Russian ethnic nationalism and religion today

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This chapter examines the ideology and the political practice of Russian ethnic nationalists, exploring religio-ideological trends in contemporary Russian ethnic nationalism and assessing their potential. By Russian ethnic nationalists, I refer solely to those individual authors, parties and movements who hold the self-determination of Russians as an ethnic group as a central element of their ideology and political programme. Thus I do not deal here with political movements that are not nationalist but that borrow from the nationalists various popular ideas or political slogans at odds with the basic ideology of that party or movement.

Ethnic nationalists do not acknowledge that it is possible or necessary to create a civic nation that unites different ethnic and racial groups within Russia. For them, the Russian Federation is an alien state, dominated by a minority that oppresses the majority – akin to the South African system of apartheid. Nationalists often call Russia ‘Rossiiania’ or ‘Erefiya’ (‘RF-iiia’), stressing that they are not patriots. For nationalists, the word ‘rossiianin’, a citizen of the Russian Federation, as opposed to ‘russkii’, an ethnic Russian, is an insult, and ‘tozherossiianin’ (‘also-a-Russian-citizen’) is a scornful label for non-Russian ethnic groups.
Russian ethnic nationalism and religion in historical perspective

Ethnic nationalism is a relatively young ideology in Russia. Political thought in Russia has always focused on the relationship between the state and Orthodox Christianity. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the historical role of the Russian people was rarely questioned. As John Anderson notes, in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, Slavophiles were the first to focus more on the roots of religion in the ‘national psyche’ (2012: 209). Slavophiles barely distinguished the ‘people’ from the ‘state’: ‘they all took the view that Orthodoxy was in some sense core to the very identity of Russians as a people and Russia as a state’ (ibid.). At that time the Russian people were divided into social classes with differing legal status, so the foundations for ethnic nationalism had not yet been laid. The idea of a civic nation, borrowed from the West, was unacceptable to conservatives, but was to become the hallmark of the liberal and social-democratic camp.

At the start of the twentieth century, the ‘Black Hundreds’ ideology emerged. This became a step on the way to ethnic nationalism, since the Black Hundreds sought the formation of a Russian state, rather than imperial expansion (Stepanov 1992). However, the Black Hundreds were still closely linked with the traditions of Russian conservatism, which was state-centred and religious, whereas ethnic nationalists severed the connection between the Russian people and the Russian state, admitting the possibility of personally opposing the state. This kind of Russian ethnic nationalism emerged only after the revolution of 1917. It developed in the diaspora and was a part of the dissident movement in the USSR, but only after the beginning of perestroika was it possible to propagate ethnic nationalism openly.

In the final years of the USSR and immediately after its collapse, various conglomerates took shape that united people of diverse ideological orientations under the common name of ‘Russian nationalists’. Important here were the Pamiat Society, which arose at the end of the 1980s, and Russian National Unity (RNE). Almost all long-standing members of today’s nationalist
movement began their activities either in Pamiat or in RNE (the RNE leadership also emerged from Pamiat). Then even larger super-conglomerates of ‘red-whites’ (the Russian National Council under General Aleksandr Sterligov and the National Salvation Front) emerged in the early 1990s, joined by nationalists, imperialist patriots and Soviet patriots, giving rise to the name ‘national patriots’. People with incompatible ideological positions were united in their hostility to the Russian authorities and their desire for regime change. These national patriots represented not so much a set of organisations as a milieu consisting of individuals and small groups, connected by a network in virtual and real space (for information on some of these individuals and groups, see Verkhovsky and Kozhevikova 2009).

Sergei Lebedev, a scholar and also a participant in the national patriotic movement of the 1990s (he was a member of the Russian National Council), writes that at that time ‘the defence of Orthodoxy’ was one of the shared characteristics common to all national patriots, even atheists (Lebedev 2007: 472). Alexander Verkhovsky (2007a: 11) also observes the ‘obligatory’ presence of Orthodoxy in the political doctrines of ‘serious nationalists’, at least until after the turn of the millennium. This was due partly to the legacy of conservative thought of the past, and partly to the mass public interest in Orthodoxy in the first post-Soviet decade. The profusion of neophytes with high expectations created the illusion among nationalist ideologues that identification with Orthodoxy in particular would help to attract more supporters. Pamiat, for whom Orthodoxy was an ideological prop, played a role in this. This was the first nationalist organisation to gain Russia-wide media coverage, although it was consistently depicted in a negative light. For a long time new organisations, whether consciously or not, copied the ideology of Pamiat, including their emphatic adherence to Orthodoxy. Some of the nationalists liked the fact that by doing so they were maintaining a link with the Russian conservative tradition. Others, conversely, wanted to be more contemporary, turning to the experience of the European right-wing.

Soon after the turn of the millennium, ‘true’ Russian nationalists began to demarcate themselves from those in the national
patriotic sphere more appropriately called ‘statists’ or ‘patriots’, using nationalist rhetoric. The ‘true’ nationalists seek an ethnically homogenous state of Russian people: they do not want to preserve the Russian Federation, still less to resurrect the Soviet Union or the Russian Empire. Patriots, by contrast, are ready to sacrifice the ‘special position’ of the Russian majority in the name of preserving and increasing the territory of the state. The transformation of the rhetoric, and in part also the nature, of the ruling regime led the patriots to adopt a natural – for them – position of supporting the government, which in their eyes now appeared suitably (if not entirely) Russian and national. Among the nationalists, one section was busy consolidating the citizens of Russia, and became civic nationalists, extremely loyal to the authorities. ‘True’ nationalists, in contrast, strengthened their opposition to the regime, which they hitherto had deemed weak and unworthy of serious opposition.

Ethnic nationalists had been a minority among the broad array of ‘national patriots’ in the 1990s. Lebedev (2007: 453, 450) refers to them as ‘low-profile’, ‘outsiders in the national patriotic movement’ and even ‘a ghetto’. The process of demarcation created the illusion among nationalists themselves that a completely new ideology now had appeared.

