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RUSSIAN FALSE RELIGIOUS ACCUSATIONS OF UKRAINIANS

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Abstract
The text provides a summary of several months of research on Russian false religious accusations against Ukrainians (Satanists, Satan) and actions (de-Satanization, Holy war, Jihad). Only the essential elements required for the conceptual analysis of the insufficiency of existing explications will be presented. The extensive evidence supporting the existence, falseness, and characteristics of the accusations will be supplied where necessary for the analysis. The analysis requires certain preliminary clarifications, namely: the evidence of the existence, falseness, and other attributes of the Russian accusations (section 1), the description and analysis of the most plausible explanations regarding the motives behind the accusations (section 2), and an argument highlighting the insufficiency of these explanations, which includes logical, factual, clinical, and interpretative objections (section 3). The underlying reason for the insufficiency of explanations can be attributed to various possibilities, some of which include the peculiarity of the phenomenon itself, particularly within the context of Russia, as well as the absence of applicable models for seemingly similar contemporary and historical phenomena such as a lack of democratic practices (section 3.2).

Keywords
religious accusations, Satanists, Satan, de-Satanization, Holy war, Jihad

"Religious madness is madness springing from irreligiousness.," "Religious faith & superstitions are quite different. The one springs from fear & is a sort of false science. The other is a trusting." (Wittgenstein, 1998:15, 82)

1. The existence, features, and falseness of Moscow's religious accusations against Ukrainians

Russia is notorious for its propaganda, a practice that has persisted for over a century. Starting with the successful Bolshevik propaganda in the early years, this influence has continued to the present day (Van Herpen, 2016). While there have been fluctuations along the way, under the new management, Moscow's propaganda seems to be as effective as it was during earlier times. Consequently, Russia is currently not highly regarded for its media freedom. According to the "2022 Press Freedom Index" by *Reporters Without Borders*,

Moscow ranks 155th out of 180 listed countries. Media freedom in the Russian Federation (RF) is classified as a "very serious situation" (*Press Freedom Index*, 2022). Combining Moscow's propaganda traditions with its lack of media freedom suggests the likelihood of extreme and undemocratic distortions. When propaganda aligns with ideological radicalization, the concept of *religious radicalization* naturally comes to mind (referred to as "Tactical narratives for the domestic audience" by Anton Shekhovtsov, 2022; see Shekhovtsov, 2018). However, Moscow's *religious radicalization* exhibits characteristics that render it unimaginable in 21st-century Christianity, especially within Europe, making it paradoxical (Krkač, 2022a).

One of the conclusions drawn from the 2016 quantitative research conducted by Gerber & Zavisca was as follows: "Within Russia, anti-Americanism (and the consequent blame placed on the United States for the Ukraine conflict) is the only element of the Russian government narrative that has gained significant traction" (Gerber & Zavisca, 2016:94). The current topic will be approached with this in mind. In brief, Moscow's extensive propaganda regarding Ukraine has been widely accepted in Russia since at least 2016 (and it is undoubtedly built upon pre-existing Russian sentiments towards Ukraine, as noted by Szporluk, 2020). Considering the available evidence, it can be acknowledged that the present topic, as an extension of Moscow's propaganda against Ukraine, has achieved a substantial level of acceptance, or has *truly taken hold*, to a significant extent.

The accumulated body of evidence regarding Moscow's *unfounded religious allegations against Ukrainians* and their perceived "misuse of religion" (see O'Beara, 2022; UNHR Office of the High Commissioner 2022) is primarily characterized by its specific alignment with a broader conceptual framework. Specifically, these allegations are intricately connected with *non-religious accusations* (see Rossoliński-Liebe & Willems, 2022). These non-religious allegations encompass a spectrum of concerns spanning from geostrategic dimensions (such as Ukrainians being portrayed as *anti-Russians* and posing a *threat to Moscow*) to political dimensions (where assertions are made that Ukrainians are *radicalized*, associated with *Nazism*, and similar matters; refer to EUvsDISINFO, 2002).While there exists a continuum from non-religious and religious allegations, instances of overlap are also observed. Although their interrelations hold significance, it is important to note that the scope of this investigation *does not encompass an examination of their interplay.* This is because while non-religious and religious assertions might be closely intertwined, they do not elucidate the distinctive characteristics of religious allegations within this specific context. Hence, a comprehensive exploration of their interconnections will not be undertaken in the subsequent discussion.

Religious accusations, on the other hand, will be *presented and analyzed* (see Norris & Inglehart, 2004; Haynes, 2008). The presentation includes evidence of their existence and a severe lack of evidence for what they claim. For instance, Satanism and black magic aren't widespread among Ukrainians, especially not among the formal leadership of Ukraine. Furthermore, there are indications that "experts" in black magic are used by the highest services of Moscow (see Ukrainska Pravda, 2022, Chakraborty, 2022).

