

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM AND CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN MESSIANISM. A CRITICAL VERIFICATION

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The article offers a critical overview of nine views common in academia related to Russian messianism. The main premise of messianism which is important for its political dimension, is: Providence has a plan along which History unfolds, and in this plan the chosen one (individual or collective) has a special role to play (mission). Under «mission» we understand that a certain community (state/nation) is exceptional and that this exceptionality manifests itself in its special destiny. I discern three distinctive, but interconnected, features of «mission»: (1) the conviction of having a special destiny, (2) a sense of moral superiority, (3) the conviction that the state's activity is motivated not only by its own national interest but also by a higher cause important for a broader (regional, global etc.) community. The first two components of mission express exceptionalism of the mission-beholder, while the third component refers to the universalistic nature of the calling.

This selection of nine views is not a complete catalogue but it does include the core concepts that may be encountered while reading about Russian messianism. The article seeks to verify and put in order the existing body of knowledge on this topic. The critical verification is based on the material that comes from two main sources. The first is the existing body of academic literature (in English and Russian) which is used to identify and cross-examine the views circulating among academia. The second source comes with the material gathered as a result of the content and discourse analysis of the official statements of Vladimir Putin. The article is structuralised along the enumeration of nine popular views on Russian messianism. Each view is critically combined with the academic literature and the empirical data. The views discussed in the article tend to essentialise Russian messianism and essentialise Russia as well.

Key words: messianism, mission, Russia's foreign policy, Third Rome, major power status, expansion, Russian identity, exceptionalism.

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Messianism is probably among the top 15 notions used to characterise the Russian political tradition. With the rise of the conservative agenda in the official narrative of the Kremlin many scholars refer to Russian politics as messianic [39, p. 198; 47, p. 157-161]. However, it is hard to find publications [9 and 5 are exceptions] which would provide substantial evidence on the nature of Russian contemporary messianism. Moreover, the thesis about the messianic edge of the current Russian foreign policy is opposed by other scholars [52, p. 220], not to mention Russian officials¹, who tend to emphasise the pragmatism and de-ideologization of Russia's international behaviour. The goal of this article is not so much to issue an unambiguous ruling on this particular case (i.e. whether Russian foreign policy is today messianic or not) but rather to encourage a deeper reflection on the complexity of Russian messianism. In other words, this article aims to add nuance to referring to this phenomenon as a self-evident truth, which unfortunately is far too often a practice. The article seeks to verify and put in order the existing body of knowledge on this topic. To achieve it, this article offers a critical overview of the views related to Russian messianism most common in academia. I counted nine of them. This selection should not be interpreted as a complete catalogue but, in the author's opinion, it does include the core concepts that may be encountered while reading about Russian messianism. The careful verification, eventually, allows revealing the «glue» which preserves the messianic motifs in the public discourse. I argue that it is due to the existing connection between major power identity and messianism. The sense of mission is perceived as an attribute of a major power and hence pursuing a mission plays a part in status seeking strategies as well as self-identification process of contemporary Russia.

The critical verification of the nine views is based on material that comes from two main sources. The first is the existing body of academic literature (in English and Russian) which is used to identify and cross-examine the views on Russian messianism circulating among academia. The second source comes with the material gathered as a result of the content and discourse analysis of the official statements of Vladimir Putin. The analysis covers the period 2000-2018. I coded the texts manually with the use of 56 key words (among these were specific words such as: «mission» (Rus. *missiya*), messianism (Rus. *messianstvo*), national idea (Rus. *natsional'naya ideya*), the Third Rome (Rus. *Tretiy Rim*), or more general, such as: identity (Rus. *identichnost'*), historical task (Rus. *istoricheskaya zadacha*). I also analysed specific types of Putin's statements – interviews, written articles, speeches to mark special occasions (on Victory Day, Russia Day, National Unity Day), Putin's speeches at the Valdai Club, the annual address to the Federal Assembly (State of the Union) and the New Year's Address, and Putin's performance during the annual phone-in programme with Russian citizens asking questions (*priamyaya liniya*). Altogether, I analysed 8,377 texts looking for messianic roles ascribed to Russia by its leader. In my understanding, «messianic» roles are those