The political demarcation between nationalists and patriots was accompanied by a religious demarcation. Statist patriots preserved their traditional orientation towards Orthodoxy. Ethnic nationalists split into three basic groups, to be examined separately in detail below: (1) Orthodox nationalists, who may belong to the Russian Orthodox Church or to uncanonical religious organisations; (2) contemporary Slavic pagans (neopagans); and (3) secularists: those who consider religious questions unimportant and do not advertise their religious affiliation (if they have one).

**Orthodox Christianity and Russian nationalism**

Orthodox organisations and activist writers who publicly proclaim their adherence to nationalism comprise a discrete section of the nationalist movement. Among the organisations, the most
important are the Union of Russian People and various similarly named structures that appeared as a result of the splintering of this organisation as well as the Union of Orthodox Banner-bearers; among activists Konstantin Dushenov, editor of the newspaper *Rus Pravoslavnaia* (Orthodox Rus), the politicians Iurii Ekihev, Boris Mironov (and his wife Tatiana) and Andrei Saveliev, and the publicist Mikhail Nazarov. The position of Orthodox nationalists in the nationalist sphere has always been difficult and ambiguous, and their ideological principles indistinct.

It is not Orthodox doctrine that presents nationalists with the greatest difficulty, since they freely adapt it according to their aims, but the necessity of belonging to the Church and participating in liturgical life. Since this necessity is spelt out in the Creed and in Holy Scripture, Orthodox nationalists cannot avoid the ‘Church issue’. The average person can call him or herself Orthodox without partaking of the sacraments of the Church, but Orthodox nationalists study their ideology, they read and think, and as a result are aware that identifying oneself as an Orthodox Christian means having a life within the Church. The main problem for Russian nationalists is their critical and even hostile attitude to the Orthodox Church that ministers to the area in which they live.

In order to understand the attitude of Orthodox nationalists towards the Russian Orthodox Church, we must examine the official ecclesiastical position on issues that concern nationalists, relating to the people, the state and the Church.

**The Russian Church in the Russian world**

The official position of the Church is not the same as the position adopted by its individual or group members, clerical and lay. All possible ideological tendencies, from complete universalism (*uranopolitizm*) to racist ethnic nationalism, are unofficially represented. None of these tendencies is the official one. The position of the Church is reflected in the articles and speeches of the Primate (the Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus), representatives of synodal departments and the other governing bodies that guide the Church.
Following the 1917 revolution, groups that insisted on separating the concept of the Russian (rossiiskoe) state from that of the Russian (russkii) people first appeared in the Church: among members of the ‘catacomb church’ (True Orthodox Christians) and of the Church Abroad. The ecclesiastical majority remained loyal to the traditional approach of Russian conservative thought, asserting that there was an unbreakable link between people and state. That said, the former link between the Church and state established in the synodal period was not, of course, restored.

With the collapse of the USSR, it became necessary for the Russian Orthodox Church to rethink the issue of patriotism. In the ‘people or state’ conundrum the Church did not side unilaterally with the state. The Church did not consider it appropriate to ‘shrink’ to the boundaries of the Russian Federation and function as an ideological support to this state. Civic nationalism is therefore not characteristic of the Church, which is patriotic but not inclined to support any state action. This is reflected in the Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church, where, at least in theory the possibility of civil disobedience is recognised.

The state would like to use the Church to legitimise its politics and to strengthen the civic nation. At the same time, it has not tried to take any significant steps towards meeting the needs of the Church. The Church insists on having its own agenda, and although it acts with caution, instances of opposition between the Church and the state have multiplied in the post-Soviet period. One of these concerns the fate of the Orthodox parishes of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Even though Moscow recognised the independence of the two republics, the Russian Orthodox Church continues to insist that they are located on the canonical territory of the Georgian Church; supplications by clerics and laity have not changed this position (Matsuzato 2009, 2010). Parishes in Crimea have likewise remained under the jurisdiction of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, although this region has now been included in the Russian Federation. In terms of domestic politics, we may recall the Church’s struggle for the ‘Fundamentals of Orthodox culture’ as a mandatory school subject: the state eventually decided to introduce a course on the ‘Fundamentals of religious cultures and secular ethics’, in which
the ‘Fundamentals of Orthodox culture’ is one of five options that parents (not the school) may choose from.

The independence of the Church from the state does not mean that its official position has become ethnic Russian nationalism. Names such as the Russian (Russkaia) Orthodox Church and the World Russian (Russkii) People’s Council can be misleading,\textsuperscript{6} as they suggest an ethnic narrowness that is alien to Orthodox Christianity. In reality, only the Moscow and Constantinople Patriarchates do not aspire to create ethnic parishes abroad – the remaining local Churches usually minister to ethnic diasporas. Only these patriarchates conduct missionary activity beyond the boundaries of the historical Orthodox realm: in China, Thailand, Pakistan and elsewhere. The ethnic diversity of the Russian Church grows with the opening of new parishes: local residents unconnected with Russian culture become parishioners.

In contrast to the ethnic nationalists, the Russian Orthodox Church does not consider immigrants from other cultures a threat to the Russian people. On 19 April 2013, the Church signed a cooperation agreement with the Federal Migration Service and went on to create a diocesan system for facilitating linguistic and cultural adaptation of migrant workers. As official spokespersons have announced more than once, this work with immigrants is not a missionary effort to bring them to Orthodoxy\textsuperscript{7} – although individual clerics and lay members may, of course, insist on the need to catechise immigrants.

Despite the fact that the Church through its activity thus has proven its negative attitude to ethnic nationalism, the use of the phrase ‘the Russian world’ (russkii mir) can cause confusion if interpreted as an indicator if not of ethnic, then of ‘imperial’, ecclesiastical nationalism. Theoretically the concept of ‘the Russian world’ allows such a possibility, but the Church uses this phrase in its own way, and over the past few years it has imbued ‘the Russian world’ with increasingly broad content.