Furthermore, some of Moscow's alleged evidence for their accusations against Ukrainians, such as Nazism, Satanism, and black magic, has been proven to be completely fabricated (see Gault, 2022; Krkač, 2022:26). Visual and textual evidence of these accusations, including photos, videos, parts of official speeches, segments from TV shows, newspaper reports, commentaries, columns from official websites, and various social networks where

links are shared, will not be provided in detail due to the enormous amount of material. However, crucial points will be cited. For previous research on this extensive body of evidence (see Krkač, 2022) where the vast majority of it is available with links containing visual confirmations (Section 1). Before we address the issue, it is important to emphasize certain aspects related to the *political exploitation of religion*. This point will be relevant within the context of objections (Section 3) to the proposed explanations (Section 2) of the phenomena under consideration.

First, some authors suggest that an *a priori* separation of secular and religious concepts can be confusing, and that *a posteriori* separation resulting from debate may provide a more suitable starting point (see Carter Hallward, 2008).

Second, in most cases, the political association of ideology with theological exegesis appears to be highly problematic. This connection is crucial for maintaining the consistency of the political exploitation of religion (see Jacoby, 2018). Consequently, a selective interpretation of sacred texts or their interpretation in cases where no interpretation is allowed seems to be quite common.

Third, there is a theory suggesting the existence of a kind of religion-nationalism that only partially explains the case of RF (see Bacon, 2018).

In his article titled "Reflexive and Reasoned Religious Nationalism: The Exploratory Case of Russia," Edwin Bacon focuses solely on the case within the Russian Federation (RF) up to 2018. He does not consider the RF's relationship with Ukraine, even in 2018, during which a documented list of accusations emerged, ranging from political accusations (*e.g.*, *a threat*) to religious accusations *(e.g.*, Satanists, witches, etc.). Therefore, in his approach to the "nationalism–religion relationship," this would align more with the "*ex patria* strand" rather than the "*ex religio* strand" (see Bacon, 2018). It is suggested that "religion has been hijacked and abused by nationalists" (Bacon, 2018). However, explicit public statements made in 2022 by RF's highest church officials, priests, and monks (as detailed in Section 1.2) indicate the opposite process, wherein the invasive ideology of RF has been hijacked and abused by religion. Nevertheless, it is possible that these two processes run parallel and are mutually consistent, and they may even be practically supportive, viewed as beneficial by all parties involved.

The final point pertains to Moscow's religious accusations against Ukrainians within the context of discussions in political science regarding *political and religious propaganda*. In connection with the first point, it can be argued that the entire notion of an *a priori* separation between religious and secular might be considered a myth, specifically, "a rhetorical construction of these categories" (see Fitzgerald, 2011). There is nothing inherently problematic about this point, except that in certain cases involving the Russian Federation (RF), there exists an evidently established legal and economic relationship between the state and the church. While its metaphysical foundation may be deemed fictitious, its pragmatic consequence is undoubtedly a tangible reality. In fact, in this regard, the approach of political science may be less fortuitous compared to that of political economy, given the substantial state financing of churches, which implies a *quid pro quo* arrangement.

Steven Merritt Miner, in his book *Stalin's Holy War: Religion, Nationalism, and Alliance Politics*, raises an insightful point that helps clarify why Moscow's contemporary accusations are not novel and why they do not fall within the realm of political science theory, but rather align with propaganda techniques and routines. In fact, they appear to be a di-

rect replication of strategies employed during Stalin's era. During Stalin's time, the war (*i.e.*, World War II) was perceived as a "Holy war by the Russian people; patriotism and Orthodoxy were intertwined" (Merritt Miner, 2003:51–93), and a "holy hatred toward the enemy" was considered normal within the radically anti-religious system (Merritt Miner, 2003:93–123). This manipulation of religious language by a profoundly anti-religious system was primarily employed because it was the sole language comprehensible to the majority of citizens. This issue pertains more to propaganda techniques than to political science, resembling irresponsible advertising rather than a specific political ideology or theory. The enigmatic aspect lies in the fact that these same accusations continue to be effective nearly 80 years later.

Given the complexity of the current methodological approach, it appears crucial to outline its fundamental structure and the analysis (the basic method used hereafter is a case study, explication, and conceptual analysis). The following structure provides only the basic elements and their essential interrelations concerning my ultimate objectives and alternative proposals for clarification. The research hypothesis is that we still don't have a completely clear explication of Russian religious accusations toward Ukrainians.

