

Semiotics of Strategic Narratives of "Antichrist" in Russia's War in Ukraine

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Abstract: The Russian war in Ukraine which began on February 24, 2022 coincides with the ongoing schism of the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, to which the Orthodox Church of Ukraine affiliates. In this setting, spiritual and secular leaders in Russia and Ukraine have mutually utilized narratives of the Antichrist and Satan to explain Russian attacks on Ukraine, imbuing a "spiritual" dimension to the strategic communications in the conflict. This paper applies a semiotic approach to analysing the Antichrist and satanic myths at play in the context of ideological "strategic narratives", and the conflict of meanings which emerges from these competing narratives. In Russia, these ideomyths have long been utilized as an ideological tool which places the nation metaphysically in perennial militant opposition to the West. However, Ukraine which is striving to leave the Russian orbit and join the West has reciprocally framed Russia and its leader in similar concepts. In conclusion, this paper argues that there is opportunity for the creation of political messaging which can frame the conflict in spiritual and moral terms that can resonate with both the West and Russian thinkers.

Keywords: Antichrist, Ideomyth, Information Geopolitics, Semiotics, Strategic Narratives

1. Introduction

This review article analyses competing wartime strategic narratives of "Antichrist" and "Satan" used by senior public figures in contemporary Ukraine and Russia which were openly reported in news media during the year of 2022.

The article offers an innovative theoretical perspective by integrating these observations from 2022 with a semiotics-focused study of the Antichrist as a key "ideomyth" of post-Soviet Russian culture (Dolinska-Rydzek 2021), and also with a semiotics-focused approach to the analysis of "strategic conspiracy narratives" (Madisson and Ventsel 2020).

The semiotic approach to analysis of strategic conspiracy narratives in an information warfare context (such as these public statements about the Antichrist may be theoretically considered) takes a primarily cognitive security focus (Madisson & Ventsel 2020).

According to Lotman (2005), a semiosphere can be defined as the smallest functioning unit of semiosis, comprised of hierarchically organized sub-structures (human personalities, memory images, texts, etc.) that comprise the entire "semiotic space" of a given culture. It exists in a continuum of other semiospheres representing other cultures.

The author posits that since the fall of the Soviet Union, the cultural semiospheres of Ukraine and Russia are increasingly ideologically divergent. This is evidenced in the wartime meaning of the Antichrist ideomyth concepts as projected by the countries' respective churches and secular security leaders.

The article first presents the context of the Antichrist ideomyth in 2022 as reflected in worldwide Google Trends results, which demonstrates a direct linkage to Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, and the respective leaders of Ukraine and Russia. Next, the competing narratives related to the Antichrist which have been offered by Ukrainian and Russian religious and secular security figures during the war are presented.

The literature on the Antichrist ideomyth in post-Soviet Russia is then discussed. This introduces key ideological figures involved in the ongoing production of the ideomyth. The literature on strategic conspiracy narratives is next considered, which relates the 2022 statements to the Russian field of "information geopolitics" which relies on the Russian Orthodox Church as a tool of sharp power projection.

Finally, the outlines of a "pro-Western" strategic conspiracy narrative are proposed by the author which would follow the lead of the Ukrainians and leverage the deeply-ingrained global semiotics of the Antichrist ideomyth in order to symbolically promote a rules-based international order.

2. The Antichrist of 2022

In February 2022, worldwide interest in the topic “Antichrist” spiked to its highest level since 2020 on Google Trends (Figure 1). There was a clear association between the commencement of Russia’s “Special Military Operation” and the virality of Antichrist as a search term. The associated results show related queries are most often for Vladimir Putin, President of Russia; and Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine. This indicates that internet users were most likely wondering if these men might be candidates for the identity of the end times Antichrist.