Until 2009, the Church did not use the concept ‘the Russian world’. In a 2008 article by Father Georgii Riabykh (the later Abbot Filipp Riabykh; see below), ideas of ‘civilisational diversity’, of a ‘multi-polar world’ and ‘civilisational originality’ are evoked in a discussion of Orthodox civilisation (Riabykh 2008: ...
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25). Apparently on the basis of similar publications, Verkhovsky came to the conclusion that ‘beyond the territory of the USSR the Russian Orthodox Church claims a flock which is exclusively Russian in cultural and ethnic terms’, and that the ecclesiastical understanding of unique and segregated civilisations is close to that of Samuel Huntington (Verkhovsky 2007b: 178, 180). Father Georgii Riabykh (2008: 30) cites not ecclesiastical but state circles on the concept of ‘the Russian world’, the aim of which is to unify the Russian-speaking diaspora. The diaspora does indeed look like a closed and isolated version of an Orthodox civilisation. However, the Church swiftly rejected this approach, perhaps because the unity of Orthodox civilisation is up for debate (Mitrofanova 2004).

Patriarch Kirill first began talking about ‘the Russian world’ from an ecclesiastical perspective on 3 November 2009, at the Third Assembly of the Russian World, where he suggested the widest possible interpretation of all of the concepts raised – the ‘Russian Church’ (russkaia tserkov’), the ‘Russian culture’ (russkaia kul’tura), even ‘the Russian language’. Abbot Filipp (Riabykh), elaborating on the Patriarch’s position, stressed that the debate was not about Russian ethnic identity (etnos) but about the spiritual-cultural tradition that every local church creates. According to Abbot Filipp, tradition suggests shared spiritual centres, shared shrines and specific traits in ecclesiastical life – for example, the Old Style calendar that unites people belonging to ‘different ethnic and national cultures’ – and that the sources of such tradition may be located outside of Russia (for example, the Kyivan Caves Monastery) (quoted by Sokolov 2010). ‘With such an understanding of the Russian world, we depart from a narrow ethnic perception of the Russian Church itself, too. In this light the Russian Church is the Church of the multinational Russian world, and not of the Russian ethnic group’, he explained (ibid).

Confirming the unacceptability of ethnic nationalism, Patriarch Kirill did not confine himself to praising the ‘unique russkaia civilisation’ and did not call for its isolation. He declared:

We need to be even more clearly aware of the uniqueness of the Russian way of life and to reproduce it not only in countries where
Patriarch Kirill’s suggestion that the Russian way of life be presented (and even reproduced) worldwide clearly goes beyond Huntington’s theory of original and exclusive civilisations that are unable to comprehend one another. In ecclesiastical understanding, Russian civilisation is valuable not so much because of its uniqueness as because its values and principles are deemed to be universal, and can be disseminated beyond the realms of ‘the Russian world’. If uniqueness were the only issue at stake, one may agree with the phrase ‘civilisational nationalism’, suggested by Emil Pain (2007; see also Verkhovsky 2014c: 74). However, the ecclesiastical approach is not nationalist, but universal. Nationalism – ethnic or civic – suggests exclusivity, a closed nature, the maintenance of strict boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’. One can hardly talk about ‘nationalism’ when the values of a specific civilisation are freely promoted to more or less the entire rest of the world.

The universalism of the ecclesiastical approach emerged even more clearly during Patriarch Kirill’s speech at the World Russian People’s Council in 2013. Despite a preliminary remark about the uniqueness of the Russian civilisation, the Patriarch stressed that ‘the value of any civilisation lies in what it brings to humanity . . . As a country and a civilisation, Russia has something to offer the world’ (Ofitsial’nyi sait Moskovskogo patriarkhata 2013). Here the universal cultural mission of Russian civilisation is clearly in harmony with the universal mission of the Church to save humanity – that would be impossible if the Church accepted Huntington’s theory of isolated and hostile civilisations.

Thus, on the official level the Russian Orthodox Church does not promote nationalist concepts – neither ethnic, nor imperial, nor civilisational. The Church does not ethnicise, but universalises, going beyond – theoretically and practically – not only the borders of the Russian Federation but also the borders of its
canonical territory. Since the idea of ‘the Russian world’ is not of ecclesiastical origin, it may also be that, with time, the Church will stop using this phrase and develop another that better reflects its universal approach.

Hence, nationalists – ethnic and civic – can be only marginal within the Church. Nevertheless, there is a layer of nationalists for whom affiliation to Orthodoxy is important, for personal reasons. These individuals develop a variety of strategies that allow them to unite two apparently incompatible outlooks on the world. The simplest strategy is to join various uncanonical Orthodox jurisdictions (or to create such jurisdictions) where it is easier to hold non-standard opinions. More complex strategies involve the endurance of separate nationalists and even whole groups as members of the Russian Orthodox Church. Before turning to each of these variants, let us examine the shared ideological foundations of Orthodox nationalism (Mitrofanova 2005; Verkhovsky 2005a, 2005b).

THE IDEOLOGY OF ORTHODOX NATIONALISM: A GENERAL OVERVIEW

Orthodox nationalists trace their ideological biography to the works of Metropolitan Ioann (Snychev) of St Petersburg and Ladoga. From 1992 to 1995 Konstantin Dushenov – the best-known representative of Orthodox nationalism, a retired submarine officer and one of the original leaders of the Union of Orthodox Brotherhoods – worked as his aide (according to Dushenov, as press secretary).

A starting point for Orthodox nationalism is its rejection of the contemporary world, which is perceived as having abandoned God and fallen under the sway of the Antichrist. Orthodox nationalists hold that the special mission of Russia and the Russian people is the preservation of the Orthodox enclave in a decaying world. The Russian people and their state (not any Russian state, but specifically a state of the Russian people) are the katechon, ‘the one who withholds’, keeping back the collapse of the world and the establishment of the rule of the Antichrist (see Dushenov 2006).
There is an idea about the Russians as a chosen people, of the uniqueness of their fate. The Russian people acquire special worth not only as the preserver of the true faith, but in and of itself, independently of formal confession of faith. ‘Russia and the Russian people are a sort of holy ark, in which God’s Revelation is preserved’, Dushenov declared (Portal-Credo.ru 2005). ‘Russian’ and ‘Orthodox’ are equivalent concepts for nationalists. Dushenov came to the conclusion that

the doctrine of Russian Orthodox nationalism is an inalienable part of the religious doctrine of the Church. Every Christian is now simply obliged to be a Russian Orthodox nationalist. And the enemies of this doctrine are the enemies of the Mother Church and our Lord Jesus Christ. (Dushenov 2006)

Orthodox nationalists also tend to be pro-monarchist. A phenomenon has emerged in their midst that their opponents contemptuously refer to as ‘tsarebozhnichestvo’ – worshipping the tsar in place of Christ (Orthodox nationalists themselves consider this epithet insulting, and do not use it). The source of this concept is the nationalist idea of the Russian people’s collective guilt for the sin of regicide: the Russian people are not only God’s chosen people, but also a great sinner nation. The sins of the Russian people were on such a terrible, cosmic scale that they could be redeemed only by the voluntary, sacrificial death of Nikolai II and his family.

