographical reference, highlighting the importance of gentle Christian virtues (faith, hope, and love) and describing the season as "a time of charity and mercy, of sincere consideration of those who need our care and concern."⁵⁴ At the same time, Putin emphasized his role as Russia's protector, using the same term (*opora*) that the National Committee +60 linked through reverse rhyme to the protecting veil (*pokrov*) of the Mother of God in their "Prayer to Putin." Preparing to host the world at the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi in 2014, Putin seemed to imagine "traditional spiritual and moral values" as a protective and unifying encirclement saying, "[The holiday] unites us around (*vokrug*) traditional and moral values which play a special role in the history of Russia and serve as the pillar (*opora*) of our society."⁵⁵

Christmas images of Putin surrounded by icons and children have become common fare on the Kremlin website, and their visual composition

50. All images are taken from the website of the President of Russia (kremlin.ru), which gives expressed permission to reproduce all materials without restriction (<http://en.kremlin.ru/about/copyrights>).

51. Uspenskii, *Semiotics of the Russian Icon*, 49–57; Antonova, *Space, Time*, 29–62.

52. In her study of Kuz'ma Petrov-Vodkin's painting *1918 in Petrograd (The Petrograd Madonna)*, Wendy Salmond notes how the composition, clothing, and use of the "archaic green" in the work created a Mother of God "icon-painting" ("Kuz'ma Petrov-Vodkin's *1918 in Petrograd [The Petrograd Madonna]* and the Meaning of Mary in 1920," in Adams and Shevzov, *Framing Mary*, 175–77).

53. For example, "Piar na detiakh': Putin napugal mal'chika. FOTO," *Tsenzor.net*, at https://censor.net/ru/photo_news/229869/piar_na_detyah_putin_napugal_malchika_foto (accessed January 1, 2023).

54. "Pozdravlenie s Rozhdestvom Khristovym," Website of the President of Russia, January 7, 2013, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17308> (accessed June 21, 2023).

55. *Ibid.*



Figure 1. Christmas 2013. Sochi.

has become standardized as the loosely grouped shots of the early 2000s (Figure 2) gave way to more formal and intentional posing (Figure 3). These images of Putin at prayer have resulted in a now recognizable “type” of official portraiture in the tradition of imperial representations of the leader as “political god” or “earthly god” (*zemnoi bog*).⁵⁶ Such overlap between

56. See Alain Besançon, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm* (Chicago, 2000), 57; and Zhivov and Uspenskii, “Tsar’ i Bog,” 85. In Russia, imperial



Figure 2. Christmas 2000. Moscow.



Figure 3. Christmas 2020. St. Petersburg.

political portraiture and icons also introduces the notion of “presence” into Putin’s Christmas visits. As Clemena Antonova notes, both imperial portrait and icon act as “container” of the person or divine prototype they represent

portraits hung alongside icons and were venerated as such (Zhivov and Uspenskii, “Tsar’ i Bog,” 75).

or with whom they are associated.⁵⁷ The reverence accorded the iconographical representations of Lenin and Stalin and the brutal treatment of their statues in the early 1990s suggest that Soviet citizens also perceived this link between image and presence.⁵⁸

Putin discourages the iconographical treatment of his likeness.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, his close association with icons allows him to participate in the charisma of iconographical subjects or, as in the case of the Christmas portraits, to engage with the sense of presence.⁶⁰ After Putin's 2003 visit to the Southern Ural village of Agapovka, for example, residents refer to the Church of the icon of the Vladimir Mother of God as the "church were Putin prayed."⁶¹ Thus, Putin's attendance at Christmas services designates the place as (politically) "sacred" and thereafter "protected" as his visit becomes part of the sacred narrative of the place and the gifted icons seem to stand watch. As Vera Shevzov notes, specific icons of the Mother of God are believed to "guard" the country's borders to the north (Tikhvin), south (Iveron), east (Kazan), west (Pochaev and Smolensk), and center (Vladimir).⁶² Putin's Christmas appearances reveal a similar geographic distribution of protective Mother of God icon types (Kazan, Smolensk, Tikhvin) to the north (Novgorod, Saint Petersburg, Petrozavodsk), south (Sochi, Voronezh), east (Ustiug, Yakutsk), west (Vladimir, Suzdal, Kostroma), and center (Moscow, Tver, Istra). One of Russia's greatest vulnerabilities is its sheer size, and the need to construct a narrative that it is safeguarded on all fronts seems as important as building actual defenses. Putin's visits to the Sochi region leading up the 2014 Winter Olympic Games or the 2015 visit to Voronezh, where he was pictured with refugee children from the Donbas region of Ukraine, show concerns with the integrity of Russia's cultural and geographical borders (Figure 4). Because icon ritual also revives memories of events association with the images (like tales of miraculous delivery from enemies), it is possible to understand Putin's perception of threats through the language of the icon.

In 2022, Putin broke with tradition and spent Christmas services as the sole congregant in the Church of the Icon Not Made by Human Hands at his presidential residence near Moscow (Figure 5). Like images from the

57. Clemena Antonova, *Space, Time*, 79–80.

58. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*. On the desecration of Soviet-era statues, see *Disgraced Monuments*. Directed by Mark Lewis and Laura Mulvey. 1994. 48:00. Visual Education Centre Ltd, 2012. DVD.

