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Thesis Prospectus Draft

The Russian Orthodox Church and Nationalist Politics in Russia  
(Working Title)

Research Question/ Overview:

This thesis will focus on the interaction of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and ultra-nationalist political parties in Post-Soviet Russia. Its first goal is to explain the context of the both the resurgence of the ROC and ultra-ultra-nationalism as a political and societal ideology in Russia. In doing so, the paper will begin by historically tracing the roots of the Orthodox faith in Russia and its relationship with the state. This will give a concise overview of the ROC during the periods of Kievan-Rus, the Muscovite state, Imperial Russia, and Communism, and will investigate the Church's connection with the state through all periods. The next section of the thesis will focus on the Post-Soviet state and will focus on the rise of ultra-nationalism. This section will also define what ultra-ultra-nationalism is in today's Russia and will explicate on the various ways it manifests itself politically and socially by looking at prominent nationalist political groups and their actions. After that, the thesis will synthesize the two previous sections by analyzing the way the two camps have interacted in the Post-Soviet era. The last section of the thesis will focus on my analysis and predictions of whether a potential union between the ROC and nationalist camps could destabilize Russia's fragile democracy and lead to a centralization of power and return to a centralized authoritarian state. This will all be

done in an effort to answer the question of whether or not the Russian Orthodox Church is an organization that has promoted political ultra-nationalism within an emergent Post-Soviet Russia, and what its consequences are for today's Russia.

#### Background and Initial Findings:

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the forming of the new Russian Federation, the people of Russia found themselves at an existential crossroads. With their new nation, they stood to construct for themselves a new identity. Would they become like the other nations of Europe and fold themselves into an increasingly Westernized modern democracy? Or, would they look down the path that had been taken by their Slavic ancestors more than a century before and return to the ideals of “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality?” The journey to forge a Post-Soviet identity within the Russian Federation has been a tumultuous. Different factions have risen up to suggest different paths. Some of the liberal intelligentsia and politicians have declared the new path to be one towards a democratic and civil society that can “unleash the people's initiative and to protect them from the egotism of those in power.”<sup>1</sup> Others, however, have expressed their affinity for the past and a return to the “unification of all Russian land around a single spiritual (religious) and political (great power) center, that, after the victory at Kulikovo, by all rights became Moscow.”<sup>2</sup> It is this dichotomy within which the Russian people presently find themselves searching for an identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Billington, 100

<sup>2</sup> Allensworth, 132

Within the nation's search for an identity, there have been many groups that have gained prominence. On an ideological level, one of the most prominent groups that influence the Russian society is that of the Russian Orthodox Church. Surveys have shown that the Russian people trust the ROC more than any other public institution in the nation, testifying to its significance in the building of public opinion.<sup>3</sup> According to the US State Department, 100 million Russians identify themselves as Russian Orthodox Christians, though the number very few of these practice on a regular basis.<sup>4</sup> Out of a population of almost 143 million people, for 100 million to claim allegiance to a specific group constitutes a large majority. These numbers act as a testimony to the influence the ROC has with the Russian people, and how being seen as a Russian has become widely accepted as being a member of the ROC.

Experiencing a similar rebirth in Russia is the popularity of ultra-nationalism as an ideology. Russian historian and former Librarian of Congress James Billington wrote that "nationalistic views of Russian identity enjoyed rising popularity," in the 2000s, and that ultra-nationalism offered an "ideological cement for a new autocracy should Russia's fragile democratic institutions break down or social violence break out."<sup>5</sup> From the very beginning of the Russian Federation, the ideas of political ultra-nationalism, with forays into radical ultra-nationalism, were prominent in the ideological landscape. Throughout the 1990s, however, ultra-nationalism was trimmed down. By the end of the decade, it had become apparent to many that capitalism was a long-term goal and wouldn't be going away soon, causing Soviet "restorationists" to lose popularity. Also, with Ukraine

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<sup>3</sup> Knox, 533

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2007/90196.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Billington, 67-68

firmly independent and supported for geopolitical reasons by the United States and Western Europe, groups hoping to restore the Imperial Russian state also lost hold. Because of these losses, the prominent form of ultra-nationalism in Post-Soviet Russia became ethnic-nationalism.<sup>6</sup> The increase in ethnic-nationalism in the years since Communism was taken out of Russia and the resurgence of the ROC have brought both of the camps closer together.