THE ANALYSIS STRUCTURE
Moscow's false religious accusations against Ukrainians
↓
→ (1.) Evidence of existence, features, and falseness
↓
→ (1.1) Existence and content of accusation (Table 1.)
→ Features: totality, continuity, progression, and extension (points 1–5)
→ Relations between features (Illustration 1.)
→ Falseness and fabrication (point 6)
→ (1.2.) The content in relation to features (Table 1.)
→ (1.3.) The creators of the accusations (points 1–4)
→ (1.4.) Reasons, motives, and the model of accusations (Table 2.)
↓ ←
→ (2.) Explications of the accusations
↓
→ (2.1) Ideological radicalization and propaganda
→ (2.2.) Schizo-fascism
→ (2.3.) Existential crisis
→ (2.4.) Belief in fiction
↓ ←
→ (3.) Objections to the proposed explications and a different suggestion (points 1–3)
↓
→ (3.1.) Objections (points 1–3)
→ (3.2.) A different suggestion: Democracy breach

1.1. Existence, features, and falseness of Moscow's accusations

Five features of the collected evidence of Moscow's accusations were singled out in order to make them clear, that is to say:

- (1) besides the *existence* (and the *content* which will be presented separately) of Moscow's accusations (with separate evidence of falseness included under (6)), some further properties of these accusations are interesting; namely:
- (2) *totality* – they are made by all members of all branches of government (legislative, executive, and judicial), by various warlords, by church authorities (from Patriarch and lower level of clergy to priests, and monks, see Gudziak, 2023), media propaganda actors (state journalists and propagandists), and by various scientists, intellectuals, ideologists, analysts, and commentators;
- (3) *continuity* – such accusations have been made since at least 2014 and continuing in 2022, while animosity between RF and Ukraine has existed for decades, perhaps for centuries, see Szporluk, 2000);
- (4) *progression* – which is interesting because besides repetition and overlap there is a verifiable progression of Moscow's accusation over the years (2014–2023), and quite a sudden progression in 2022, namely (a) from non-religious (*Nazism*) to religious accusations, and (b) within religious ones from minor (*e.g.*, *black magic*, *Satanism*, see Kluth, 2022) to mild (*e.g.*, *demons*, *devils*, and extreme (*Satan* himself) which are paired with Moscow's responses (*e.g.*, de-Nazification, de-Satanization, etc.); and
- (5) *extension* which means that Moscow at first (2014–2023) made accusations only against Ukrainians (the majority of the nation, and the leadership), but later on (during 2022) made the same or similar accusations to non-Ukrainians (e.g. Germans, Catholics, the Pope, etc.), (see Pullella, 2022; Krkač, 2022).

The mutual relations of these features of the accusations are given in the following illustration (as shown in Illustration 1). Here the content is only mentioned, and it will be listed later (see Table 1.).

- (6) Concerning the *falseness* of Russia's *political accusations*, it should be said that they are part of Moscow's propaganda and completely fabricated (*e.g.*, so-called "De-Nazifying" of Ukrainian Nazis is completely fabricated, see Farley, 2022; Treisman, 2022), while others are invented.
- (6.1) Concerning the *falseness* of Russia's *most extreme* religious accusations (*e.g.*, "Antichrist," "Satan"), there is not much sense in trying to show that they are false. Showing that would require a deep explication of a theology of evil, especially in Orthodox Christianity, but still, it wouldn't make sense because such accusations were mostly made by politicians, and propagandists, not by the highest church officials, or theologians (some were made by patriarchs, priests, monks).
- (6.2) Concerning Russia's *moderate* religious accusations (*e.g.*, "demons," "evil spirits") similar to the previous case applies (here it should be mentioned that *exorcism* in Orthodox Christianity is performed by *every believer who fights evil*, not like in Catholicism where it is performed only by licensed exorcists).
- (6.3) Finally, concerning Russia's *minor* religious accusations (*e.g.*, "Satanists," "black magic"), there is some sense in sociological-anthropological research of the phenomenon, but then again it still wouldn't make sense (for some discussion on these phenomena see Bogatyrev 1998; Kononenko 1998; Kukharenko 2007).