¹ Lavrov S. *Vneshnepoliticheskaya filosofiya Rossii*, 2013. URL: <http://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/comments/vneshnepoliticheskaya-filosofiya-rossii/> (accessed 24.02.2019)

roles which are legitimated by Russia's identity; roles which Russia pursues because of what it was in the past, what it is today and what it wants to be in the future. Such roles are «messianic» because Russia is «destined» (by its history, legacy, identity) to fulfil them.

The article is structuralised along the enumeration of nine popular views on Russian messianism. Each view is critically combined with the academic literature and the empirical data. Before we start with the first point, we should articulate our understanding of messianism. Defining messianism could be a dividing issue [3; 8; 40; 41; 43; 44; 50] and so we could become stuck with our analysis already at this point. To avoid that and with no ambitions to create an all-encompassing definition, we can safely claim that the main premise of messianism, rooted in Jewish and Christian traditions (and which is of importance for its political dimension) is as follows: Providence has a plan along which History unfolds, and in this plan the chosen one (individual or collective) has a special role to play (mission). In other words, it is a belief that one's nation is to serve a redemptive role in the history of mankind. This formulation indicates that messianism is connected to the sense of exceptionalism (being chosen) which in turn manifests itself in the sense of having a unique mission in the world. The sense of mission (a messianic role which indicates a country's place in the international arena) is the very component of messianism which is relevant for foreign policy. In this article, messianism refers to this particular sense of uniqueness accompanied by the sense of moral superiority and combined with the sense of special mission. Hence, it is first and foremost about the political and not the social aspect of messianism. To be more precise, it's about sense of mission connected to major power identity.

Messianism, including its Russian tradition, is a dynamic phenomenon. The views listed below tend to essentialise Russian messianism and, as a consequence, to essentialise Russia as well.

1. The Role of the Third Rome Myth

In the Russian tradition messianism is linked to the idea of Russia's separate path of development (Rus. *osobyi put*) [1; 46] and the Russian idea (Rus. *russkaya idea*) [3; 26] which both elaborate on Russia's exceptionalism. The founding role, however, is prescribed to the mythical idea of Moscow as the Third Rome. The phrase appeared in a private letter written in the first decades of the 16th century by the Pskovian monk Philotheus to the grand prince of Moscow, Vasili III. It emphasised Moscow's great fate as the third and last true successor of the ancient Christian empires (i.e. Roman and Byzantium). Many intellectuals, e.g. Peter Duncan, Vladimir Storchak, Ostap Kushnir, perceive this concept as the primordial source of the sense of universal mission of the Russian state [8; 23, p. 48-49; 40; 41]. They see Eastern Orthodoxy as the key structure responsible for cultivating messianism in Russian politics uninterruptedly since the time of Vasili III. However, there are two arguments that undermine this linear vision.

The first one was brought forward by Roman Szporluk and Marshall T. Poe². The American scholars convincingly argued that the idea of the Third Rome did not play any vital part in Russia's political imagery until the 1860s. The Third Rome is an example of a «modern historical myth» which provided a new way of understanding Russia's past. Ana Siljak followed this reasoning to discover that the Third Rome became a part of messianic thinking only during the Silver Age in the works of Sergei Bulgakov, Dmitri Merezhovsky, Viacheslav Ivanov etc. However, the first Slavophiles [51] wrote about Russia's special mission in the world before the «Third Rome» idea became influential. Hence, the question arises regarding what the main source of the Russian state's sense of universal calling was if it was not, at least not solely, Eastern Orthodoxy.