Overall, the ROC has experienced a rise in status within the government. When Vladimir Putin was elected President, his devout commitment to the ROC was prominently displayed during his campaign and administration. Following his inauguration in May 2000, the newly elected Putin held a Thanksgiving service in the Church of Annunciation and was praised by Patriarch Aleksii II as being “thoughtful and responsible,” and he pressed upon the President the need for the “restoration of the spiritual powers of the nation and a rebirth of its commitment to genuine moral values,” ending with the statement “Vladimir Vladimirovich, help us to disclose the soul of the nation.”<sup>7</sup> This phenomenon is not new. The ROC, since the Baptism of Rus in 988 and throughout the time of Imperial Russia, has been closely tied to the state and has expressed a form of fundamentalism that puts patriotism, loyalty to the state, and civic duty, at its ideological forefront. Modern Russian politicians are answering their people’s search for identity by forging another deep relationship with the ROC. In the media and in politicians’ speeches, one can hear the frequent use of phrases such as “loyalty to our cultural and historical type,” “acceptance of the basic values of Orthodox Christian Culture,” “the revival of spirituality,” and “adherence to the strategy of Orthodox

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<sup>6</sup> Verkhovsky, 125-127

<sup>7</sup> Anderson, 185

Christian civilization.” Alongside these, however, one can also hear talk of the “unacceptability of Western models on our soil,” “our great power,” “infusion of ultra-nationalism with positive connotations,” “our unique character,” and “our unique path.”<sup>8</sup> Beside one another, these phrases blend into one and the border between the sacred and the secular and the religious and the national become porous, allowing for the interchange between the two. In writing about Ultra-nationalism in Russia, Raskin later goes onto to write,

“Nationalism reproduces traditional values and structures, but the cosmos and full content of traditional culture are distorted by its ideological bias. Nationalism reduces traditional culture to the level of traditionalism (fundamentalism). To nationalism, traditional culture (which includes values selected by nationalism as its own) is, above all, a means of combating whatever nationalists regard as unacceptable in this world.”<sup>9</sup>

In his view, the ROC has fallen victim to the nationalists’ use for political gains. If true, it comes in many fashions. The moderates have found the ROC as a way to promote a civil society that will support the state as it makes its transition towards a modern democracy. Other groups, however, have mixed ultra-nationalism and spirituality to invoke an idea of Russia as a distinct and superior people. Alexander Dugin’s Eurasia party is a good example of this. He purports that Russia is more akin to Asia than it is Europe, so Russia should reject Western influence and forge its own way (especially with regards to geopolitics). Dugin’s ethnic and nationalist chauvinism, however, has been

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<sup>8</sup> Raskin, 5

<sup>9</sup> Raskin, 7

tempered by his long-standing support of the ROC and commitment to its centrality to the Russian culture.

As the ROC and Russia's ethnic-nationalists enter into the modern day, however, they face many problems. A demographic crisis of epic proportions faces the Russian nation as its population dwindles due to war and health issues, causing labor shortages throughout the nation. As immigrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia move into Russia for work, they exacerbate the nation's already volatile ethnic relations. In the wake of this, phrases such as "Russia for Russians" have made their way into common usage. In 2004, Russian police forces reported 44 murder cases that had nationalist and xenophobic motivations.<sup>10</sup> These attacks are bolstered by organizations such as the Russian National Unity (RNU) party and the National Great Power Party of Russia (NDPR) that actively promote the removal of ethnicities other than Russian from the nation, and produce books with titles such as "Time to be Russian," and "The Jewish Yoke."<sup>11</sup> Other factors such as Russia's economic downturn and chilly international affairs also contribute to a potentially volatile political and social climate.