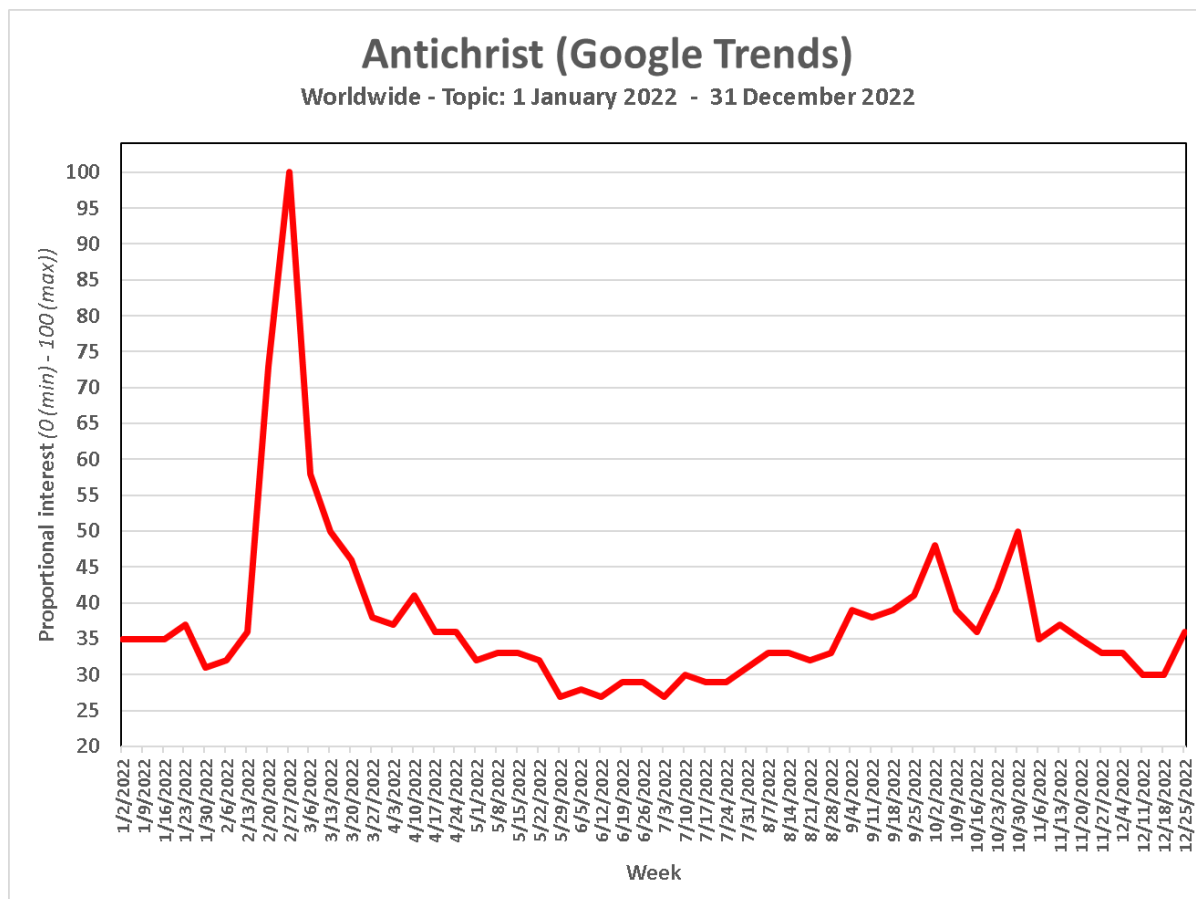


Figure 1: Google Trends data for "Antichrist" (Topic, Worldwide) - 2022

As indicated by the sudden shift in popular conspiratorial suspicion of Bill Gates as Antichrist during the coronavirus pandemic to that of Putin or Zelenskyy as Antichrist during the Special Military Operation, the Antichrist is an historical “floating signifier” (Almond 2020), whose identity changes depending on the contemporary cultural and political circumstances.

In nearly two millennia since the scribing of 1 John 2:18, which reads (KJV): “Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that Antichrist shall come, even now are there many Antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time”, observers wondering if they are living in the end times have speculated on a seemingly-unending list of potential suspects. Such an enduring global fascination with the figure of the Antichrist suggests the term may have perennial plasticity for purposes of political warfare.