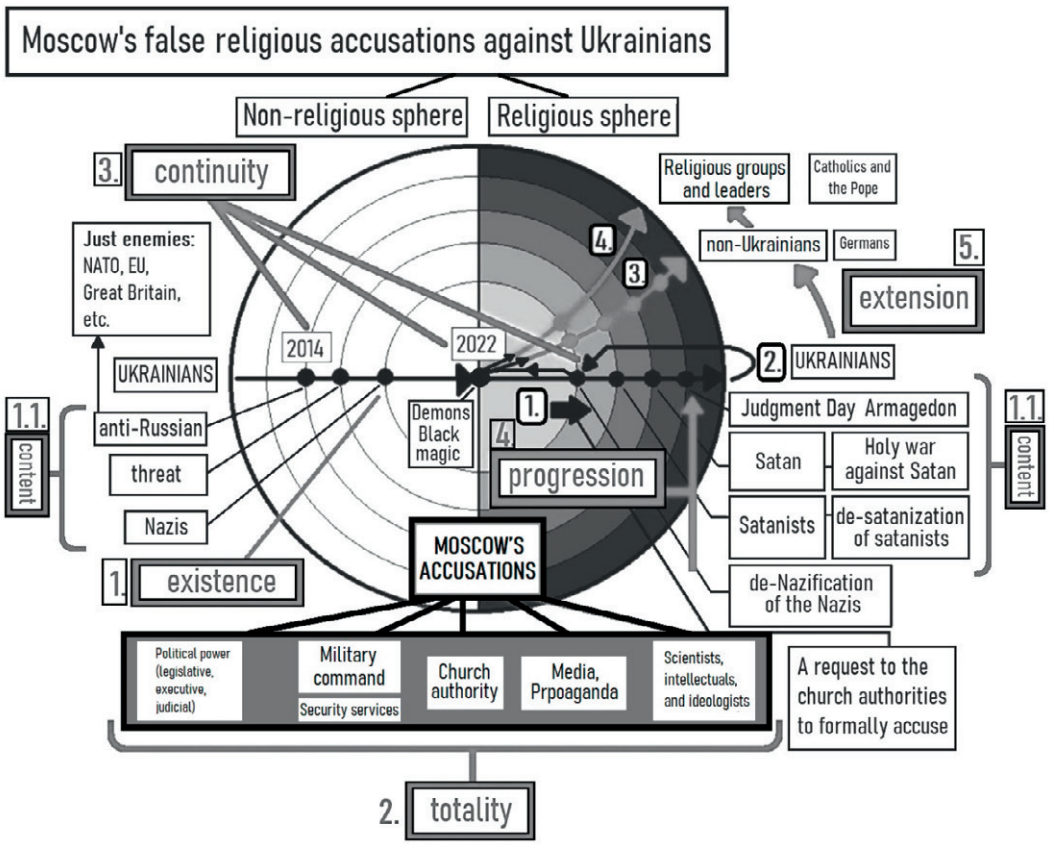


Illustration 1: The relation of 5 features of Moscow's false and fabricated religious accusations of Ukrainians (by the author, see Krkač, 2022:33).

1.2. The content in relation to features of Moscow's accusations

Next, an important note should be made concerning the *content* of Moscow's accusations and their reactions in terms of descriptions of their actions in religious terms. The content can be divided as said into non-religious, and religious, and religious into mild, medium, and radical. The second one is more important. What we have here is an extreme variety and as said *progression* (as shown in Illustration 1). The content of religious accusations was obviously *expanded* very quickly, namely from *e.g.*, "Satanists" to "Satan." Continuity (overlap and repetition) is also quite obvious. *Progression* from mild *e.g.*, "black magic" to radical *e.g.*, "Satan" is also obvious. *Extension* from Ukrainians to non-Ukrainians happened only at the end of 2022 and accusations were extended (in addition to the standard list of enemies such as NATO, USA, West, EU, and GB) to Germans, Catholics, and the Pope. *Totality* is also obvious because accusations were, and are, made by at least one representative (formal or informal) of all branches of government, military leadership, warlords, church power (clergy), media, propagandists, various military analysts, commentators, scientists, and ideologists. Some of them repeated the same accusations on numerous occasions and some even published papers in which they made them (*e.g.*, see Dugin, 2022). These will be mentioned later on. All features suggest that these accusations were made partly in a systematic manner (*e.g.*, by RF politicians), and partly completely chaotically (*e.g.*, by some warlords of RF). In most cases, accusations were repeated by

others after the most senior politicians made them (*e.g.*, Putin, Medvedev, Patriarch Kirill, etc. see Reuters, 2022).

Table 1. Accusations, evidence, and reactions

Moscow's accusations against Ukrainians	**Non-religious accusations**	**Religious accusations (with progression)**			
Time period (with extension)	2014–2022 Mostly Ukrainians		2022 NATO, USA, EU, GB, Germans, Catholics, Pope		
Who in RF made the accusations?	Politicians (see Bobylev, 2022, Krkač, 2022:6–7)	Priests, monks, ideologists (see Gudziak, 2023, Introvigne, 2022, Krkač, 2022:8–9)	Priests, monks, ideologists, propagandists, politicians, warlords (see Dugin, 2022; Krkač, 2022)		
The contents of Moscow's accusations	*Nazis, Neo-Nazis, totalitarian hyper-sect*	*Black magic, blood magic, satanic seal, neo-pagan cults, witchcraft, etc.*	*Satanists*	*Devils, Demons, Satanic evil spirits*	*Satan, Antichrist, Master of Hell, Small demon Zelenskyy*
Evidence	Nonreliable or fabricated by RF	Nonreliable or fabricated by RF	None or fabricated	None or fabricated	None or fabricated
Evidence for the opposite	Indications: There are Neo-Nazis in RF (see Townsend 2022)	Indications: some RF services use experts for black magic, and astrologists	–	–	–
Who in RF made the reactions?	Politicians, Patriarch (see Treisman, 2022; Krkač, 2022)	Patriarch Kirill, politicians, ideologists, propagandists, warlords (see Arredondas, 2022; Radio Free Europe, 2022; Dugin, 2022; Krkač, 2022)			
Moscow's reactions	*Invasion, Denazification*	*Invasion, Suppression*	*Desatanization*	*Exorcism*	*Armagedon, Holy war, War against hell, Jihad, War of Heaven and Hell*
Moscow's powers to react	*Invasion, "war dead have their sins forgiven"*	*Sacred Russia, Orthodoxy*	*Holy power, Holy Hatred, Orthodoxy*	*Holy power, Orthodoxy*	*Angelic warriors, Heavenly army*
Kiev's re/actions	Possibility of celebrating Christmas on the 25th December (see Harding, 2022; Krkač, 2022:13–5)	The case of "Saint Javelin" (condemned by Ukrainian church) (see Mehta, 2022; Krkač, 2022)	Ban of Russian church in Ukraine (due to various pro-Russian activities) (see Peleschuk & Hunder, 2022).		
Other's reactions	Cardinal Kurt Koch called Kirill's "sins forgiven" of the dead Russians in Ukraine heresy (see Allen 2022)		Pope Francis compared Russia's war against Ukraine with Nazi Germany's operation against Jews during World War II (see Horowitz, 2022; The Editors, 2022)		