The tsar and his family are indeed venerated as saints by the entire Russian Orthodox Church. But the Church considers the forms of veneration that have developed among Orthodox nationalists uncanonical, and even heretical. The latter paint uncanonical icons of Saint Tsar Nikolai, depicting him with a halo that contains the form of a cross, like Christ (Bodin 2009). The nationalists have also developed their own version of eschatology. They hold that, through repentance, Russia will receive a new tsar, who will conquer the Antichrist and prevent him holding sway over Russia (see Zemtsov 2012). The Orthodox nationalist ritual of ‘the whole nation’s repentance’ – in other words, the repentance of the Russian people for the sin of regicide – has become widely
known. Group repentance is conducted with diverse participants and in various places. Particularly well-known is the ‘rite of repentance of the whole nation’, conducted at the monument to Tsar Nikolai in the village of Taininskoe in the Moscow region. A similar ritual is also conducted each year in Nizhnii Novgorod, where Prince Dmitrii Pozharskii and the merchant Kuzma Minin levied their militia against the Polish invaders in the early seventeenth century.

Most Orthodox nationalists share these ideological directions to a greater or lesser extent. These directions do not accord with, or accord poorly with, Orthodox doctrine and the official position of the Church, which makes life within the Russian Orthodox Church problematic for the nationalists. Nevertheless, the Church has been relatively lenient towards them, although their views and activities (especially the introduction of uncanonical icons and rituals) have attracted criticism from the hierarchy and ecclesiastical press. By contrast, nationalists themselves are often hostile towards the ‘official church’. Their negative views of the Russian Orthodox Church are not just a result of the absence of indicators of ethnic nationalism in the Church’s stance, but also because of its collaboration with the ruling regime. Orthodox nationalists – like all nationalists – see the secular authorities in Russia as being ranged against the Russian people and Orthodoxy (as ‘godless’, and a ‘power not from God’). In reality it is almost impossible for an Orthodox believer to be an implacable opponent of a governing regime: the requirement to obey the authorities is set out in Holy Scripture (for example, Romans 13: 3–4). However, the catacomb milieu, with its complete rejection of all secular authority and weakened liturgical life, had an enormous influence on Orthodox nationalists in the early 1990s, and continues to have so (see Beglov 2014). There is nothing surprising in the fact that Orthodox nationalists often do not want to be members of the Russian Orthodox Church, or split off from the Church at some point in their lives.
Orthodox nationalists of alternative jurisdictions

Until the reunification of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA) in 2007, Orthodox nationalists generally aligned themselves with ROCA communities. This allowed them to remain within an apparently canonical church and simultaneously to avoid cooperating with the Russian authorities. After the reunification of the churches, uncanonical structures that did not want to be reconciled with the ‘Soviet’ Church and split away from the ROCA became popular with nationalists.

One example is the ‘Russian (Rossiiskaia) Orthodox Church’ (RosOC), which appeared in 2006. Iurii Ekishev, a well-known nationalist politician from Syktyvkar, had been a member of this community since about 1998, when it was still part of ROCA. Previously he had been a parishioner of the Russian Orthodox Church, but had left this because of its cooperation with the ‘godless authorities’ and its reluctance to call for an armed uprising (Kuzmin 2011: 257). Ekishev’s successor as head of the nationalists in the Komi Republic, Aleksei Kolegov, is proud of the fact that he occasionally cooperates with the Syktyvkar diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church, but he considers its priests unable to motivate people to protect Orthodoxy. He holds a higher opinion of the RosOC priests Ekishev has introduced him to:

[young people] like the fact that they [the RosOC priests] say: we have to protect ourselves. And these photographs there: a priest bearing arms. That’s normal for them. They all have weapons, they have all possible kinds of sports activities . . . They are clearly different from the Moscow Patriarchate. If we could only show this sort of priests on television . . . But instead we show a priest sitting by the fire, drinking tea.10

It has also been reported in the media (although this is currently impossible to verify) that Colonel Vladimir Kvachkov of the People’s Militia of Minin and Pozharskii has joined the RosOC (Chelnokov 2011).11 Kvachkov’s deputy in the People’s Militia was Ekishev; after Colonel Kvachkov was arrested for the second
time in 2010, Eksheev remained the sole leader of the People’s Militia. According to the *New Times*, while in prison Kvachkov announced, ‘I transferred to the jurisdiction of the RosOC and took communion there’ (*Newsland.com* 2011).

Another jurisdiction that emerged as a result of splits in the ROCA is the ROCA-A led by Bishop Agafangel (Pashkovskii) and with its centre in Odessa. Orthodox nationalist Mikhail Nazarov was a member of this jurisdiction. The well-known publicist Egor Kholmogorov, who calls himself ‘a Russian nationalist and an Orthodox fundamentalist’, at one time belonged to another splinter group emerging from ROCA, the Russian (*Rossiiskaia*) Orthodox Autonomous Church (ROAC), which has its centre in Suzdal. At the time of this writing, however, Kholmogorov has returned to the Russian Orthodox Church (see also Kholmogorov 2008).