2.1 The Ukrainian position: Putin as the Antichrist of our current times

On September 6, 2014 in response to Russia’s invasion of ‘fraternal’ Ukrainian territories, primate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kyiv Patriarchate), Patriarch Filaret (Denysenko) published a letter implying that Vladimir Putin faced “eternal damnation” and was “a real new Cain – not by name, but by deeds” ... “we know that two great sins, murder and lie are in close unity with each other, as the ruler and the inspiration of both is the devil. Therefore, anyone who indulges in these sins, according to the Savior, has the devil as his father.” ... “His lie is misleading some people, and they think that in fact this ruler protects traditional spiritual and moral

values from the ravages of globalization. But the fruit of his actions, which the Gospel calls us to evaluate, suggest otherwise.” ... “Calls for this ruler and his minions have already been sounded many times publicly - to think again, to stop sowing evil and death, to repent. But it seems that he remains deaf to these appeals and only multiplies evil, because satan went into him, as into Judas Iscariot.” The Patriarch further compared the Russian leader to the Pharaoh, and the Ukrainians’ plight to the freedom from enslavement of the Jews in ancient Egypt (Denysenko 2014).

In October 2018, this spiritual argument between the brotherly nations of Ukraine and Russia significantly escalated when the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople indicated its intention to grant autocephaly to a new Ukrainian Church. This resulted in the largest schism in modern Orthodox Christian history, when the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) broke off communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate in response.

The new Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) was established on December 15, 2018, and on January 5, 2019, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I signed the *tomos* granting the church official autocephaly.

On February 27, 2022 (the fourth day of the new war), and shortly after Google Trends interest in “Antichrist” seems to have peaked, Metropolitan Epiphanius (Dumenko), the first primate of the OCU, wrote a scathing letter about Putin, noting the condemnation of the war by other Orthodox Church leaders, and likening the Russian leader to both Antichrist and Hitler for his nuclear threats.

“Today, the President of Russia ordered to increase the level of readiness of nuclear weapons. Isn't this a confirmation of the fact that the head of our state Volodymyr Zelenskyy and many others have said from the beginning: not only Ukraine is in danger, the whole world is in danger. The spirit of the Antichrist operates in the leader of Russia, the signs of which the Scriptures reveal to us: pride, devotion to evil, ruthlessness, false religiosity. This was Hitler during World War II. This is what Putin has become today.” (Dumenko 2022)

Archbishop Yevstratiy Zoria, a spokesman of the OCU also told the BBC on February 27 in an interview that: *“Putin is really not messiah, but really Antichrist of our current time... He is Antichrist because everything what he does, everything what he does now is totally against Gospel, against God's law.”* (Jansezian 2022)

2.2 The Russian position: a unifying campaign to “desatanize” Ukraine

A week after the March 6, 2022 lead of Patriarch Kirill (Gundyaev) who then alleged that opposition to “gay parades” provided the theological basis for the war, the head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov seems to have invented the term “de-shaitanize” in relation to Ukraine (Ms.Detector.Media 2022, Orlova 2022).

In a June interview with the pro-Kremlin Serbian news outlet IN4S, which Montenegrin authorities alleged to be *“the propaganda branch of the Serbian Information and Security Agency (BIA)”*, close associate of Kadyrov, Secretary of the Security Council of Chechnya, and commander of the Chechen Akhmat detachment, General Apti Alaudinov said: *“I call the Akhmat special forces the army of Isa, the army of Jesus. Because we, true Muslims, are waiting for the coming of Isa-Jesus more than anyone else. Because we - both Muslims and Christians - we are one, whole. And when we unite, on this day the devil and his army will cry.”* (Krasno 2022)

When announcing his annexation of Ukrainian territories on September 30, 2022, Vladimir Putin declared his opponents were followers of *“a religion on the contrary—outright Satanism,”* borrowing rhetoric normally associated with the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian anti-cult movement (Introvigne 1, 2022).

On October 25, 2022, the call for the “desatanization of Ukraine” was first mentioned in news reports by Aleksey Pavlov, Deputy Secretary of the Security Council who also borrowed rhetoric from the anti-cultist movement (Introvigne 2, 2022).