Author's own work.

1.3. The creators of the accusations

An important note should be made on the notion of "Moscow" in the present text because it supplies facts and hypotheses on how these accusations are widespread. By "Moscow" here it refers to various individuals and groups within the RF. Some of them are referred to *factually*, and some *hypothetically* due to the lack of clear evidence, and in the following order:

- (1) particular individuals who explicitly made such accusations and who belong to the *highest positions of power* in RF (politicians *e.g.*, Putin, Medvedev, Peskov, members of Duma (parliament), members of judicial power (judges), members of various highest federal services (*e.g.*, Naryshkin), members of the clergy (Patriarch Kirill suspected as a KGB agent, (see Corley, 2022) various priests and monks), warlords (*e.g.*, Kadyrov), and propagandists (*e.g.*, Solovyov),
- (2) particular *analysts and commentators* (as guests on TV shows), *scientists and professors*, and various *ideologists* (*e.g.*, Dugin 2022),
- (3) particular *citizens* who (in most cases) repeated the same accusations in various interviews on various channels of state TV,
- (4) various *groups* (parapolitical, and political) and a *percentage of citizens* of the RF (both non-religious and religious) who support such accusations. However, due to the lack of clear evidence and often mutually contradictory data, this kind of reference is only hypothetical. Namely, during 2022 from multiple sources various percentages of citizen support of the RF invasion of Ukraine were presented. They varied from almost 90% to 50% approximately (see *Statista Research Department* 2022). Since these percentages and sources cannot be verified, they cannot be taken as credible data and sources. However, since support was in no source lower than 50% it can be assumed that at least 50% of the population supports the invasion and all that goes with it (the military actions of the RF in Ukraine and narratives as well among which there is the *religious narrative*). Furthermore, apart from some relevant opposition to mobilization and some for the RF minor protests against the invasion there were no other major protests. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that a relevant percentage of the population supports the invasion or that, at least, isn't against it. Yet, this cannot be checked.

1.4. Reasons, motives, and the model of accusations

Political accusations of Ukrainians by RF are understandable as means of radicalization of conflict, and perhaps as a justification for invasion (see Illustration 1. namely Ukrainians as "anti-Russians, a threat to Russia, Nazis" and similar). After all, such political radicalizations appear in many countries and political systems, even in democratic ones. In most cases political radicalization, in the face of a military conflict or during the conflict, serves practical military purposes, that is to say: to motivate the population to support the invasion, and in the RF case mobilization as well, to motivate soldiers to fight (and perchance to commit war crimes and not to feel guilt or shame), to justify the loss of soldiers on the battlefields, to remove the responsibility from oneself in case of losses, and probably to prevent one's own population from turning against the government.

All that being said, it still doesn't explain the Russian move *from political to religious accusations* as means of *extreme religious radicalization*. As far as political radicalization is in question, a debate on evidence is suitable, but once it moves to religious radicalization a debate on evidence rarely makes sense. One can debate whether Ukraine is in any relevant sense a threat to Russia, and does it have an extremely high percentage of neo-Nazis (say compared to the US or EU average). When one moves toward a debate on the existence of *e.g.*, "Satanists" or practitioners of "black magic," things could still be relevant perhaps only in a theological context, but don't make sense in a political one. They are meaningless except if one researches superstition.

Finally, when one moves even further toward accusations including concepts such as "demons," "satanic evil spirits," "Satan," "Antichrist" etc. (see Illustration 1.) things become utterly strange even to theologians. Regardless to say, there is no evidence of Ukrainians being "Satanists" or "practitioners of black magic." Ironically enough, there are some indications that Russians themselves are using *e.g.*, black magic, even in the highest federal services.