And here comes the second argument introduced by David Rowley. According to Rowley, it is not the religious but the imperial tradition which the Russian messianism relevant for state policies feeds on [38, p. 1583]. Describing mechanisms characteristic for the self-identification of empires, Rowley emphasises the need to provide a meta-idea which would give a sense of purpose to a multiethnic and multireligious population. Framing foreign policy in terms of mission is a common feature of imperial entities [2, p. 101; 30]. Hence, it is the imperial structure which keeps messianism alive. Krishan Kumar, who writes about «missionary/imperial nationalism», argues that references to a universal calling help to unite the population and mask the asymmetry of positions between the so called «imperial nation» and other nations subdued by the empire [21, p. 30-34]. Mission is thus an important part of the imperial cultural hegemony (in the Gramscian sense). At the same time that sense of mission becomes one of the key components of identity of the nations-builders of the empire (as in the case of Englishmen, Americans or Russians).

The myth of the Third Rome is still present in works of Russian intellectuals [32]. Its core is based on the conviction of Russia's moral superiority and its sense of mission with a strong emphasis on Russia's role as the shield against evil. However, the idea of the Third Rome does not appear in Russia's official discourse. Vladimir Putin, for instance, does not mention it. Remarkably enough, even in the messianic narrative of the Moscow Patriarchate, the Third Rome does not have a prominent part to play. The factor of major power status is more important than the myth of the Third Rome.

2. The Sense of Mission as the Driving Force behind Russia's Foreign Policy

Valentina Feklyunina writes that «messianic vision has always been central to Russian self-image» [11, p. 622]. This view is shared by other scholars as well [18; 19; 22; 41]. It would indicate that messianic motifs in Russia's foreign policy are a manifestation of the Russian identity. However, it would be misleading to argue that the mes-

² Szporluk R., Poe M.T. «Moscow, the Third Rome» The Origins and Transformations of a «Pivotal Moment». Harvard University, The National Council for Soviet and East European Research, 1997. Available at: <https://www.ucis.pitt.edu/nceer/1997-811-25-Poe.pdf>

sianic narrative belongs today to the mainstream of the Russian official discourse on foreign policy. In fact, it exists rather on its margins. Approximately 6% of the texts analysed for this research included messianic references. This 6% should not be dismissed, however, as unimportant. Taking into account the highly regulated language of diplomacy and the declared strong commitment of the Russian officials to pragmatism (understood as a farewell to messianic ideas), 6% is a result worthy of consideration. The sense of mission is not the main driving force of contemporary Russia's international behaviour *per se*. The reason, however, it persists in the discourse is the same as given by David Rowley, namely its connection to the idea of Russia as a major power (previously an empire). Mission is perceived today by the Russian elites as an attribute of a major power [4, p. 245]. According to this reasoning, a true major power should not limit its activity to developing trade or building pipelines but should pursue grand tasks, important for a broader community. This thought was carefully outlined by Sergei Lavrov who referred to Ivan Ilyin: «Ilyin, thinking about Russia as a major power in the world, emphasised that the status of a major power is not determined by the size of its territory or the population, but by the readiness of the government and its people to take upon themselves the burden of grand international tasks» [23]. By pursuing mission, Russia legitimates its claim to equal status with other major powers, chiefly the West.

3. Messianism as an Instrument of Russia's Foreign Policy

The fact that a sense of mission is rooted in Russia's major power identity does not exclude its instrumentalization. The forms and content of the messianic roles ascribed today to Russia by its officials show how the messianic tradition can be adapted to the current circumstances. The analysis of the material selected for this research allows twelve messianic roles to be identified in today's discourse. These envision Russia as: «the bridge», «the moderator of dialogue», «the guardian of justice», «the global balance provider», «the patron of its own kin», «the keeper of Europe», «the protector of faith and values», «the shield», «a contributor to world civilization». There is also «the mission in Eurasia», «the modernisation of Russia» and «preserving Russian civilization». These enumerated missions show great continuity with the missions claimed for the Russian Empire by its intellectuals [51] as well as by the Soviet establishment for the USSR [15]. This continuity confirms that messianism, as a part of identity, is persistent but also flexible enough to allow modern reinterpretations of itself. For instance, the role of the «contributor to world civilisation» nowadays includes the taming of outer space³. Another example comes with «the guardian of justice» which refers to providing fair and indiscriminative access to peaceful nuclear