59. In April 2020, controversy erupted over the inclusion of Putin's portrait in a proposed mosaic for the interior of the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces. In the final design, artist Vasili Nesterenko replaced the president's face with an icon of the Mother of God (Ol'ga Bakurova, "Ne khotite—ne molites." Interview with the main artist of the Cathedral of the Armed Forces of Russia Vasil'ii Nesterenko," Moscow, May 1, 2020, at <https://mbk-news.appspot.com/suzhet/intervyu-s-glavnym-xudozhnikom-xrama/> [accessed June 21, 2023]).

60. See Boris Uspenskii, *Tsar' i Patriarkh: Kharisma vlasti v Rossii (Vizantiiskaia model' i ee russkoe pereosmyslenie)* (Moscow, 1998).

61. "Vladimir Putin v Agapovke," Turisticheskii portal Cheliabinskoi oblasti, October 28, 2014, at <http://www.xn--74-6kca2cwbo.xn--p1ai/tourism/cities/agapovka/citygallery-453/> (accessed June 21, 2023).

62. Shevzov, "Field of Battle," 272.



Figure 4. Putin with Donbass refugees. 2015.

2018 inaugural prayer service, Christmas photos that show Putin alone with clergy offer a new type of Christmas portraiture that combines his elevated political and spiritual roles to re-sacralize his leadership. Putin's Christmas address underscored partnerships between state and Orthodox Church as

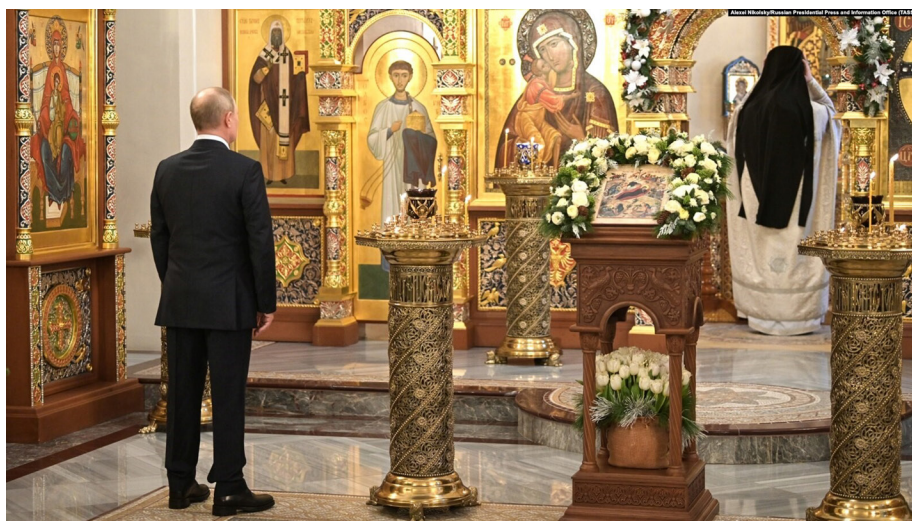


Figure 5. Putin celebrates Christmas alone. 2022.

he emphasized the latter's role in social initiatives.⁶³ Doing so, he described in domestic terms the kind of public diplomacy the Church has conducted abroad since at least 2007, when Putin created The Russian World (*Ruski Mir*) Fund.⁶⁴ In what looks like a personalized offshoot of The Russian World project, Putin has infused his own dealings with world leaders with the traditions and images of Orthodox icons in order to create and maintain political alliances. State-level exchanges of icons have also become a kind of loyalty test for "sacred" political friendships that, as in the case of Ukraine, can quickly turn into enmity.

The End of the (Russian) World As We Know It

During the 2016 awards ceremony for the Russian Geographical Society, Putin quipped that "Russia's border doesn't end anywhere."⁶⁵ In light of Russia's invasions of Crimea and mainland Ukraine, this facetious remark reveals the problematics of the sacred in Russia's diplomacy, especially programs like the Russian World. Much has been said about the "soft power" strategies of the Russian Orthodox Church (a member of the Russian World Foundation since 2009) that purport to strengthen historical and cultural ties with former Soviet states and to extend Russia's reach abroad by creating an "empire of diaspora" that reimagines national borders and cultivates the myth of a greater Slavic and Orthodox brotherhood of nations.⁶⁶ With similar political goals, Putin has used what might be called "icon diplomacy" to engage world leaders from a variety of faith traditions in the idiom of the icon and create "sacred" Russian space abroad by gifting, exchanging, and ritually interacting with icons during state visits (Table 3).⁶⁷ This process illustrates what Lidov and Avanesov describe as a semiotic "carrying over" or "transfer" of culturally significant or "semantic" space from one place to another through performative ritual actions key to Putin's icon diplomacy.⁶⁸ Along with the

63. "Putin pozdravil rossiian s Rozhdestvom," *Izvestia*, January 7, 2022, at <https://iz.ru/1274074/2022-01-07/putin-pozdravil-rossiian-s-rozhdestvom> (accessed June 21, 2023).