The model of Moscow's religious radicalization is quite internally consistent if not coherent. Let us take examples from Table 1. (as shown in Table 2.).

Table 2. The model of Russian accusations and internal consistency.

Moscow's model of false religious accusations against Ukrainians	Justification	Progression		
		→	→	→?
Because Ukrainians are: ↓		Satanists	Demons	Antichrist, Satan, Devil
Russians must perform: ↓		Desatanization	Exorcism	Holy War / Jihad
By use of:		Orthodoxy	Holy power	Angelic Warriors / Heavenly army

Author's own work.

The question that arises is, why did the shift occur *from political to religious accusations*, and *from political to religious radicalization*? It is plausible that political radicalization lacked the requisite specificity or clarity to resonate with certain social groups. It's conceivable that the inclusion of a religious component was deemed necessary to exert an influence on particular social segments, such as those who are socially excluded, marginalized, deeply religious, possess lower levels of education, rely on federal financial aid, exhibit unquestioning faith in the president, government, priests, and the like. However, this explanation is rooted in what is generally understood about *ideological radicalization*, which often encompasses *religious elements*. Yet, there is no evidence from Russia that definitively substantiates or justifies this explanation. Perhaps, at some point in the future, new evidence may come to light, shedding light on this peculiar practice. However, this shift isn't the topic here but only the nature of religious accusations.

2. Various explications of Moscow's false and fabricated religious accusations against Ukrainians

In this section, four explanations of the *described religious accusations* will be presented, along with some clarifications. It is essential to note that all these explanations attempt to elucidate (and in some cases to explain) the accusations as something *extreme*, be it extreme radicalization and propaganda (2.1), an extreme mental disorder coupled with political and military motives (2.2 and 2.3), or extreme manipulation and fabrication (2.4). Consequently, each explanation incorporates some form of extreme actions, although they vary in terms of the nature of these actions.

Considering that the accusations possess distinctive features that set them apart from historically similar events (*e.g.*, the Crusades) and contemporary phenomena (*e.g.*, radical Islamism and Islamic terrorism), certain aspects will remain enigmatic if one intends to entirely classify this phenomenon under a specific rule, definition, or criterion distinct from something even marginally dissimilar (*e.g.*, Medieval Crusades, contemporary Jihad, various manifestations of right-wing and left-wing terrorism, whether state-sponsored or not, and analogous occurrences).

The point with "extreme" *e.g.*, as in "extremist actions" is twofold, and both parts should be fulfilled in order for the whole thing to work. In this particular case, not only that state religious propaganda, *i.e.*, accusations, must be extreme, but also the recipients of it must be open to extreme or radical religiosity and will accept such religious propaganda. Therefore, there must be some actions performed by the highest church officials and clergy. If for example recipients are moderately religious (see Wibisono, Louis, Jetten, 2019), and skeptical of any forms of extreme religiosity, it isn't likely that extreme religious propaganda and accusations would have an effect on them; perhaps a counter effect rather than an effect.

2.1. Ideological radicalization and propaganda

The most effective approach to elucidate *Moscow's religious accusations* is to view them as a layer within Moscow's propaganda framework, one characterized by religious dedication and a high degree of radicalization. In essence, this layer constitutes propaganda that centers on ideological-religious radicalization (see Van Herpen, 2016; Tusini, 2019), a term encapsulated by the broader concept of religious radicalization (see Link & Sharma, 2018; de Graaf & Bos, 2021). Religious radicalization can manifest in two principal forms. Firstly, it may align with the overarching ideological radicalization of society (as discussed by Murray 2015 and Jayakumar 2019). Secondly, it may represent a distinct or individual radicalization within society (as examined by Bernstein, 2005, and Kimball, 2008).

In both categories *religious radicalization* is directed at specific influential groups within society or the society as a whole, particularly when religion plays a pivotal role within that society. Notably, certain types of radicalization incorporate religious implications, concepts, and beliefs, especially within right-wing and Islamic contexts, while left-wing radicalization tends to avoid religious affiliations. It is intriguing to observe that Russian radicalization simultaneously draws from the left-wing radicalization of the Soviet Union, the right-wing traditions of Tsarist Russia, and archaic religious beliefs, thus forming a paradoxical blend. A. P. Schmid, in his paper "Radicalization, De-Radicalization,

Counter-Radicalization: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review" (2013), offers the following insights:

> Causes for radicalization that can lead to terrorism ought to be sought not just on the micro-level but also on meso- and macro-levels: 1. Micro-level, i.e. the individual level, involving e.g. identity problems, failed integration, feelings of alienation, marginalization, discrimination, relative deprivation, humiliation (direct or by proxy), stigmatization and rejection, often combined with moral outrage and feelings of (vicarious) revenge; 2. Meso-level, i.e. the wider radical milieu – the supportive or even complicit social surround – which serves as a rallying point and is the 'missing link' with the terrorists' broader constituency or reference group that is aggrieved and suffering injustices which, in turn, can radicalize parts of a youth cohort and lead to the formation of terrorist organizations; 3. Macro-level, i.e. role of government and society at home and abroad, the radicalization of public opinion and party politics, tense majority–minority relationships, especially when it comes to foreign diasporas, and the role of lacking socio-economic opportunities for whole sectors of society which leads to mobilization and radicalization of the discontented, some of which might take the form of terrorism (Schmid, 2013).