Other than ROCA splinter groups, nationalists may join the Russian Old Believers and the Old Style jurisdictions of other local churches that reject cooperation with the authorities. In extreme circumstances, there remains the possibility of independently creating an uncanonical structure. Bishop Diomid (Dziuban) of Anadyr and Chukotka – the author of several open letters accusing the hierarchy of the Church, and even Patriarch Aleksii himself, of heresy and cooperation with an anti-people regime – was defrocked in 2008 by the Russian Orthodox Church. After his dismissal Diomid created a virtual structure, ‘the Most Holy Governing Synod’, which a section of the Orthodox nationalists joined. It is worth noting that in his open letters Diomid did not articulate any sort of nationalist ideas: in other words, what nationalists find attractive is probably his implacable hostility to the ‘official church’. Nationalists themselves deduced from Diomid’s phrases about the ‘anti-people regime’ that he was denouncing ‘non-Russian’ authorities. Schema-priest-monk Rafail (Berestov), to whom we will return to below, swiftly spoke out in support of Diomid on the grounds that ‘the government of Russia is not Russian. It does not follow a Russian ideology’ (Rafail [Berestov, R.] 2008).
ORTHODOX NATIONALISTS IN THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

The Orthodox nationalists who remain in the Russian Orthodox Church, doomed to the difficult combination of belonging to the Church and continuously criticising her actions, are bordering on schism. Aleksandr Zhuchkovskii, for instance, who writes in the journal *Voprosy natsionalizma* (Questions of Nationalism), stresses that ‘I am Orthodox by confession, I am a member of the Russian Orthodox Church’ (Zhuchkovskii 2014: 33). At the same time, the position of the Church on the ‘Russian question’ does not suit him:

Members of the Russian Orthodox Church should be in the first ranks of the Russian March, and in discussions with the authorities the ecclesiastical leadership should be strict lobbyists for the introduction of a visa regime with the countries that send migrants alien to our culture and religion. Instead, unfortunately, we observe the contrary. (Zhuchkovskii 2014: 42)

Before his arrest in 2010, Dushenov was an especially ambiguous figure, disseminating openly anti-Church materials while remaining a member of the Church. This bewildered even those individuals who shared the views of Orthodox nationalism, such as Leonid Simonovich-Nikshich:

I don’t entirely understand Konstantin Dushenov. His newspaper [*Rus Pravoslavnaia*] often speaks from a theoretical position which Karl Marx founded and considered the most important during his lifetime. This thesis is called: criticism of everything that exists. And so that is how it turns out. He criticises absolutely everything and everybody. Why? What sort of criticism? Not necessary criticism, but creative activity and help to the weak. As it is said, ‘and mercy to the fallen is called for’, as one not entirely stupid person wrote. But where is this mercy? Not mercy, but some sort of awfulness. We attack everyone and everyone is bad. And what sort of people are we, then?12

Simonovich-Nikshich stressed that the Union of Orthodox Banner-bearers, of which he is the leader, belongs to the Church:
I say clearly to you: we are not edinovertsy [an Old Believer group in communion with the Moscow Patriarchate], not Old Believers, not catacomb Christians, not True Orthodox Church, not Church Abroad, neither those nor any others of their huge number of offshoots. We are the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, headed by the Most Holy Patriarch Kirill.

Due to the specific administrative structure of the Church, which allows individual parishes considerable independence, it is possible to be an adherent of nationalism and simultaneously a member of the Russian Orthodox Church. An Orthodox believer who is inclined towards nationalism can find a parish where his views will be considered dogmatically acceptable (although this may mean he will need to travel a great distance to participate in the liturgical life of this parish), and a group of Orthodox nationalists can create such a parish.

The above-mentioned ‘tsar-worshippers’ (tsarebozhniki), for example, created a parish around the priest Roman Zelenskii, who, until he was dismissed in 2008, served in Leningrad oblast and ministered to several nationalist monarchist organisations such as the Society of Zealots for the Glorification of the Royal Martyrs. Father Roman’s parishioners were (and perhaps remain) notable figures of Orthodox nationalism – such as the singer Zhanna Bichevskaia and her husband, the poet and composer Gennadii Ponomarev. Before he was dismissed, Father Roman conducted the liturgy according to the pre-revolutionary service book, including prayers for the Emperor, and during the Prothesis he would cut a piece from the offertory bread for the Tsar – practices not in use in the contemporary Orthodox Church.

Parishes may also be more abstract, when believers are ‘spiritually fed’ by some cleric at a distance, reading his publications on the Internet or frequenting mass meetings (not church services). There is a number of politically active ‘wandering clerics’, who are not registered with any particular church or monastery, and who are sometimes without clear jurisdiction. They write books and articles, and organise meetings with their virtual flock. Notable here is schema-priest-monk Rafail (Berestov), brother
of the famed and highly respected cleric, medical doctor and philanthropist Abbot Anatolii (Berestov). Father Rafail speaks out against the church hierarchs extremely harshly, considering them ‘riddled with heresies’ (Novorossiia 2010). Despite his advanced years (he was born in 1932), he travels around the world meeting with believers. Such practices allow Orthodox nationalists to remain within the Russian Orthodox Church, despite not trusting its hierarchy and holding dogmatic ideas that are not Church-approved.

Elements of nationalism existed in the ideology of many Orthodox political organisations and activist writers in the 1990s. However, after two significant events – the defrocking of Bishop Diomid in 2008 and the sentencing of Dushenov in 2010 under Criminal Code Article 282 Part 2 (incitement to hatred and enmity on the grounds of nationality, origin or religion), nationalism has been reduced to a marginal ideological tendency in the Orthodox sphere. The majority of Orthodox believers are aware that nationalism leads one into opposition with the Church and into conflict with the authorities. Few Orthodox nationalist organisations have survived until today, and the majority of visible Orthodox nationalists have either moved into the camp of ‘patriots’ (Kholmogorov, Dushenov), or are no longer Orthodox (Aleksei Shiropaev). Verkhovsky notes that toward the middle of first decade of the new millennium, the official position of the Russian Orthodox Church became closer to that of Orthodox civil society movements (that is, as one can deduce from his text, to nationalist movements), but explains this as a result of the hierarchy’s inclination towards the ideology of these movements (Verkhovsky 2007b: 173). In my opinion, the reverse is the case: the views of one-time radical nationalists have grown closer to the official position of the Church, at least on the most important questions. Today, Orthodox nationalists represent an obsolete, archaic element of the nationalist movement, left over from the early 1990s. Many concepts that have been abandoned by contemporary Russian nationalism – anti-Semitism, for example – are retained in the ideology of Orthodox nationalism.
Pagans

The neopagan tendency has existed in Russian nationalism at least since the 1970s, but for a long time was openly propagated only by individual, marginal figures. In the 1990s pagans were represented by isolated groupings of like-minded people, who had neither organisational structures nor media access. Operating within these networks were well-known nationalist ideologists and activists who either did not belong to any of the groups or moved between them, like the artist Aleksei Shiropaev and the publisher Viktor Korchagin. After the turn of the millennium, a pagan cluster formed around the Russkaia Pravda publishing group, including Aleksandr Aratov, Vladimir Istarkhov and Vladimir Avdeev. The wider pagan milieu now includes individuals as well as organisations such as Vadim Kazakov’s Union of Slavic Communities of the Slavic Native Faith.