64. See Vera D. Ageeva, "The Rise and Fall of Russia's Soft Power: Results of the Past Twenty Years," *Russia in Global Affairs* 19, no. 1 (January–March 2021): 118–45; Ariel Cohen, "Ideology and Soft Power in Contemporary Russia," in Stephen J. Blank, ed., *Perspectives on Russian Foreign Policy* (Carlisle, PA, 2012), 195–214; Saari, "Russia's Post-Orange Revolution Strategies," 50–66; Kudors, "'Russian World,'" 2–6.

65. "Russia's border doesn't end anywhere, Vladimir Putin says," *BBC News*, November 24, 2016, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38093468> (accessed June 21, 2023).

66. See Ageeva, "Rise and Fall"; Alexander Sergunin and Leonid Karabeshkin, "Understanding Russia's Soft Power Strategy," *Politics* 35, no. 3–4 (November, 2015): 347–63; Simons, "Perception of Russia's Soft Power," 1–13; Valery Tishkov, "The Russian World—Changing Meanings and Strategies," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Russia an Eurasia Program, no. 95 (August 2008): 1–55.

67. This table provides an overview of Putin's icon interactions with foreign heads of state and religious leaders. It does not list Putin's regular domestic engagement with icons that, in addition to his Christmas visits, include religious ceremonies like Easter and Epiphany, the restoration of holy sites, and icon exhibitions.

68. See Avanesov, "Sakral'naia topika" and Lidov, "Novye Ierusalimy," 5–10.

Table 3 Putin's Icon Diplomacy, 2000–2020; *As prime minister (2009–2012)

| Year | Place | Event/Leader | Icon(s) Gifted (G)/Received (R)/Venerated (V) by Putin |
|--------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2000 | Prokhorovka, Russia Moscow | Presidents Aleksandr Lukashenko and Leonid Kuchma Return of icon from Germany | Nativity of Christ (G), The Life of Lord Jesus (G). Pskovo-Pecherskaia Mother of God (R) |
| 2001 | Moscow | Meeting in Moscow with Greek Orthodox Archbishop Christodoulou | Christ the Savior (R) |
| 2003 | Latvia | Meeting with Russian diaspora | Mother of God (R) |
| | Paris | Meeting with Russian diaspora | Archangel Michael (R) |
| | New York | Meeting with Metropolitan Laurus | Saint Elizabeth the Holy Martyr (R); Old Testament Trinity (G) |
| | Vatican | Meeting with Pope John Paul II | Medallion-icon of Madonna and Child. Putin (R); Kazan Mother of God (V) |
| | Kyiv | Metropolitan Vladimir | Saints Anthony, Theodosius and Holy Monks of the Kyiv Cave Monastery (R); Seraphim of Sarov (G) |
| | Chicago | Return of icon from United States | Tikhvin Mother of God (R) |
| | Mt. Athos New York | State visit Metropolitan Laurus | Iveron Mother of God (V) Kursk Root Mother of God (V) |
| France | Andrei Schmemmann | Putin gives thanks for sending icons to Saint Petersburg for the grace of the Romanovs | |
| 2005 | Vatican | Return of icon | Kazan Mother of God (R) |
| | Novyi Bezdachich, Ukraine | President Viktor Yushchenko | Tour of icon collection at Yushchenko's dacha |
| 2007 | Vatican | Pope Benedict XVI | Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker (G) |
| | Bari, Italy | Visit to exhibit of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker icons | Tour of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker (various) |
| | Vatican | Birthday wishes to Pope Benedict | Unspecified icon (G) |
| | Moscow | Reunification of Russian Orthodox Church with ROC Outside of Russia | Kursk Root Mother of God icon (R) |
| 2009 | Beijing | Consecration of Cathedral of the Dormition | Pokrov Mother of God (G); Smolensk Mother of God icons (G) |
| | Germany | Return of icon | Kazan Mother of God (R) |

(Continued)