On the same day, Patriarch Kirill (Gundyaev) called Putin “a fighter against the Antichrist” in his remarks at the 24th Congress of the World Russian People's Council. At this same conference, was the session *“ideological war against Satan”* which included speakers such as Alexander Dugin (MS.Detector.Media 2022).

Also on October 25, 2022, Head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov called for a union of Christians and Muslims, and said the Special Military Operation was a “Jihad” in defence of traditional values. He exhorted his forces to *“destroy these shaitans, wherever they are and no matter how well they hide.”* (Kadyrov 2022)

On Russia’s “Unity Day” on November 4, 2022, security council member and former president Dmitry Medvedev said the war’s goal was *“to stop the supreme ruler of hell, whatever name he uses: Satan, Lucifer or Iblis.”* (Iblis is a Muslim equivalent name for Satan.) Medvedev’s use of multireligious terms appealing to various Abrahamic

faiths in describing the adversary of Russia was a notably “ecumenical” use of the desatanization idea following Putin’s announcement at the annexation event (Magnenou 2022).

It was noted by analysts that “*desatanization is practically the only way to unite everyone*” and was “*a desperate search for an ideology that will create a single platform for the Russians.*” Further it was noted that Medvedev’s speech was written with “*language taken from “A Thousand and One Nights”, with quotes from Aitmatov. A colourful orientalism appears there, and all this, on the one hand, may indicate that they are trying to attract the attention of Muslim communities...*” (Medvedev 2022)

Although Aleksey Pavlov’s claims sparked controversy in the Jewish community for its portrayal of Hasidism as a “hypersect cult” he alleged was connected to Ukrainian satanism, Pavlov also argued that Ukraine was planning to ban values associated with traditional faiths like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in his original argument. (Pavlov was fired on January 20, 2023 at the order of Vladimir Putin without explanation for what many suspect was a popular backlash over his antisemitic remarks (Halpern 2023).)

It seems clear that this sequence of narratives delivered by high level figures from Russian religious and secular security circles represent attempts to reinforce a “cultural code” related to the Antichrist which may be useful for the popular unification of various domestic religious denominations in Russia in opposition to an all-encompassing common enemy; and may be particularly effective in creating favourable cognitive conditions that more readily encourage Russian soldiers to fight (and die) in Ukraine.

3. Literature review

3.1 The Antichrist as a Russian ideomyth

From a semiotic perspective, myth may be considered an “ideologically driven narrative” or the “most elementary form of the narrative”, governed by underlying rules of the culture which produces it (Lincoln 1999). Specifically, an ideomyth refers to a “*culture mirroring and culture-forming narrative, adjusting its objectives to the contexts in which it is employed.*” (Dolińska-Rydzek 2021)

Dolińska-Rydzek (2021) considers the Antichrist to be an ideomyth which is “*an essential part of Russian cultural imagery... a significant part of historiosophic conceptions such as Moscow the Third Rome, or the Holy Rus*”, or the idea of “Katechon”. It supports “*an ideological narrative, which simultaneously reflects and constitutes Russian culture*” which “*the Antichrist figure encapsulates the most important features of*”, having “*undergone numerous historical and semantic transformations throughout the centuries*” to suit the contemporary political requirements. The Antichrist is a “*multidimensional character*” which has “*served as a constitutive other and the final enemy against whom Russian national identity has been constructed*” and has “*served as a myth consolidating the community in the face of crisis.*”

The post-Soviet ideological conception of Antichrist which dominates during the “Special Military Operation” seems primarily related to the work of “Russian Orthodox nationalists” who utilise eschatological and anti-Western themes in their writing. This list includes (but is not limited to) public figures such as Vardan Bagdasaryan, Alexander Dugin, Konstantin Dushenov, Tatyana Gracheva, Metropolitan Ioann Snychev (deceased 1995), and Alexander Prokhanov (Dolińska-Rydzek 2021).