³ Putin V. Vstupitel'noye slovo na torzhestvennom sobranii, posvyashchenom Dnyu kosmonavtiki [Вступительное слово на торжественном собрании, посвященном Дню космонавтики], 2004. URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22419> (accessed 11.02.2019).

energy⁴. The role of «the guardian of justice» also stresses Russia's role as a norm provider [25]). It is worth noting that this particular role fits the vision of the 21st century as presented by the current «Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation»⁵. The authors of the document argue that the rivalry between major powers gained a strong symbolic, normative and civilizational dimension and so the capacity to be a norm provider, and not just a norm taker, is crucial for preserving the status of a leading power.

4. Messianism Legitimises Expansion

Since mission is perceived as an attribute of a true major power, all messianic roles serve to legitimate Russia's claim to be treated as an equal partner by other major powers. Messianic roles might have also different functions. Missions like «the keeper of Europe», «the patron of its own kin» (Slavs, Orthodox believers) or «the bridge» (between Europe and Asia) address the issue of Russia's civilisational belonging. Then there are missions, like «the protector of faith and values» or «the moderator of the dialogue» which emphasise the moral superiority of Russia and hence compensate for its material deficits. Finally, there are messianic roles connected to the broadly acknowledged attributes of a major power, e.g. military capacity («the shield») or its own sphere of influence («mission in Eurasia»). These three categories of missions, we will call them respectively, «civilisational», «moral» and «geopolitical» have distinct but mutually related functions, namely self-identification, compensation and legitimacy. These three categories of messianic roles are connected with Russia's status ambitions (being recognised as an equal partner by major powers). As a consequence, the messianic narrative depends on international dynamics, mainly on Russia's relations with the West (NATO and EU members). However, there are also messianic roles triggered foremost by domestic affairs, i.e. relations between the ruling elites and society. I call them «auto-missions» for they are focused on saving Russia. These particular missions («the modernisation of Russia», «preserving Russian civilisation») are about mobilisation. It can be either positive, i.e. for a common goal, or negative, i.e. pointing to a common threat and aiming at closing ranks in society.

The variety of functions and the relevance of both the external and internal environment show how complex messianism is. Linking it to expansionism is simply reductionist. In fact, the only mission that might legitimate expansion is the «mission in Eurasia». This mission stands out for its differentiated content. Russia's mission in Eurasia can be about providing security and stability but also about promoting modernisation or pursuing a good old-fashioned *mission civilisatrice*⁶. All these variations

⁴ Putin V. Stenogramma press-konferentsii dlya rossiyskikh i inostrannykh zhurnalistov [Transcript of the press conference for Russian and foreign journalists], 2006. URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23412> (accessed 01.02.2019).

⁵ «Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation», approved November 30, 2016. URL: http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk86BZ29/content/id/2542248

⁶ Putin V. Poslaniye Federal'nomu Sobraniyu Rossiyskoy Federatsii [Message To The Federal Assembly Of The Russian Federation], 2005. URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931> (01.02.2019).

of the «mission in Eurasia» are brought together by the conviction that Russia has special responsibilities in this particular region. The «mission in Eurasia» is a part of Russia's hegemonic claim labelled by Kevork K. Oskanian as «hybrid exceptionalism» [31]. According to Oskanian, the exceptionalist narrative expressed traditionally in terms of a *mission civilisatrice* legitimates the hierarchical order and Russia's hegemonic position within it [31, p. 30]. Oskanian noticed that «Russia's claims — liberal in form, imperial in content — therefore take on a forced, artificial appearance, providing an at best imperfect justification for regional hierarchy in the contemporary world» [31, p. 41]. Although the content of the «mission in Eurasia» changed through the ages, it preserved the central role of Russia as the actor entitled (and capable) of defining and protecting the «civilisational authenticity» of the other countries of the region [31, p. 31]. This particular way of perceiving its own immediate neighbourhood is a part of Russia's self-definition as a major power which, in order to keep its status, must have a sphere of privileged interest and influence. The «mission in Eurasia» plays a part in legitimating Russia's hegemonic claim as well as in Russia's self-identification process as a major power. One can imagine a situation, in which the messianic narrative could be used for legitimating expansion, but this is not the main, and definitely not the only function of Russian contemporary messianism.