Table 3 Continued

| Year | Place | Event/Leader | Icon(s) Gifted (G)/Received (R)/Venerated (V) by Putin |
|------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2010 | Poland | Consecration of Church of the Resurrection | Resurrection of Christ (G) |
| 2012 | Jerusalem | Patriarch Feofil III | Christ the Savior (G); Jerusalem Mother of God (R) |
| 2013 | Tver | Serbian delegation to Seliger Youth forum | Saint Basil of Ostrog (R) |
| | Vatican Kyiv | Pope Francis 1025 anniversary of Kyiv-Pechersk Monastery | Vladimir Mother of God (G) Unspecified (R) |
| 2015 | Mt. Athos Moscow | Greek Prime Minister Tsipras | Panaida Patriotissa (R) Icon removed from Greece in WWII (G) |
| | Crimea | Visit to Church of Saint Vladimir with Silvio Berlusconi | Saint John the Baptist (G); Saint Vladimir (G) |
| | Astana, Kazakhstan | Holy Dormition Cathedral with President Nursultan Nazarbayev | Pokrov Mother of God (G); Fedorov Mother of God icon (R) |
| 2016 | Athens | Exhibit of Andrei Rublev's icon of the Ascension | |
| | Mt. Athos | Visit with Hegemon of Panteleimon Monastery | Guardian Angel (G); Holy Prince Vladimir Equal to the Apostles (G); All the Holy Princes of Russia (R) |
| 2017 | Sevastopol | Saint Vladimir's Cathedral | Holy Prince Vladimir Equal to the Apostles (G) |
| | Paris | Holy Trinity Church | Holy Trinity (G); Most Holy Trinity (R). |
| 2018 | Sochi | Aleksandr Lukashenko | Guardian Angel (R) |
| 2019 | Belgrade | President Aleksandr Vučić | Putin and Vučić "complete" mosaic icon of Christ the Savior |
| | Valaam | Visit to Valaam Monastery with President Lukashenko | Myrrh bearing icon of the Mother of God (V) |
| | Konevets Island | Visit to Konevskii Monastery with President Lukashenko | Konevskaia Mother of God (R) |
| | Moscow | President Vučić | Transfiguration of the Lord (R) |
| | Vatican | Pope Francis | Saints Peter and Paul (G) |
| 2020 | Moscow | Bulgarian journalist addresses Putin at annual press conference | Saint Ivan Ril'skii (R) |
| | Damascus | President Bashar al-Assad | "Tenderness" icon of the Mother of God (G) |

sacred space created through devotional interaction, the icons with which Putin interacts are often linked to significant historical events traditionally perceived as miraculous and convey a sense of sacred time as well. But while narratives of sacred histories may strengthen alliances through memories of common cultural experiences as in the case of Greece, Serbia, and other traditionally Orthodox countries, they can also create contested temporal territory. (Table 3)

The language of the icon that plays out in Putin's encounters with foreign leaders often reveals complex truths about political relationships. The construction of the Cathedral of the Holy Dormition in the predominantly Muslim capital of Astana, Kazakhstan, for example, established a spiritual "outpost" of Russian influence, an idea emphasized in the 2015 icon exchange between Putin and President Nursultan Nazarbayev. Putin gave the cathedral an icon of the Protecting Veil of the Mother of God, symbolically promising defense. In turn, by giving Putin a Feodorov or "Romanov" icon of the Mother of God—an image that "blessed" Putin's presidency in 2000 and, as the Metropolitan of Astana and Kazakhstan Aleksandr (Mogilev) noted during the visit, is considered a protectress of the Russian state—Nazarbayev acknowledged Putin's authority.⁶⁹ In another example, years of reciprocal visits and icon exchanges with Patriarch Feofil of Jerusalem did not preclude Putin from spending Orthodox Christmas day 2020 with Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad at the Cathedral of the Most Holy Mother of God in Damascus. With Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu looking on, Putin donated an icon of the Mother of God to the church before he and Assad lit candles to the cathedral's icons. Visiting the relics of Saint John the Baptist at the Umayyad Mosque on the same day and noting the "common moral values" and "universal humanitarian values" of Orthodoxy and Islam, Putin demonstrated in words and actions a major goal of his icon diplomacy: to create alliances among conservative cultures that might join him in questioning the universality of western liberal values.⁷⁰

For Putin, political alliances can take shape through the construction of actual sacred space. In 2010 when Roman Catholic and Orthodox Easter fell on the same date, Putin marked what he hoped was a new era of Russian-Polish relations. On that day he visited the site of the 1940 Katyn Massacre to lay the cornerstone for the Orthodox Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ and bestow on the church a Resurrection icon. In his dedication speech, Putin emphasized the transformative nature of the project—describing how it would turn a tragic place into a "sacred place" and unite people of all faiths as equal victims of Soviet repression (a move widely seen as an attempt to whitewash the historical responsibility of the Soviet regime). Putin's emphasis on the shared reverence for icons paralleled his claim to the sacred history of the tragedy:

69. "Vladimir Putin podaril Uspenskomu Soboru v Astane ikonu Pokrova Presviatoi Bogoroditsy," *Pravoslavie*, October 15, 2015, at <https://pravoslavie.ru/86784.html> (accessed June 21, 2023).

70. "Putin raskryl prichinu posescheniia Bol'shoi mecheti Damaska," *EurAsia Daily*, January 7, 2021, at <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2021/01/07/putin-raskryl-prichinu-poseshcheniya-bolshoy-mecheti-damaska> (accessed June 21, 2023).