While many of these figures were once politically fringe, their works have increasingly been legitimised in mainstream culture. Those like Bagdasaryan, Dugin, and Prokhanov are believed to support the development of national ideologies for the Kremlin used in the war (Faure 2022, Laruelle 2022, Pertsev 2022).

According to Dolińska-Rydzek (2021), for today’s Russian Orthodox nationalists the Antichrist “*denotes not only the forthcoming global apocalypse and the decay of the West, but also the complexity of Russian-Western relations and Russian supremacy as the only genuinely Orthodox power. What is more, the Antichrist represents phenomena such as globalization, ecumenism, new technologies, and anti-Russian plots*” ... “*it is a result of unceasing processes of re-interpreting and re-working of apocalyptic and eschatological narratives, and aligning them to existing reality.*”

As noted by Bagdasaryan and Resnyansky (2016), “*each epoch in the development of Russian historiosophy created its own Antichrist, who had little in common with the beast from The Revelation of John the Theologian.*”

In accordance with this ever-regenerating system of meanings around the ideomyth of Antichrist and its ‘floating signifier’ status, throughout history, the external “metaphysical enemy” of the Russian Katechon has taken many

forms: “the Tatars, the Turks, freemasons, Napoleon, Hitler, and nowadays American agents, Ukrainian fascists, and the Kiev Junta.” (Engström 2014)

However, Dolińska-Rydzek (2021) notes that in addition to the popular idea that Russia is Katechon, there is also a deeply rooted and contrasting idea within Russia that the embodiment of the Antichrist would be born there.

Suspects for the identity of the Russian Antichrist have at times included Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, Joseph Stalin, and Mikhail Gorbachev (Bagdasaryan & Resnyansky 2016, Isupov 1995, Dolińska-Rydzek 2021).

3.2 Strategic narratives of Antichrist and semiotic conflict in information geopolitics

Despite the mutual significance of these popular-eschatological symbols in the Ukrainian and Russian semiospheres, the author posits that it is evident that the diverging strategic narratives considered in the article related to the identification of the Antichrist/Satan are artifacts of a “semiotic conflict” in political meaning produced by the respective wartime cultures.

According to semiotic theory, in the margins between semiospheres is where both communication and conflict can occur (Lotman 2005, Madisson & Ventsel 2020). This interaction between spheres can transform meanings of a sign such as the complex identity of the Antichrist may be considered in the context of an ideomyth (Dolińska-Rydzek 2021).

Information geopolitics is a term attributed to Russian information warfare theorist Igor Panarin (Maliukevičius 2007). This field is also relevant to the examination of the work of philosopher Alexander Dugin, who in addition to Panarin, has been considered one of the primary Russian thought leaders of information geopolitics. Despite basic differences, both Panarin and Dugin similarly base their theories around direct competition with the Western system and the expansion of Russia’s informational and/or territorial sphere of influence (Darczewska 2014).

According to Russian information geopolitics theorist Andrei Manoilo, penetration into other states’ information environments is accomplished only where those states operate a mutual common “code” (language, religion, historical experience, etc.), and if those codes do not match, information confrontation can result (Maliukevičius 2007).

The author strongly feels this corresponds with the theoretical idea of semiotic conflict between semiospheres, and the transmission of Antichrist conspiracies through Orthodox Church channels.

Whereas traditional geopolitical theory understands power as derived through the management of a physical political geography, proponents of information geopolitics instead posit that geopolitical power is derived through control of the information space using techniques such as knowledge management, information infrastructure control, and the influence of public opinion (Darczewska 2014, Maliukevičius 2007).

In Russia, these projects in relation to figures like Panarin and Dugin have been consistently focused on the neo-imperial “information expansion” of “Russian Civilization” (or the “Russian World”), often in association with the Russian Orthodox Church (Maliukevičius 2007).

Bagdasaryan & Resnyansky (2016) note the geopolitical dimensions of the Antichrist ideomyth in Russia again evolved after the fall of the USSR to encompass opposition to “a monocentric model of the world”, and the popular equation of the Antichrist with the “Anglo-American civilization”, NATO, and the global financial system. They provide several examples of eschatological conspiracy theories which circulated in Russia’s Trinity-Sergius Lavra monastery and may have influenced the behaviour of churches abroad, such as in Cyprus, Greece, and Finland.