What is intriguing here is that certain aspects of various mental issues may play a role in the micro-level causes of radicalization, including identity crises, feelings of alienation, discrimination, humiliation, stigmatization, and rejection. Some of these emotional states can contribute to the development of mental disorders. On the macro-level, however, ideological radicalization and its political dimension take precedence.

Ideological radicalization helps elucidate the progression of Moscow's accusations, including the transition *from political to religious allegations*. However, it may not fully explain the emergence of *extreme religious accusations* (such as Satan or Antichrist) without a more comprehensive examination of the relationship between religious education and culture in Russia and its connection to Orthodox theology and the current church leadership. Even with this additional context, certain elements would still be required to provide a meaningful explanation. As a result, Moscow's religious accusations, as a facet of broader ideological radicalization, may describe necessary but not sufficient conditions for the observed phenomenon. Therefore, one needs to explore alternative possibilities to bridge this explanatory gap.

2.2. Schizo-fascism

Another proposal was given by M. Epstein in his paper "Schizophrenic fascism: on Russia's war in Ukraine" (see Epstein, 2022, but also Pomerantsev, 2023). In the abstract Epstein writes the following:

> This essay describes some of the literary, psychological, and historical causes of Russia's war in Ukraine (2022) based on observations of the national character found in the fiction of Aleksandr Pushkin and Fyodor Dostoevsky and in philosophical and psychological essays of Petr Chaadaev, Sergei Askol'dov, and Sigmund Freud. The political ideology that stands behind the war can be characterized as schizofascism, or schizophrenic fascism that embraces the contradiction between archaic myths, chauvinism, and xenophobia, on the one hand, and corruption and cynicism, on the other. Citing the controversial results of sociological polls indicating both Russians' aspiration for friendship with Ukraine and their support for the aggressive war, the author explores the deep ambivalence inherent in the psychology of Russians as historical successors of the Golden Horde and the Moscovite State, incorporating the legacy of nomadism, militarism, messianism, and autarky (Epstein, 2022:475).

This is sufficient for understanding the overall argument. *Schizophrenic fascism* is the outcome of Russian political ideology, which emerges from a complex interplay of con-

tradictory phenomena and beliefs, encompassing "archaic myths, chauvinism, xenophobia, corruption, cynicism, the Golden Horde, the Moscovite State, nomadism, militarism, messianism, and autarky," as articulated by Epstein in 2022. It forms a blend of conceptual inconsistencies, historical distortions, and contemporary fabrications. It appears as though the ideology opportunistically incorporated whatever served to justify its actions to its citizens, often portraying these elements as beneficial for the nation and state, and if necessary, distorting or entirely fabricating them through state agencies, scientists, ideologists, state media, propagandists, and more.

Epstein's analysis presents two noteworthy elements. Firstly, it acknowledges the multitude of factors contributing to a singular universal political ideology, which is arguably closer to the truth than identifying a sole cause or motive. Secondly, it highlights the many contradictions within this ideology. Furthermore, messianism can help clarify Moscow's natural progression from non-religious to religious accusations against Ukrainians. However, the challenge lies in claiming that a significant portion, or possibly the majority, of individuals exhibit the clinical disorder of schizophrenia, which is typically diagnosed in individual cases and has a multifaceted etiology.

On the other hand, if Epstein uses the term metaphorically rather than literally, it raises the question of why specifically this term. It seems to suggest that many Russians suffer from a form of mental disorder that manifests in radical totalitarian actions, such as invading another sovereign country, committing probable war crimes against civilians and POWs in that country, and sacrificing thousands of their own citizens as cannon fodder on the battlefields. Perhaps the most significant issue is that taking such a claim literally, at least partially absolves Russians of responsibility for their actions in and regarding Ukraine.

2.3. Existential crisis

Another possible explication is supplied by E. Ferris in her text "How Russia's Narratives on Ukraine reflect its Existential Crisis" (Ferris, 2022). Ferris writes the following:

> The Ukraine war has become an existential crisis for Russia. Its senior leadership now appears to be talking in *apocalyptic terms* about the risk of Russia's very survival, and to be on a messianic mission of which Ukraine is only part of the picture. The Kremlin's framing sees Russia not only pitted against the West, but acting as the vanguard and protector of a collective civilization under attack, through the retelling of historical memory that casts Russia as the aggressor. The current situation is no longer about which parts of Ukrainian territory Russia is willing to cede, but a fundamental reimagining of Russian national identity (Ferris, 2022).