One more point may be added. Expansion may also have a normative, ideological dimension. Messianism is sometimes associated with revolutionary, progressive ideas and the attempt of the state to export these messianic ideas. In favour of this interpretation, Isabelle Falcon came to the conclusion that «Russia's traditional messianic impulses have recently subsided. Moscow has no ideology to export» [10, p. 88]. However, with the exception of the Soviet period, Russian messianism did not envision the Russian state as a progressive revolutionary power. Contrary to the American messianic tradition (McDougall, 1998), Russian messianism has a conservative character [14, p. 86; 49] and sees Russia rather as a shield than as a crusader.

5. Messianism is Irrational

Messianism analysed in the context of politics is often juxtaposed with pragmatism [42, p. 299; 48, p. 14]. It is interpreted as a utopian state of mind which manifests itself above all in the readiness to sacrifice one's own national interest for the sake of the messianic ideal. From the perspective of the rational choice theory, messianism is an irrational factor which disrupts the conducting of foreign policy based on national interest. However, I believe that framing messianism as irrational does not allow us to grasp its complexity. Keeping in mind that mission is perceived as an attribute of a major power and that the status of a major power is the core component of Russia's self-identification, it is useful to acknowledge the research on social status and recognition. Jonathan Renshon rightly argues that satisfying status ambitions is incorrectly interpreted as irrational [37, p. 51]. Status ambitions are a permanent part of a state's self-understanding and its ontological security [29]. And as such, Renshon points out,

it can sometimes be prioritised more highly than strategic investments, alliances or even peace. The fact that states are ready to start a conflict in order to improve their international ranking might be as rational as building their own military capacity as long as we understand that security and status might be equally important for a state. Using this lens to analyse the messianic motifs in Russia's foreign policy allows us to see the compatibility between geopolitical calculations and the Russian sense of exceptionalism expressed in terms of mission. If a true major power legitimates its status by pursuing mission, why should it be interpreted as an irrational behaviour? Fulfilling a sense of mission does not have to require the sacrifice of one's own national interests. The analysis of contemporary discourse reveals that it is sufficient (i.e. enough to pass «the test of credibility») to argue that a mission is pursued not just for the benefit of Russia but also for the benefit of a broader community (e.g. other countries in the region, international society). Sergei Lavrov, for instance, argued that a major power is the one which, while pursuing its national interests, contributes to the well-being of all the nations [25].

6. Messianism Compensates for Economic Hardship

The analysis of the official narrative on foreign policy combined with the dynamics of the Russian economy in the time period 2000-2018 did not reveal any correlation between the intensity (frequency) of the messianic narrative and the moments of the economic slowing down. To give an example, in 2009 in the midst of the Western financial crisis which affected Russia's economy, not once did Vladimir Putin mention Russia's special mission. On the other hand, in 2004 and in 2013 when Russia's economy was doing well, the president referred to it on several occasions. What brings together these two years is the noticeable drop in the president's approval ratings. In 2004, it went below 70% and in 2013, it almost hit 60% [12, p. 3]. These numbers suggest a different type of correlation, namely between the decrease in popularity of the president and the appearance of the messianic narrative. To emphasise this point, in 2009, when the Russian economy weakened, the president's popularity stood steady (78%) and so there was no domestic incentive for the messianic narrative.