On this basis, the author asserts it is plausible to see how the ideomyth of Antichrist can fit as a tool of information geopolitics spread through the “Russian World” which may influence internal and external audiences.

As Dolińska-Rydzek (2021) notes based on an analysis of works of the semioticians of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School, one of the “essential aspects” of the Orthodox Christian culture of Russia emphasises a kind of “Manichean vision” where “the world is viewed in a paradigm either/or: either holy or diabolical, either good or bad, either Christian or anti-Christian” and “in this world-view, the West represents evil, while Russia is perceived as an embodiment of positive values.”

In their book *Strategic Conspiracy Narratives: A Semiotic Approach*, Madisson & Ventsel (2020) treat conspiracy theory within the context of strategic communications and identity creation. The researchers state that *“influencing activities focused on the cognitive level of the contemporary information war are usually based on the inclusion and exclusion logic of identity creation”* ... *“The communication of conspiracy theorists is characterized by strongly polarised identity creation in which an antagonistic opposition of “us” and “them” serves as an important dominant.”*

Russian nationalist Bagdasaryan (2016) posits that *“to disavow geopolitical opponents, it is necessary to create an associative series that leads to their identification with images perceived as an unambiguous evil. Such an evil in medieval semiotics was the figure of the Antichrist.... The modern world is built on a value consensus of condemnation of fascism and Nazism. The role that the Antichrist played for the medieval consciousness is played today by Adolf Hitler. Accordingly, in order to expose the enemy, it should be likened to Hitler.”*

The author suggests that as the ultimate contrast to “good”, ideomyths of the Antichrist and Satan have clear value for polarising identity creation, supporting the “Manichean vision” of the Russian Orthodox worldview in the context of strategic conspiracy narratives.

3.3 Security implications outside Russia and Ukraine

In the divergence of the Ukrainian church and political system from the Russian one – as well as apparently in response to over 20 years of the development of aggressive, nationalist rhetoric in Russia, we see potential semiotic conflict arising in differing interpretations of codes of “Antichrist”. The author feels this conflict in meanings has implications for information and cognitive security in Western societies.

The Antichrist ideomyth narratives may fuel international extremist political activities on the far right, where Russia has demonstrated a significant investment in such groups (Dolińska-Rydzek 2021).

To support such a view, from the start of Kadyrov’s use of desatanization rhetoric, there was also an intersection with the defence of traditional values and conspiratorial statements about gay parades. Further, the massive legitimisation of an irrational campaign against Satan seems likely to provide fodder for Christian nationalist groups, or supporters of fringe movements like QAnon (Lecaque 2022, Magnenou 2022).

The ideology of the “Russian World” driving the SMO which has been observed as a heresy by Orthodox leaders outside of the Russian Orthodox Church orbit is seductive to many in the *“Orthodox Church and has even been taken up by the Far Right and Catholic and Protestant fundamentalists.”* (Gallaher & Kalaitzidis 2022)

Therefore, Western societies may be interested in defending against and disrupting such narratives from an informational-cognitive security perspective, as these ideas seem likely to spread beyond Orthodox Christian semiospheres and may influence various extremist secular and religious groups.

4. Discussion: Creating a pro-Western strategic narrative of “desatanization”

On November 22, 2022, Ukrainian secret services raided the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra monastery, which had been leased by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), still in communion with Moscow. This raid and seizure were done in the broader national context of *“a “counterintelligence” operation aimed at countering pro-Russian propaganda”*, after parishioners were seen at the site singing pro-Russian songs in mid-November. Following the raid in which incriminating materials were found, the UOC’s lease on the UNESCO World Heritage Site was terminated, and legislation was passed which would require the UOC to legally identify its name with “Russian Orthodox Church” or “Moscow Patriarchate”, which UOC leaders resisted (Palikot 2022).