With the construction of this cathedral this place, which was certainly associated with tragedy and crime, is turning into a sacred place (*prevrashchaetsia v sviatoe mesto*). Ordinary citizens and relatives of the Poles, Russians, and other peoples of the Soviet Union who are buried in the Katyn forest will be able to come here, put down flowers and pray. Remember your loved ones, remember the victims of the repression of the totalitarian regime. And remember to make sure it never happens again in our history. With the blessing of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, Orthodox icons honored by Orthodox and Catholics, especially in Poland, will be placed here. It will be another symbol that unites our peoples.⁷¹

The icons that Putin gives to and receives from the Vatican seem to make even more grandiose claims to sacred territory. It is striking that, despite numerous visits in Rome with all three twenty-first century popes and the expressed desire for “interdenominational dialogue,” Putin has studiously disallowed the Holy Father to set foot on Russian soil. Even Pope John Paul II’s historical 2004 decision to return to Russia the icon of the Mother of God of Kazan (the palladium believed to have secured Prince Dmitrii Pozharskii’s victory over Polish-Catholic forces during Russia’s Time of Troubles in 1612) gained entry only for the Pope’s emissaries. Indeed, the only way the Vatican seems to get to Moscow is via gifts, like a majolica view of the Vatican Gardens or an etching of a view of Saint Peter’s Basilica (the inspiration for St. Petersburg’s Kazan Cathedral Square), given so Putin “would not forget Rome.”⁷² Putin has responded to the Vatican’s outreach with gifts that are equally symbolic of sacred space and history: a representation of Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior, volumes of the Orthodox Encyclopedia, and, most remarkably, icons that promote the idea that Moscow rather than Rome is the true heir of the Christian world. In 2013, for instance, Putin brought the Vatican an icon of the Vladimir Mother of God, the palladium and “master symbol” of the Russian state and a sign of Moscow’s own covenant with Mary.⁷³ (Figure 6) And, in a 2019 visit to discuss Syria and Ukraine, Putin presented Pope Francis with a large and ornately covered Orthodox icon of Saints Peter and Paul, from whom both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches claim descent. This icon challenged papal authority in several ways, claiming the keys of the kingdom of heaven in Saint Peter’s right hand and making implicit references to Putin’s native city of St. Petersburg, whose eighteenth-century architects strived to “surpass that which the Romans considered sufficient for their monuments.”⁷⁴

In contrast, Putin has warmly hosted the late Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, whose controversial 2015 trip to the Crimean Peninsula

71. “Osobyi den’ dlia narodov Rossii i Pol’shi,” *SmolNews.ru*, April 10, 2010, at <https://www.smolnews.ru/news/55176> (accessed June 21, 2023).

72. “Putin v tretii raz vstretilsia s papoi rimskim. I opiat’ opozdal,” *BBC News*, July 4, 2019, at <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-48871290> (accessed June 21, 2023).

73. Adams and Shevzov, “Introduction,” in *Framing Mary*, 8; Miller, “Legends of the Icon of Our Lady of Vladimir.”

74. Zara Torlone, “A Tale of Two Cities: Ancient Rome and Saint Petersburg in Mandelstam’s Poetry,” in Helena Goscilo and Stephen M. Norris, eds., *Preserving Petersburg: History, Memory, Nostalgia* (Bloomington, 2008), 88–114.



Figure 6. Putin presents Pope with an icon of the Vladimir Mother of God. Vatican. 2013.

was regarded as tacit support for Russia's 2014 annexation. Of note was Berlusconi's participation alongside Putin in rituals of icon veneration in the Cathedral of Saint Vladimir in the National Preserve of Tauric Chersoneses outside of Sevastopol, to which Putin gifted the analogous icon of Saint Vladimir. Berlusconi's presence and role in these activities seemed to ritually and politically validate Putin's perception of Crimea as "sacred" Russian space. Indeed, just months earlier in his address to the National Assembly, Putin—in a clear instance of "cultural semiotic transfer"—had symbolically relocated Jerusalem's Temple Mount to Crimea, where he pinpointed Russia's "spiritual" and political roots:

It is precisely in Crimea that the spiritual roots of a diverse but monolithic Russian state and Russian centralized government are located. For Russia, the Crimea, ancient Korsun, Chersoneses, and Sevastopol hold enormous civilizational and sacred meaning. It is like the Temple Mount in Jerusalem for those who profess Judaism or Islam. This is how we will regard it. From now on and forever.⁷⁵

In the past, Putin visited the Cathedral of Saint Vladimir (by legend the place where Prince Vladimir was Christened) with Ukrainian presidents Leonid Kuchma (2001) and Viktor Yanukovich (2013). But with these words—understood as political propaganda in Ukraine—he denoted Crimea

75. "Kherones: Russkaia Troia i Russkii Ierusalim," *Parlamentskaia gazeta*, January 15, 2018, at <https://www.pnp.ru/social/kherones-russkaya-troya-i-russkiy-ierusalim-2.html> (accessed June 21, 2023).

as sacred space for Russia alone.⁷⁶ Since then, Putin's designation of the peninsula as "holy" (*sviatoi*) or "sacred" (*sakral'nyi*) Russian territory has become commonplace.⁷⁷