The relevance of the messianic narrative for the legitimacy of the Russian regime stems from the role of major power status in the Russian self-identification process. Ethnic Russians, similarly to other so called «imperial nations» [28, p. 11-12], formed their self-image in connection to the vision of Russia as a major power. Being a resident of a major power is what constitutes a true Russian. This logic turns the status of a major power not just into a matter of foreign policy but also into the concern of the individual. And so the legitimacy of the ruling elites depends on their capacity to preserve/regain/manifest Russia's status. Yeltsin's growing unpopularity was caused by the perceived failure of the new government to preserve the desired status [6, p. 281]. To sum up, the messianic narrative is not aimed at making up for the demand for bread and butter, but for political legitimacy.

7. Messianism is About Domestic Affairs

The preceding conclusion should not lead us to another common but reductionist assumption that messianism is a matter of domestic affairs [25, p. 20]. It is true, as the analysed material shows, that the domestic audience is the most important target of the messianic narrative. Vladimir Putin mentioned mission while talking to the domestic audience on 35 occasions and only five times when exclusively addressing the international audience. However, even the «auto-missions», the most dependent on the domestic context, reveal their connection to the international environment. Regardless of whether it is about modernising and preserving Russian civilisation, eventually, it is about making it strong enough to compete as an equal with other major powers. Since mission is perceived as an attribute of a major power, it is a part of a status-signalling behaviour. The Russian president talks about Russia's international actions in terms of mission because this is what leaders of major powers do.

The analysis of the official discourse shows a correlation between the messianic narrative and the dynamics of Russia's relations with the West. Messianic motifs tend to appear in official statements often in periods of tensions between Moscow and Washington, e.g. after the Orange revolution [42] or the Crimean crisis⁷. What is more, the analysed material allows an observation that the West is the most important international factor of this narrative. The non-Western countries are almost absent. The missions which are most frequently ascribed to Russia by its leader in the context of the relations with the West are: «the global balance provider», «the shield», «the mission in Eurasia» and «the guardian of justice». The combination of three geopolitical messianic roles with one moral («the guardian») confirms the link between the messianic narrative and Russia's status. The geopolitical dimension of the messianic narrative emphasises attributes of Russia as a major power which has its own sphere of influence, is capable of providing security beyond its own territory and which can balance the influence of other major actors. With «geopolitical» missions, Russia signals its equality with the West. The «moral» mission, in turn, underlines Russia's moral superiority and counter-hegemonic logic behind its actions aimed at opposing Western normative hegemony. To conclude, the sense of mission in Russia's foreign policy is shaped by two factors. Not only by the fluctuations of the popularity of the ruling elite (see the previous paragraph), but also by the dynamics taking place in the international arena, chiefly those triggered by Russia's significant other (the West).

8. Messianism as a Part of Reactionary Modernism

The notion of reactionary modernism refers to combining modern technologies with a rejection of the ideas of the Enlightenment and the values and institutions of

⁷ Putin V. Poslaniye Prezidenta Federal'nomu Sobraniyu [Message From The President To The Federal Assembly], 2015. Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50864> (3.12.2015).

liberal democracy [16]. In this context a sense of mission as a part of the exceptionalist narrative is interpreted as a reaction of states which failed to modernise and have been stigmatised by the modern, i.e. Western countries, as «backward». The messianic narrative is a self-defensive mechanism and a counter-hegemonic behaviour. The state claims to have a special path of development and a unique role to play in the world (often not despite its backwardness but due to it) in order to avert the external pressure of the more developed countries. This interpretation can be found in the works of Richard Ned Lebow, Ayse Zarakol or Dmitrii Travin [24, p. 376; 46, p. 10; 51, p. 8]. However, messianism is not only a feature characteristic of countries stigmatised as backward. As has been already stated, it is an attribute of a major power. Therefore, apart from being a compensatory mechanism, messianism is also about emulating the behaviour of the most powerful players. In the past, in the age of the first European modern empires, the British Empire emulated practices of the Spanish, and later on in the 19th century British imperial policies became the role model for others, including the Russian Empire [33, p. 67]. In the 19th century, countries which also had other attributes of a major power (e.g. significant territory and population), like the Ottoman Empire, Japan or Russia, by pursuing their own mission they conveyed a message that they wanted to be recognised by the West as different but equal. This observation confirms again that a messianic narrative is a part of status-signalling behaviour. The connection of the sense of mission to status ambitions is of greater importance than to reactionary modernism.