In responding to UOC complaints, Ukrainian National Security Council secretary Oleksiy Danilov made an appearance on television excoriating UOC leaders for camouflaging ongoing connections to Moscow. Danilov said: *“After February 24, our society needs justice. And if you hide your affiliation with the Moscow Patriarchate, your connections with people who are praying on the territory of Russia for Russian soldiers to kill us, then how can you even look each other in the eye?”* ... *“Why are you hiding your name? This is not fair; people should know where they are going. If you are not related, then officially renounce your baptism, say that Putin is Satan and Satan is Kirill. Call a spade a spade, and then it will be fair.”* (Kostyushenko 2022)

Here, Ukrainian security leaders’ reciprocal attempts to “desatanize” Ukraine involve the removal of Russian tools of geopolitical influence and an equation of the Russian position to one of evil and not justice.

Following the lead of Ukrainian religious leaders who have portrayed Putin in analogy to both Hitler and the Antichrist, the author argues that Western secular leaders should go on the “spiritual offensive” and be encouraged to make public statements which truthfully articulate the ways in which the behaviour of Russia’s leadership during its war of aggression have been “Antichristian” in accordance with Western moral values.

As Alexander Dugin has observed, Putin’s rise to power in the “seventh month” of 1999 to emerge as some kind of “ideal ruler of the period” (Dugin 2014) coincides with a popular millennialist Nostradamus conspiracy theory generally interpreted to be about a “Third Antichrist” who would succeed Napoleon and Hitler. (The reciprocal consideration of an “ideal ruler” according to a Ukrainian priest suggests the worldly power of the Antichrist itself (McKay 2022).)

In his respective New Year 1999 and 2000 addresses to Arctogaia, Dugin first reflected on his gleeful anticipation of such a “King of Terror” and then seemed to ruminate that that figure was Putin, and the end times would have to be put off a while (Dugin 1999, Dugin 2000).

There is no doubt that Jesus Christ was not equated with murder or worldly power, and is known as “Prince of Peace”, not “King of Terror”.

Following this basic “conspiratorial” approach, is easy to conceive of a strategic narrative utilising basic Christian knowledge about Satan, as well as popular eschatological symbols which could depict Vladimir Putin as a usurper of the Orthodox Church and false claimant to the leadership of all Christianity.

Unlike Christ, an ascetic figure associated with life, forgiveness, and truth – who rejected worldly power when tempted by the Devil, the murderous, vindictive, and deceiving figure of “Putin the Third Antichrist” is possibly the richest man on earth, and can be analogised to figures like Pharaoh, Herod, or Nero.

He slays his brothers, poisons his enemies, and threatens the world’s destruction with nuclear weapons. Putin can be portrayed as an evil tyrant (“King of Terror”) who operates a vast global disinformation machine which “deceives the whole world” (Revelation 12:9).

Such a “strategic conspiracy narrative” based on popular eschatological symbols which contrasts Russian “satanodicy” with Ukrainian (and Western) theodicy (see Epstein (2022)) could theoretically reinforce Western values, while refuting Russia’s narrative that its war is Christian.

5. Conclusion

This article applied a semiotic approach to analysis of public statements related to the Antichrist ideomyth in both Ukraine and Russia during the Special Military Operation in 2022. It considered contrasting narratives in the context of a conflict in meanings emerging between the religiously and geopolitically divergent semiospheres of Ukraine and Russia.

The author asserts that this ideomyth has implications for information and cognitive security both in the West and in Russia when framed from the perspective of semiotics and information geopolitics. To this effect, this article has demonstrated that the Antichrist signifier can also be wielded in geopolitics for either offensive or defensive purposes.

Despite the idea that eschatological narratives of Antichrist are Russian symbols which promote cultural unity in opposition to Western values, history demonstrates that another of the significant roles of the Antichrist in Russian semiotics involves political narratives depicting such leaders as Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and Joseph Stalin as Antichrists.

Vladimir Putin would seem to fit in this line, and while in the Ukrainian semiosphere he may have already earned the label of “Antichrist of our current time”, it remains to be seen if his symbolic identification with evil would be as globally enduring as that of Hitler.

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