In this context, will ultra-nationalism find a more secure footing, and will the ROC's loyalty to government and state exacerbate this issue? I believe these are very important questions. Russia is a strategic monolith that stands between the East, West, and Middle East. Ultra-nationalism as a movement isn't one that supports international cooperation, and pushes chauvinistic views towards other races and nations. For Russia's ultra-nationalist camp to gain a secure spot within the ideological landscape of the nation would be a security threat for the rest of the world. The ROC, as the most trusted civil

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<sup>10</sup> Pain, 6

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

group within Russia, stands as the organization most likely to shape people's views. If the ultra-nationalists can receive support from the ROC, it would give the movement great amounts of legitimacy. My thesis will analyze the relationship between these two resurgent groups and attempt to answer the question of whether or not the ROC is an institution that promotes or exacerbates an ultra-nationalist sentiment within Russia.

#### Methodology:

In an attempt to establish causality between a resurgent ROC and a resurgent nationalist ideology, this thesis will use many primary and secondary resources for a basis of analysis. Because the ROC plays such an integral part in the Russian consciousness, it is important to review its history in Russia and the way in which it interacted with the state throughout the ages. I will first look to secondary sources and will summarize the way in which the ROC and state have closely interacted throughout the history of Russia. In this section, I will also provide my own analysis of how the close relationship between the Church and state has become part of the national ideology.

The next section of the thesis will explain the political vacuum that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and how ultra-nationalist sentiments came to play a prominent role in the political landscape. Because of the breadth of the word "ultra-nationalism," I will use Alexander Verkhovsky's definition of a Russian "National-Patriot."<sup>12</sup> Verkhovsky is the director of the SOVA Center in Russia, a NGO that

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<sup>12</sup> Verkhovsky, Alexander. "Ultra-Nationalists in Russia at the Beginning of the Year 2000 ." Institute of Governmental Affairs at the University of California, Davis. Davis, CA. 23 Feb 2000. Reading.

produces research on the development of nationalism and racism in Russia, and is considered an expert on the subject (His full definition is included at the end of the prospectus). To further qualify how ultra-nationalism manifests itself in Russia, I will show how ultra-nationalism affects political groups from many different positions, ranging from radical parties such as Eduard Limonov's National Bolshevik Party and Alexander Barkashov's Russian National Unity party to more mainstream parties such as the United Russia party and Communist Party of the Russian Federation (the two largest seat holders in the Duma). In addition to political groups, I will also look at social movements that have arisen in the civil sector in support of ultra-nationalism. I will use many secondary sources to add academic weight to my analysis of the rise of ultra-nationalism. In addition to those, I will make use of my Russian language skills to analyze documents and statements produced by these nationalist groups (that are readily made available on the internet) to show how ultra-nationalism has manifested itself within their views. Throughout this part of the thesis, I will continue to reference the previous section on the ROC to show how the two camps interacted as both experienced resurgence during the Post-Soviet period.

The third part of the thesis will focus on the connection between the ROC and the nationalist groups mentioned in the previous section. To do this, I will once again rely upon multiple secondary sources to help guide my analysis, but I will also include several primary sources such as surveys conducted in Russia by the Russian Analytical Digest (a division of the Center for Security Studies in Zurich) and other groups that chart national trends on thoughts about ultra-nationalism, xenophobia, and modernization in Russia. Alongside those surveys, I will look at ROC membership trends and surveys in the post-

Soviet era that will allow me to assess the breadth of the influence of the ROC. To try and find causality between the rise of the ROC and the rise of ultra-nationalist sentiments, I will cross-reference prominent members (such as Alexander Dugin) that affiliate with the ROC yet are a loud voice within the ultra-nationalist camp. I will also look at official documents such as the 1997 “Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations” as a basis for analysis on the government’s views toward the ROC. In this section of the thesis, my goal is to provide analysis on the relationship between nationalist groups, the Russian government, and the ROC in order to answer whether or not the ROC is an institution that promotes ultra-nationalism within Russia.