9. Russian Society Needs a Sense of Mission

The Russian political leadership refers to messianic motifs as it resonates well with society. This popular belief indicates the existence of a genuine social demand for a sense of mission. This demand is generated by the link between the messianic narrative and the vision of Russia as a major power. Russian researchers pay a large amount of attention to the «post-imperial syndrome» present in Russian society [18; 36]. Kasamara and Sorokina reached the conclusion that the post-imperial nostalgia helps to compensate people for their lowered personal security [17, p. 288], also in its ontological aspect (i.e. the lack of a coherent identity and sense of historical continuity). This observation corresponds with the argument brought forward by A. Zarakol that countries experiencing lowered ontological security show higher sensitivity to status concerns [51, p. 56]. And, we should not forget that the messianic narrative is a part of status-signalling behaviour.

The messianic narrative belongs to a broader exceptionalist framework. Andrei Kolesnikov observed the steady growth of the exceptionalist narrative intensified by the Crimean crisis. In 2015 55% of respondents wanted Russia to follow its own path [20, p. 20]. Pastukhov sees origins of the contemporary social support for the *Sonderweg* narrative in the failure of Yeltsin's team's reforms. As early as 1992, polls denoted an increase up to 23% [35, p. 56]. Another sharp rise appeared in 1999 as a

reaction to the NATO's bombardment of Serbia [35, p. 56] but at the same time 18% of respondents still wanted good relations with the US. Pastukhov concluded that in relations to the West (US, NATO, EU) Russians were chiefly concerned with their ontological security, i.e. with the possible loss of their true identity. In addition, a part of this true identity is seeing Russia as a respected major power [13, p. 13-15]. The genuine social demand for belonging to a great country of global significance provides fertile ground for the messianic narrative.

While naming Vladimir Putin's greatest achievements as president, 49% of respondents pointed out to the fact that he returned to Russia the status of a great power [21, p. 22]. This result confirms the connection between major power status, the individual identity of Russian citizens, and the legitimacy of the political leadership. Boris Dubin also noticed the correlation between the support for the exceptionalist narrative and the social demand for a strong leadership [7, p. 14]. Emil Pain adds to this equation an observation that the imperial awareness (which harbours the sense of mission) can be activated by the elites seeking an additional source of legitimacy [34, p. 62]. According to Pain, the messianic narrative is a project of the elites who revive old motifs for very contemporary goals. This perspective indicates that the alleged genuine social demand is a product of top-down manipulation. However, it does not explain the whole complexity of the social reception of the messianic narrative. Yes, the fertile ground within the society for messianic motifs is provided by Russian's attachment to major power status. But there are limits to the instrumentalization of this narrative. Petukhov and Barash emphasise that although 60% of respondents want major power status for Russia «come what may», 40% are reluctant to build major power capacity at the cost of their individual prosperity [36, p. 93].

The link with major power status brings mission into the official discourse through a «back channel». But there is also a more direct connection. A considerable number of Russian citizens are attached to the ideal of justice and shaping a better, fairer social order [45, p. 56]. These ideas hold deep roots in the messianic tradition. Furthermore, Tikhonova found that 57% of respondents agreed that all significant events of Russian history happened for the sake of all humankind [45, p. 61]. Although the number of people who want to live for a greater cause has decreased since 1991, it is still important for many Russian citizens. This worldview could translate into an expectation that Russia's foreign policy would be moral and fair. However, Gorshkov and Petukhov noticed that although major power status is associated among Russians with moral authority, Russians' attention is directed inward. They prioritise the improvement of Russia over saving the world. This particular stand reveals a difference between Russian society and the elites who are much more attached to the messianic narrative [4, p. 242-245; 14, p. 30]. It requires further research to establish whether talking about Russia's unique mission is a mechanism above all consolidating the establishment and that society is only the secondary target. In favour of this thesis is the fact that Vladimir Putin refers to Russia's mission more often when he speaks to the representatives of the elites (political, cultural and business) than when he addresses ordinary Rus-