Most (but not all) pagans prefer to define their religion as a ‘native’ faith, and themselves as ‘native believers’ (rodnovery). In order to qualify as a community of native believers (specifically, in order to join Kazakov’s Union of Slavic Communities of the Slavic Native Faith) a group must have no less than seven members with Slavic names, a pagan priest and a place for feasts, and conduct no less than four feast ceremonies a year (Opredelenie . . . 2012). The Internet is the main means for establishing links between pagan organisations. These non-virtual, politicised organisations are often paramilitary in nature, offering or facilitating instruction in the martial arts, use of firearms and sports training. Many of them are formed around Slavic-Goritsa martial clubs (for example, the Sviatogor Centre of Old Russian Warfare and Military Culture in Kaluga, the Trigora Club in Petersburg and the Svarog and Rus Clubs in Moscow).

A basic problem for Russian native believers is that they have no living pagan tradition to lean on. Their leaders acknowledge that what they see as the Russian national religion seriously suffered under a thousand years of Christianity, so most of it has to be ‘reconstructed’ or created anew. Theorists cite the awakened memory of the ancient sorcerers (volkhvy) as a source of knowledge about indigenous Russian religion. One elder of Russian
paganism, Dobroslav (Aleksei Dobrovolskii), named the ‘revelations of Mother Nature herself and inherited memory’ as a source, for example (Dobroslav 2010: 78). Moreover, much of the theory and practice of pagans is taken from Orthodoxy, with appropriate changes. Orthodox publications, for example, are issued with the blessing of bishops, while the neopagan newspaper Russkaia Pravda comes out ‘with the blessing of Magus Ratebor of the Holy Rus’. The popular theory that there is one ‘Vedic religion’ for all pagans (Istarkhov 1999: 10) is also reminiscent of Orthodox Christianity, where the autocephalous churches make up the Universal Church. Noting the pagans’ paradoxical proclivity for Church Slavonic, archaic scripts and the like, Andrei Beskov writes that ‘a game on grounds which are foreign to them and native to the Russian Orthodox Church clearly cannot lead to success for the neopagans’ (2014: 20).

In the absence of a single tradition, each pagan group may have its own worldview and rituals, since the communities are relatively isolated from one another. In this chapter I am not concerned with the religious life of all neopagans in Russia today, but with that sector of the nationalist movement that sees public adherence to paganism an integral part of their ideology. These nationalists – occasionally for utilitarian reasons – hold that paganism is the best religion for the Russian people because it can allow them to find strength, to protect themselves from ‘foreigners’ and to create their own state. Contemporary paganism attracts those nationalists who consider Christianity to be the religion of the weak. In his popular book The Blow of the Russian Gods, pagan theoretician Vladimir Istarkhov writes: ‘Russian . . . paganism, in contrast to Christianity, raised proud, brave, life-celebrating, strong in spirit, independent personalities, people of honour and dignity’ (Istarkhov 1999: 190).

Ultimately, it is not important how specific nationalists practise paganism, or indeed whether they practise it at all. It is equally unimportant how sincerely they believe in pagan doctrines, since for nationalists paganism is part of ideology. Beskov proposes distinguishing ‘ultranationalists, using pagan symbols only for decoration’, that is, to attract the attention of potential participants or the mass media, from ‘spiritual individuals, preoccupied
with spiritual searching’ (2014: 16). One is, however, unlikely to find such clear-cut ‘ideal types’ in practice: a ‘spiritual individual’ and a nationalist may coexist in one person.

Neopaganism is not only a political movement, but also a relatively insular sub-culture, with its own language, dress code and rules of behaviour. Native believers strive to use ‘Slavic’ names of the month in place of Latin ones (stuzhen’ instead of January, liuten’ instead of February), for example, or to replace foreign words with ‘Slavic’ equivalents (svetopisi instead of fotografii, izvedy instead of interv’iu). As a rule, native believers undergo a kind of ‘baptism’ and adopt ‘pagan names’ – Aratov took Ogneved (from ogon’, fire), for example. Radicals insist that native believers must always wear Slavic tunics and head-bands. Appropriate shirts can be bought on neopagan websites, or a pattern downloaded for sewing at home. However, most neopagans wear special clothes only for religious feasts, and politicised neopagans are less likely to dress in such clothing. Concerned with ‘respectability’, leaders of political movements wear normal shirts and ties. Vladimir Avdeev, for example, explains:

I have undergone pagan initiation, I have a sacred pagan name. I have all of this. But I do not play these games, I do not run around with a little ribbon round my forehead. I go around in a suit and tie like a normal European person. (Belov 2005)

We should also bear in mind that not everyone can afford to dress in accordance with the specific demands of this sub-culture.

In Russian nationalism the pagan sector is not so much marginalised as closed off. The pool of potential neophytes is probably almost exhausted and neopagan organisations are unlikely to grow significantly. The native believer sub-culture (with costumes, pagan names, sacrifices and so forth) most likely scares off new recruits to the nationalist movement, so nationalist leaders who strive for mass participation prefer not to advertise their affiliations with native belief. Many pagans also emphasise that they are not opposed to the secular state, and that paganism in particular ‘can exist and develop perfectly well in a secular society’ (Valkovich 2014: 106). Thus, there seems to
be no insurmountable wall between pagans and secularists (see below). As for relations between pagans and Orthodox nationalists, however, these are significantly worse than in the early 1990s, although not everywhere.