Given such incursions into sacred history, Putin has understandably produced mixed results when he prods Orthodox "partner" states to participate in performative aspects of his icon diplomacy. In 2000, Putin "reminded" Ukraine's President Leonid Kuchma (fresh from a summit of the Central European Initiative states) of the sacred ties among his country, Russia, and Belarus with what amounted to a command performance and presentation of icons at the site of one of largest WWII tank battles between German and Soviet forces.⁷⁸ In contrast, Aliaksandar Lukashenka—until recently a self-described "Orthodox atheist"—has become increasingly proficient in the symbolic language of icons. Starting in 2014, Lukashenka adopted Putin's habit of attending Christmas church service (always in Minsk). In a 2018 meeting in Sochi, he gave Putin a Guardian Angel icon, observing that Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus need to act as each other's "guardians."⁷⁹ In July 2019, Lukashenka accompanied Putin to the island monasteries of Valaam and Konevets, where the two leaders venerated and received icons. A year later, Lukashenka and an unidentified Russian "patron" funded the restoration of the Saint John the Baptist church near Minsk, which features in its courtyard a WWII monument to Soviet liberators. Lukashenka donated what is likely a Zhirovitsskaia Mother of God icon at the consecration, an event designed to distract attention from anti-government demonstrations taking place in the capital.⁸⁰

Despite Russia's political, economic, and religious efforts to keep its neighboring states within its sphere of influence, Ukraine's dramatic transition from "brother state" to "enemy" revealed the tenuous nature of Putin's icon diplomacy and the Russian World project itself. As Putin's most frequent international destination, Ukraine first seemed to offer a model historical, cultural, and spiritual partnership. Nearly 40 percent of Putin's visits to Ukraine and with Ukrainian leaders before 2014 included the veneration and exchange of icons at visits to churches and monasteries and at consecrations and meetings with leaders of the Orthodox Church. During a July 2013 visit to

76. Elena Maiko, "Sakral'naia Korsun' kak instrument rossiiskoi propagandy," *Krym. Realii*, September 19, 2018, at <https://ru.krymr.com/a/sakralnaya-korsun-kak-instrument-rossiyskoy-propagandy/29496996.html> (accessed June 21, 2023).

77. Putin used such characterizations to mark the eighth anniversary of Crimea's annexation. "Putin nazval Krym sviatoi dlia Rossii zemlei," *Izvestiia*, March 18, 2021, <https://iz.ru/1139104/2021-03-18/putin-nazval-krym-sviatoi-dlia-rossii-zemlei> (accessed June 21, 2023).

78. Sergei Solodkii, "Slavianskoe svatovstvo Ukrainy ne sostoialos'," *Den'*, May 5, 2000, at <https://m.day.kyiv.ua/ru/article/panorama-dnya/slavyanskoe-svatovstvo-ukrainy-ne-sostoyalos> (accessed June 21, 2023).

79. "Lukashenko ob'iasnil smysl podarennoi Putinu kartiny s angelom-khranitelem," *Vedomosti*, August 27, 2018, at <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2018/08/27/779052-lukashenko-obyasnil-podarennoi-putinu-kartini-s-angelom-khranitelem> (accessed June 21, 2023).

80. Vladimir Rozanskii, "Surrounded by icons, Lukashenko blesses an Orthodox church," *Asianews*, October 6, 2020, at <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Surrounded-by-icons-Lukashenko-blesses-an-Orthodox-church-51222.html> (accessed June 21, 2023).

celebrate the 1025th anniversary of the Kyiv-Pechersk Monastery (the so-called “hub” of the Russian World in Kyiv that marked each presidential visit with a gifted icon) Putin promoted spiritual ties as the foundation of the Russian-Ukrainian “friendship.”⁸¹ Delivered on the eve of the Maidan Revolution, his comments seem to imagine the “spiritual unity” (*dukhovnoe edinstvo*) of the two nations as a political marriage that only God could sunder:

Our spiritual unity is so durable (*prochnyi*) that is it not subject to the actions of any power—neither the power of the government or, if I allow myself to say, even the church. Because no matter how powerful human authority over people is, nothing can be stronger than the authority of God.⁸²

While he was speaking at the monastery, however, citizens in Kyiv were protesting the alliance and, less than a year after Putin’s last engagement with icons in Ukraine, the notion of the Russian World there was soundly rejected. In fact, by spring 2022, the phrase “Russian World” had become an ironic nickname for Russia’s invasion and the destruction it wreaked, inverting its relationship with any sense of the sacred.

The semantic battle for the sacred continues in Russia’s war in Ukraine with icons acting as important visual idioms for territorial claims on real and imagined front lines. Icons of the Mother of God, for example, are used on both sides as symbolic defenses and expressions of regional exceptionalism.⁸³ Like Putin, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky does not want his image treated as an icon, but neither does he avoid the idiom of the icon.⁸⁴

81. “‘Putin golovnoho mozga u mnogikh’: V Kievo-Pecherskoi lavre zaiavliaiut o prepiatstviiakh v otkhode ot MP,” TCH, March 29, 2022, at <https://tsn.ua/ru/ato/putin-golovnoho-mozga-u-mnogih-v-kievo-pecherskoy-lavre-zayavlyayut-o-prepyatstviyah-v-othode-ot-mp-2022910.html> (accessed June 21, 2023). The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) now regards the monastery as a subversive center of support for the Russian Federation (*Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukraïny*, at <https://ssu.gov.ua/en/novyny/sbu-provodyt-bezpekovi-zakhody-u-kyievopecherskii-lavri>) (accessed August 23, 2023).