The final section of the thesis will attempt to answer my final question of whether a potential union between nationalist groups and the ROC could destabilize Russia’s attempts at democratization and result in a more centralized, autocratic state. To do this, I will combine all the elements discussed in the previous parts of the thesis and theorize how they will react when faced with Russia’s current political situations. I will look at the nation’s current demographic crisis, economic instability, and geopolitical worries and theorize how these could lead to a deepening of nationalist sentiments in Russia, and how the ROC’s influence could be hijacked into exacerbating those sentiments. In this section, I will reference literature that deals not only with ultra-nationalists in Russia, but also elsewhere in Europe. This will give me a basis from which to show potential scenarios that could emerge from a deepening of ultra-nationalism within Russia.

## Alexander Verkhovsky's Definition of "National-Patriots:"

“National-patriot” is a term that nationalists often use to refer to themselves [2]. I use it in order to pin-point a political movement and not individual bearers of nationalist ideas, who by all means can be accurately referred to as “nationalists”. As for the term “national-patriots”, it has a specific meaning. The hallmarks that unite the organizations of national-patriotic orientation are as follows:

- National-patriots always emphasize the theme of “the Russian people”, what in Russian is “russkii narod”. That “Russian people” may comprise either ethnic Russians only, or Russians, Ukrainians and Byelorussians, or representatives of all the indigenous populations of Russia or even all the indigenous populations of the Soviet Union. Accordingly, the ideal frontiers of the Russian state are seen differently by different groups. The definition of “Russian” represents an important classification criterion for the national-patriots, but their one common feature is reasoning in terms of nations, as opposed to reasoning in terms of individual human being or even states.

- Accordingly, the “Russian state” and “Russian people” are confronted with some external forces of evil. At the very least, these forces are identified with the West and, primarily, with the USA. The list of antagonistic countries and civilizations can be expanded, for example, it can include the Islamic world.

- Anti-Semitism, in principle, is not a requisite feature of each and every national-patriot, but practically all of them are Anti-Semites nevertheless. The idea of a “Jewish-Masonic” conspiracy in its various versions pervades nationalist thinking. It is also closely correlated with anti-Western attitudes. In the extreme, Jews are perceived as the age-old enemies of the Russian people and Russian Orthodox faith who direct all the other enemies, such as the United States, the Pope, Chechnya, etc. Not all the national-patriots, though, are ready to express such absurd views in their full scope, so the model above is frequently corrected to some degree.

- The animosity towards the “non-Russians” cannot be confined to Jews only. In the 1990-ies, the peoples of the Caucasus (all of them in general because in Russia they are hardly distinguished from one another) play the role of primary ethnic enemy. In last few years, the Chechens became internal enemy number one. Anti-Caucasus attitudes are mandatory for the national-patriots, but other ethnic enemies are also possible, for example, the Chinese, the Vietnamese, the Poles, and so on. Those national-patriots who are not ready to consider the Ukrainians part of the “Russian people”, also see them as fiends.

- The fight against such numerous enemies implies a high degree of militarization of the society, very important role of the special services and a readiness for war. In extreme case, it is proposed to integrate a number of adjoining territories by military means.

- National-patriots are principled adversaries of liberalism. Many of them are avid supporters of dictatorship and rigid political repression. As for restrictions on the freedom

of expression and political democracy, they are being promoted by practically all the national-patriots.

- The liberal economic model, that Russia has come close to adopting to a significant degree, is opposed by proposals for drastic reinforcement of the state regulation and social programs. Still and all, national-patriots have little interest in economics, and some organizations don't even have any suggestions to make in that domain. In the field of economics, they are mostly concerned with the topic of Jewish and generally non-Russian capital.

- National-patriots accuse the contemporary society of total lack of spirituality. Thus, the concept of spirituality and, accordingly, the concept of religion are very important for them. In most of the cases, the religion in question is Russian Orthodoxy. More rarely it is paganism. But there also exist national-patriotic organizations with no religious preoccupation whatsoever. In any case, nationalism always remains the most important value, which results, in particular, in some absolutely wild ideas about Russian (Slavic) history and Russian Orthodox faith."

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