**Secularists**

There were practically no secular Russian ethnonationalists until about a decade ago. Nationalism indicated religiosity – either Orthodoxy (according to tradition), or paganism, which functioned as ‘anti-Orthodoxy’. Religious arguments were a regular feature of nationalist organisations and often led to schisms. Observing this, some nationalist leaders stopped drawing attention to religious questions and talking openly about their personal religious affiliation. The designation of a given section of the nationalist movement as ‘secularists’ does not mean that its adherents do not have a personal religious faith and/or do not practise any religion; personally they may be practising or non-practising adherents of a religion, generally Orthodox Christianity or native beliefs. It is rather that, for secularist nationalists, religion is not an important issue worth mentioning in ideological and political documents.

One of the first secular nationalist organisations was the Slavic Community of St Petersburg, led by Roman Perin. In an interview, Perin explained the reasons for his then-innovative approach to creating the community thus:

> We have an Orthodox section . . . We have a Vedic section . . . We prioritise the ethnic over the religious, the class and the political . . . Creating the community, I was convinced that if society is divided any further now, that if we contribute to this, if even the patriots themselves are going to invest their strength in division, then this will end in tragedy . . . The first year was really difficult. There were scandals, arguments, emotions. We even had to expel people from the community, those who particularly distinguished themselves by scandal-mongering. But then everything calmed down.16

The same position is discernible in an interview with a member of the community’s council, Igor Kovalev:
From experience I can say that, on the whole, it is not truth that is generated by controversies, but rather strained relations . . . Incidentally, the Slavic Community Charter forbids conversations about religion, because it is no secret that there are Orthodox people, atheists, and a pre-Christian Russian culture. Therefore the Charter of our community forbids these conversations, at least within the confines of the community.17

The leadership of the National Great Power Party of Russia has adopted a similar view on religious arguments. Party co-chair Aleksandr Sevastianov explained his position thus:

Firstly, any discussion on religious issues is categorically forbidden in the Party. And secondly, our basic thesis may be expressed like this: we protect Russians regardless of their religious affiliation and convictions. Recently I defended the convinced pagan Korchagin in court and saved him from the gallows, and I also offered my services as defence lawyer to Mikhail Nazarov, who is the most Orthodox of the Orthodox. This is my principled, firmly-held position.18

Nationalist leaders have also recognised that excessive attention to Orthodoxy frightens away new participants rather than attracting them. Nikolai Lysenko, the creator of one of the first ethnic nationalist organisations – the National Republican Party – spoke out in support of secular nationalism back in 1992:

In its traditional hypostasis Orthodoxy is unlikely to preserve its former role as a fundamental ideological foundation in the future: more than 70 years of Soviet society without religion could not pass without leaving a trace. Today Russians are a people with an almost entirely secularised, worldly mentality. (Lysenko cited in Lebedev 2007: 456)

This theme has subsequently been repeated by most of the secular nationalists, even if they personally practice some religion or other. Aleksandr Zhuchkovskii, for example, writes that ‘en masse the Russian majority is not religious and even less churched’, citing
the 2 per cent of people who are church-goers ‘according to sociologists’ (Zhuchkovskii 2014: 41). The same idea is developed by Moskovskii gosudarstvennyi institut mezhdunarodnykh otnoshe-
nii (MGIMO) professor Valerii Solovei and his sister Tatiana in their book Nesostoiavshaiasia revoliutsiia (The Revolution that Didn’t Happen):

The ideologeme of Orthodox monarchy, the hope for a churching of Russian society and the reanimation of traditional values are vox clamantis in deserto. At the very least, these ideas are completely unsuitable for the purposes of mass political mobilisation. (Solovei and Solovei 2009)

Although the main arguments in favour of secularism always were and remain pragmatic, promoting secularism has also acquired a value in itself for these nationalists and become one of their few ideological positions. Still, secularists may use religious rhetoric for their own ends – most often Orthodox, since that attracts more supporters than, for example, paganism and allows them to appear more ‘respectable’ in the eyes of the authorities. To give an example: the Komi-based nationalist organisation Frontier of the North is presented as secular, although its symbol is a cross and the website includes the heading ‘Orthodoxy’. The membership is made up of pagans, Orthodox and non-religious people. Aleksei Kolegov, the organisation’s leader, does not deny that the use of Orthodox symbols and rhetoric is instrumental:

A person can, for example, say that ‘I am Orthodox’, and apart from a cross [round his neck] not wear anything. Here is an option ‘to protect Orthodoxy’. That is, coming into the organisation there is an option to protect Orthodoxy against the construction of mosques, the Islamisation of the North, to protect Orthodox land. To protect Orthodoxy, Orthodox Christians, an Orthodox town from invasion by sectarians. To protect, let’s say, Orthodox people from the propaganda of homosexuals.¹⁹

Secularists often pass through a period of personal religious searching, and then, not finding a tradition that suits them,
develop their own individual religious practices. Sevastianov, for example, gives the following account:

I was an Orthodox Christian, I got baptised when I was 24 years old . . . But for ten years I was beset by questions about the Orthodox Church, to which [the Church] didn’t give me satisfactory answers. I gradually moved away from Orthodoxy and now don’t consider myself a Christian, although I consider very many Orthodox rituals effective, necessary and I carry them out.\(^{20}\)

In her blog, the nationalist poet and activist Marina Strukova describes a period of religious searching: ‘Christianity was always alien to me, I do not even know why. From 2001 until 2007 I considered myself a native believer. Then I took up Judaica’ (Strukova 2013a). She is studying Hebrew and reports positively on Judaism:

Jews consider only Jews as neighbours. For Christians it is everyone. The Christian interpretation is striking, but unrealistic – like, for example, requiring every person to be able to fly into space or compose a symphony – not everyone is capable. Judaism is realistic. (Strukova 2013b)

Another source of the secularists’ indifference to religion is their anti-immigrant sentiments. According to Lebedev (2007), one of the ideological innovations of the secular nationalists is ‘the image of the main enemy’ not in the shape of Jews or Freemasons, but in culturally alien migrants. This innovation was first articulated by Nikolai Lysenko. Some secularists, like Perin’s Slavic Community of St Petersburg, continued to focus on the Jewish theme – which is why, perhaps, they did not achieve national reach. However, the anti-Semitic constructs of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (the Jewish-Masonic conspiracy, the ‘Elders of Zion’ and so on) have now practically disappeared from the nationalist lexicon.