sians. To conclude, today the messianic narrative resonates with Russian citizens as long as it makes Russia great and does not require self-sacrifice.

In the first two to three years of Vladimir Putin's first presidential term not once did he mention Russia's mission on his own initiative. On a few occasions, however, he was asked about it by foreign journalists^{8,9}. Putin made it clear that he thought of mission, as well as the «national idea», as concepts of the past, irrelevant for contemporary challenges. He even showed irritation when asked repeatedly about Russia's mission¹⁰. It is true that Vladimir Putin's official attitude to the exceptional narrative changed later on¹¹; nevertheless, when paying attention to the questions of the journalists it is hard to avoid noticing a tendency to essentialise Russia – a country that has a fixation on its major power status, respect and sense of mission. Ana Siljak's research proves this point. Although most books on Russian politics mention messianism, it is usually being referred to in a reductionist manner. The common views circulating in academia needed a critical evolution which would point out that Russian messianism should not be reduced to the Third Rome tradition; it is not just an instrument of the elites; it is not just a fig leaf for expansion and it is not just a compensatory mechanism of reactionary modernism. And, since I am advancing here the thesis about the key connection between mission and major power status, I should also add that Russian messianism is not solely about pursuing the desired status. However, I believe that I have presented strong arguments which prove that it is the self-image of major power which makes messianism relevant for contemporary Russia. I hope that this article will contribute to a more nuanced interpretation of this complex phenomenon and will encourage new research on this topic.

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ОБЩЕПРИНЯТОЕ ВОСПРИЯТИЕ СОВРЕМЕННОГО РУССКОГО МЕССИАНИЗМА. ПОПЫТКА КРИТИЧЕСКОЙ ВЕРИФИКАЦИИ

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Статья предлагает критический обзор девяти распространённых взглядов на тему российского мессианизма. Основная предпосылка мессианизма, которая имеет важное значение для его политического измерения, такова: у Провидения есть план, по которому развивается История, и в этом плане особая роль (миссия) принадлежит избранному субъекту (индивидуальному или коллективному). Под миссией подразумевается убеждение, что сообщество (государство или нация) является исключительным и что эта исключительность проявляется в её особой судьбе. Стоит различать три характерных, но взаимосвязанных, черты «миссии»: (1) убеждённость в особой судьбе; (2) чувство морального превосходства; (3) убеждение в том, что деятельность государства мотивируется не только собственным национальным интересом, но и высшей причиной, важной для более широкого (регионального, глобального и т.д.) сообщества. Первые два компонента миссии выражают исключительность «миссии» (т.е. избранного для совершения миссии), в то время как третий компонент относится к универсальному характеру призвания.

Целью статьи является упорядочение и критическая оценка научного знания этого феномена. Анализ основан на материалах, взятых из двух основных источников. Во-первых, это существующая академическая литература (на английском и русском языках). Во-вторых, это эмпирический материал, накопленный в результате анализа содержания (контент и дискурс-анализ) официальных выступлений В.В. Путина в период 2000-2014 гг. Статья выстроена вокруг девяти точек зрения, из которых каждая верифицирована через литературу, сопоставленную с эмпирическим материалом. Критический обзор этой темы актуален и необходим, потому что девять представленных взглядов способствуют определению сути как российского мессианизма, так и самой России.

Ключевые слова: мессианство, миссия, внешняя политика России, Третий Рим, статус мировой державы, идентичность России, чувство исключительности.

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