82. “Putin ob’iavil o dukhovnom edinstve Rossii i Ukrainy, kotoroe sil’nee liubykh vlastei,” *Newsru*, July 27, 2013, at <https://www.newsru.com/world/27jul2013/putncross.html> (accessed June 21, 2023).

83. See Joshua Kucera’s photo of pro-Russia men guarding Simferopol’s Parliament with shields and icons in 2014, *Al Jazeera America News Daily*, at http://america.aljazeera.com/content/ajam/features/2014/3/dispatch-from-crimea/jcr:content/featurechapter_0/chapterPar/textimage/image.adapt.990.high.kucera_crimea_2.1394803170068.jpg (accessed June 21, 2023). On November 4, 2021, Putin visited Sevastopol to reinvigorate the trope of threats from the west. Western outlets referred to the date as the Day of National Unity while local news sources in Sevastopol called it the Day of Commemoration of the Kazan icon of the Mother of God—a palladium of the Russian state (“V den’ narodnogo edinstva vlasti Sevastopolia vozlozhili tsvety k pamiatniku Primireniia,” *Bezformata*, November 4, 2021, at <https://nts-tv.com/news/v-den-narodnogo-edinstva-vlasti-sevastopolya-vozlo-43659/> [accessed June 21, 2023]). Miri Rubin notes how the war between Russia and Ukraine “has seen a resurgence of devotion to the Virgin Mary” (“There’s something about Mary: How the cult of the Virgin has evolved through history,” *Times Literary Supplement*, at <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/how-the-cult-of-the-virgin-mary-has-evolved-through-history-book-review-miri-rubin/> [accessed June 21, 2023]).

84. In his 2019 inaugural address, Zelensky said, “I really do not want my pictures in your offices, for the President is not an icon, an idol, or a portrait” (Bill Chappell, “Ukraine’s Comedian President Takes Office, Says He’s Dissolving Parliament,” *NPR*, May 20, 2019, at

Indeed, Zelensky also uses iconographical images to bolster national pride and combat Russian pretensions to Ukrainian territory and history. Two clear and dramatic examples show how Zelensky both understands and appropriates Putin's lexicon of the sacred. In the first instance on April 9, 2022, Zelensky announced that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the United States had returned the icon of Saint Mikola (Nicholas) Mokryi ("the Wet") to Kyiv, where it had been housed in the Cathedral of Saint Sophia until World War II.⁸⁵ Credited with saving the life of an infant who fell into the Dnieper River in 1091, the image, as Zelensky noted, is considered the first miraculous icon in Kyivan Rus' (and perhaps the first icon of Saint Nicholas in Rus'). In other words, the marvelous icon sanctified Kyivan lands long before the existence of the Russian state, thus legitimizing Ukraine's claims to its own sacred territory, history, and sovereignty:

I want the return of this sacred object to become an important symbol for everyone. A fundamental symbol. A symbol that we will restore to Ukraine all that is ours. Everything Ukrainian. We will restore all of our people. And we will surely restore justice—our complete control over our land.⁸⁶

Zelensky's identification of Saint Nicholas with the nation of Ukraine reflects the deep history of the saint's cult in early Rus', where, in the eleventh century, Grand Prince Sviatoslav Iaroslavich took Nicholas as his baptismal name and incorporated the image of the saint on his princely seals.⁸⁷ Zelensky's invocation of an Orthodox icon at this point in Ukraine's history can be understood not as a religious act (the president is Jewish), but a political gesture that imagines the icon as a symbol of Ukraine's right to self-determination.

The second example of Zelensky's icon "defensive" took place two weeks later at Easter in the Cathedral of Saint Sophia. There, Zelensky stood in front of the iconostasis to lead a Paschal prayer for deliverance from the invading Russian forces and to explain the national significance of the church's main icon—the same "Impenetrable Wall" Mother of God icon referenced in the 2012 "Prayer to Putin." Like the Putin prayer and its nineteenth-century subtext, Zelensky's Easter prayer drew on the tradition of the *akafist* to the Mother of God. Although addressed to God, Zelensky's words created a symbolic correlate of the icon above him (which he refers to as the Mother of God "Oranta," or "at prayer") as he led the nation in prayer. At the same time, Zelensky sought to transcend the boundaries of faith traditions and frame the icon as a universal symbol of Ukrainian unity and national defense, the "impenetrable wall

<https://www.npr.org/2019/05/20/724961911/ukraines-comedian-president-takes-office-says-he-s-dissolving-parliament> [accessed June 21, 2023]).

85. Tymur A. Bobrovs' kii, "'Mikola Mokryi': Z istorii naidavnishogo chudotvornogo obrazu Sofii Kiivs' koi," *Sofis' kii chasopis* 3 (2019): 99–128.

86. "V Ukrainu vernetsia pervaia chudotvornaia ikona Kievskoi Rusi," *RISU*, April 9, 2022, at https://risu.ua/ru/v-ukrainu-vernetsya-pervaya-chudotvornaya-ikona-kievskoi-rusi_n128211 (accessed June 21, 2023).