Nationalists oppose not only Muslim migrants, but also Christians, such as Georgians, Armenians, Ossetians, and Abkhazians. However, the fact that the majority of migrants
happen to be Muslims (if only culturally) predetermines the anti-Islamic orientation of secular Russian nationalism. Nationalists associate Islam with religion in general, and so they see religiosity as a source of backwardness and ‘obscurantism’. If immigrants are religious, nationalists suggest, then those who stand against them are obliged to be rational people of the world.

In an article about the 15 April 2013 terrorist attack on the Boston Marathon, carried out by the Chechen Tsarnaev brothers, Mikhail Pozharskii, co-chair of the National Democratic Alliance, subjects not only Islam but also religion in general to criticism (Pozharskii 2013). In his opinion, there is a gulf between the consciousness of the ‘civilised person’ and that of the ‘conventional Tsarnaev, the product of a traditional, religious society’. According to this representative of secular nationalism, Islam is the quintessence of all that is negative in every religion: ‘Of all world religions Islam is the most militant and aggressive’, he writes, but sees others as being no better: religiosity is an indicator of ‘intellectual degradation’, ‘impenetrable archaism’ and ‘psychosis’. Being non-religious is part of the secularists’ emphatic adherence to ‘European’ values (see also Mitrofanova 2012).

Until recently, the secular segment of ethnic nationalism was a marginal phenomenon, but today it is the most dynamic part of the movement. It is here that new (relative to the 1990s) ideas, organisations and leaders are appearing. Secularists are internationally active on a broad scale, and master new forms of propaganda – for example, through social media (Orthodox nationalists are more likely to maintain blogs than to be active on Facebook and Vkontakte). One example of this is of the young – in terms of age (born in 1986) and length of time in the movement – political publicist Egor Prosvirnin. When he created the site Sputnik i Pogrom in 2012, he had already become a significant figure among Russian nationalists. Prosvirnin is just as active on social networks. The high-quality artistic work on Sputnik i Pogrom has no equivalent among other nationalist sites or ordinary web publications in Russia.
Concluding remarks

Since the collapse of the USSR, Russian ethnic nationalism has developed in an increasingly fragmented fashion, also as regards questions of religion. Secular nationalism is the only religio-ideological trend that is evolving in contemporary Russian nationalism. It is in this sector that new ideological concepts, clusters and leaders are emerging. The leadership of the neopagan and Orthodox nationalist sectors has remained practically unchanged since the early 1990s: Shiropaev, Mironov, Saveliev, Simonovich-Nikshich and others remain active in the movement. No new organisations are being formed, and new methods of communication and visual propaganda are not being adopted. The ideological foundations of both neopagan and Orthodox nationalism were fully elaborated by the 1990s or even earlier: today the likelihood of new ideas appearing in these sectors is so slim that it would be fair to speak of ideological stagnation.

The secularists’ advantage over pagans rests in their practically unfettered potential to attract new participants and sympathisers to the nationalist movement. The neopagan wing of nationalism has probably exhausted any potential social base and will probably not grow any further. As compared to the Orthodox nationalists, the secularists enjoy the advantage of avoiding internal conflicts and specific difficulties linked with ecclesiastical life. Orthodox nationalism is a relic of the 1990s, and its adherents are declining in number, as many former Orthodox nationalists have joined the ranks of the ‘patriotic statists’ – even Dushenov, who until his arrest had been an implacable opponent of the authorities and called for armed insurrection.

Declared secularism does not mean that activists from this sector of the nationalist movement do not have their own religious convictions and/or practise religion. Further, secular nationalists may even use religious rhetoric in order to attract supporters or to make a good impression on the authorities. For today’s ethnic nationalists, secularism is not an ideological stance but a populist device.
Notes

1. On the formation of the nation in Russia, see Tolz (2001).
2. Lay members are those people who identify themselves with the Russian Orthodox Church and confirm this identification with more or less regular communion in its churches.
3. Uranopolitans, ‘citizens of the Heavenly Kingdom’, represent a current within the Russian Orthodox Church that rejects the importance of patriotism. Their spiritual leader was Father Daniil Sysoev (assassinated in 2009).
5. On the political influence of the Church, see Papkova (2011); Curanovic (2012); Knox and Mitrofanova (2014).
6. The World Russian People’s Council (WRPC) is an annual forum of the Orthodox community, founded in 1993.
7. See, for example, interview with the Chair of the Synodal Department for Church-Society Relations, archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin (Aleksandrova 2014).
8. At the time, Abbot Filipp (Riabykh) was Deputy Chair of the Moscow Patriarchal Department for External Church Relations. Currently he heads the Representation of the Russian Orthodox Church at the Council of Europe.
10. Author’s interview, Syktyvkar, 2 November 2013.
11. Information that Antonii (Orlov) of the RosOC blessed Kvachkov and Eksheev in their political struggle was published in Eksheev’s blog, which has later been blocked by a ruling of Russian authorities.
12. Author’s interview, Moscow, 3 June 2009.
13. Author’s interview, Moscow, 3 June 2009.
14. The Prothesis is the preparatory part of the Divine Liturgy during which the priest cuts fragments of the prosphoron (offertory bread) in commemoration of living and dead members of the Church. Since there is no longer an Orthodox Tsar in Russia, a fragment for his commemoration is naturally not cut (see Zemtsov 2012).
15. On the origins of Russian paganism, see Pribylovskii (2002); Shzhenskii (2010); Shnirel’man (2012).
16. Author’s interview, St Petersburg, 14 September 2005.
17. Author’s interview, Moscow, 3 October 2006.
18. Author’s interview, Moscow, 25 December 2006.
19. Author’s interview, Syktyvkar, 2 November 2013.
20. Author’s interview, Moscow, 25 December 2006.