87. Ildar H. Garipzanov, "The cult of St. Nicholas in the early Christian North (c. 1000–1150)," *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 35, no. 3 (August 2010): 231.

of the state,” “protectress,” and “immutable pillar” against the enemy from the east.

On our side we have truth, our people, the Lord, and the highest heavenly radiance. The strength of the protectress (*zastupnitsa*) of humankind, the Mother of God Oranta. She is right here above me; she is above us all. The immutable pillar (*stovp*) of the Church of Christ, the impenetrable wall of state (*nerushima stina derzhavi*). While there is the Mother of God Oranta — there is Saint Sophia’s, and with her stands Kyiv, and with them—all of Ukraine.⁸⁸

If the text of Zelensky’s remarks coopt familiar terms in the lexicon of political iconography, the professionally produced video version of the speech shows his mastery over Putin’s visual idiom of icons, particularly the emphasis on his sacerdotal role during the 2018 inauguration and 2022 Christmas services. A semiotic analysis of Zelensky’s 2022 Easter address shows similar dynamics of sacralization. Framed by the Royal Doors of the iconostasis, Zelensky becomes a visual part of the row of icons of Christ, the Mother of God, and other saints.⁸⁹ Zelensky stands alone just feet from the “holiest of holies” beyond the icon screen and faces an imagined congregation, symbolically assuming the liturgical status of “earthly” protector of his nation that Putin has long sought for himself. By necessity, Zelensky is playing a role he avoided early in his presidency—that of a living (political) icon for Ukraine. Indeed, as the video of his Easter address narrows to close up and Zelensky recites the impassioned prayer of protection for the people and cities of Ukraine, his newly bearded face, intense, lachrymose eyes, and recognizable olive drab clothing convey all the semiotic markings of a portrait of sacred leadership *cum* saintly icon.⁹⁰ On the symbolic battlefield of the sacred Zelensky presents Putin with a formidable semiotic challenge. In a matter of a few, terrible months of war, he accomplished what the messianic Putin has been trying to establish for decades—the nearly world-wide perception of the president as protector of the nation and chosen leader of the sacred mission for Ukraine’s sovereignty and its right to exist.

88. “Privitannia Prezidenta Ukraïni Volodimira Zelens’kogo z Velikodnem,” Website of the President of Ukraine, April 24, 2022, at <https://www.president.gov.ua/news/privitannya-prezidenta-ukrayini-z-velikodnem-82293> (accessed June 21, 2023).

89. “Privitannia Prezidenta Ukraïni Volodimira Zelens’kogo z Velikodnem.” YouTube channel of the President of Ukraine, April 24, 2022, 1:08, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-ht0wqWEU&t=53s> (accessed June 21, 2023).

90. “Privitannia Prezidenta,” 10:11. On the sartorial symbolism of Zelensky’s tee shirt, see Vanessa Friedman, “The Man in the Olive Green Tee: How President Zelensky of Ukraine transformed the meaning of a piece of cotton,” *New York Times*, March 24, 2022, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/21/style/volodymyr-zelensky-t-shirt.html> (accessed June 21, 2023); and Eric Twardzik, “The Significance of Zelensky’s Olive-Drab Crewneck T-Shirt: Does the Ukrainian president’s simple choice of clothing send a message?” *InsideHook*, March 25, 2022 at <https://www.insidehook.com/article/news-opinion/zelenskys-t-shirt-means> (accessed June 21, 2023). Twardzik quotes fashion journalist G. Bruce Boyer who sees in Zelensky’s clothing “both a ‘Man of the People’ and that they are at war, which means commitment, austerity, sacrifice, and suffering”—qualities embodied by subjects of Orthodox icons.

If Putin intended to reintroduce the notion of the sacred back into the political sphere, he may have succeeded with his curated interactions with icons, which, over the course of his long political career, have functioned politically as persuasion, coercion, and war. Moving forward, it will be critical to understand the idiom of the icon as an important and persistent form of Russian political discourse. No matter what the outcome of the war in Ukraine, for example, recognizing it as a sacred cause will help us understand the roots and potential consequences of the violence. The past two decades show how the semiotic language of icons has been adopted and amplified by Putin's political allies and surrogates from Dmitrii and Svetlana Medvedev, regional politicians, Russia's business community, and friends of the president (like Vladimir Iakunin and Igor Sechin) who lead conservative social organizations and oversee the programmatic restoration of Russia's holy sites. Like Putin, the political elite in Russia may favor the flexibility and agility of this kind of semiotic signaling in the absence of true political ideology.⁹¹ Given the Aesopic nature of Putin's politics of the sacred, his engagement with Orthodox icons, and his willingness to engage in "sacred" war, we run the risk of dangerous misunderstandings if we cannot fathom this language of the icon. Ultimately, and because there will assuredly be less direct interaction with Russia in the foreseeable future, it is critical to understand Putin's political use of icons, which may continue to indicate what space and time he considers sacred enough to defend.

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91. Evans, Alfred B., Jr. "Putin's Legacy and Russia's Identity," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Power and Policy in Putin's Russia 60, no. 6 (August 2008): 909–10.