Ferris, much like Epstein, strongly associates messianism with the likely cause of the organic proliferation of religious, particularly apocalyptic, terminology. The concept of apocalypse takes on the guise of a threat to the survival of the RF, while its antithesis portrays it as a mission to save others from themselves, such as Ukrainians. What's intriguing here is that Ferris introduces identity problems as a potential source of radicalization, which spans from the micro-level (as discussed in Schmid 2013), to the national level, characterized as a national identity problem. She terms this an existential crisis. The issue at hand mirrors what we find in Epstein's explanation. Namely, an existential crisis can be linked etiologically to certain serious conditions like depression and the like. It's notable that some of these mental disorders exhibit symptoms that encompass profoundly irrational behavior and a detachment from everyday reality.

What raises doubts in her account, akin to Epstein's account, is the attribution of essentially individual disorders to a large group of individuals, if not to the entire collective. To the best of our knowledge, collective mental disorders have different origins, such as Mass Psychogenic Illness (MPI) or mass hysteria. If one aims to attribute such conditions to substantial groups of individuals, it should be substantiated by clinical data and evidence-based medicine that confirms the collective state. However, although not beyond the realm of possibility, I believe there are simpler explanations for the presented phenomenon than resorting to clinical psychiatry.

2.4. Belief in fiction

One possibility considers all the acceptable elements of previous explanations while maintaining a degree of skepticism in light of the aforementioned objections. What can be acknowledged is that a form of *messianism* appears to be a leading contender for serving as a *binding element* bridging *the gap between non-religious and religious accusations*. Furthermore, it is plausible that the *apocalyptic* interpretation of their role and significance within the RF acts as a significant *connective element*, particularly for Russians themselves. This interpretation may account for the seemingly natural progression from less severe (*e.g.*, Satanists and black magic) or moderate (*e.g.*, demons and evil spirits) accusations to more extreme religious allegations (*e.g.*, Satan, Devil, Antichrist).

However, if this primarily involves the *cynical exploitation of religion* by prominent figures, including politicians in executive, legislative, and judicial, roles, church authorities, arms dealers, military leaders, and business individuals engaged in the production and procurement of weapons, as well as military commanders both in Moscow and on the battlefield, then it does not constitute a story that they employ to convince themselves. They are aware that this is a *deceptive* and consciously contrived narrative, a fabrication aimed at persuading others. However, if these individuals *genuinely believe* in these stories, narratives, and fabrications, then we are faced with a far more significant predicament. At this juncture, I cannot assert an equally robust standpoint, but I can propose certain elements that, in my opinion, should be considered as hypotheses to be explored in the future, with the expectation of acquiring more dependable data.

- (1) It is conceivable that Russians, be it the nation and its leadership or the leadership and the nation, have long been exclusively engrossed in *narratives* about themselves and others, particularly their neighbors. Firstly, Moscow's folk tales, fables, fairy tales, and literary works, both within their sovereign state and globally, are quoted and referenced significantly more than any other sources, suggesting the presence of deep-seated origins. Secondly, for over a century, Muscovites have endured various forms of *totalitarian* regimes, characterized by corruption, manipulation, intimidation, deceit, fabrication, and the pervasive influence of religion and superstition. The manipulation of both their own citizens and adversaries through increasingly advanced mass media could result in a form of brainwashing that extends across generations, effectively erasing the memory of a different state of affairs. Thirdly, it is plausible that the leadership, while crafting these narratives, might have fallen victim to *self-delusion*, eventually coming to believe that *there must be some truth in them*. They may have crossed the intangible but disconcerting threshold between fiction and reality; thereby accepting notions about themselves that bear no relation to actuality (see Suny 2022).

- (2) To elucidate this exceedingly peculiar phenomenon (1), a certain level of *infantilism* is essential. It necessitates a narrative featuring a childlike, naïve, and innocent Muscovite citizen who is considered incapable of wrongdoing and embarks on a personal battle against Satan. Simultaneously, there must be a self-proclaimed martyrdom, a tale of oneself as a fictional underdog, relentlessly seeking *one's rights* and *place in the sun* while laying blame on everyone but themselves for their wretched circumstances. In essence, it is akin to *the temptation of innocence*, as articulated by P. Bruckner in his book of the same title (see Bruckner 2000). Within both fiction and reality, there exists nothing that could support, let alone explain, Moscow's beliefs, proclamations, and rationalizations as a form of *temptation of innocence* propaganda. However, it is reasonable to speculate that certain psychiatric diagnoses, such as the grandiosity complex, may offer an explanation, warranting the lifelong collective institutionalization of these individuals within a closed facility. Although the superiority complex is undoubtedly a discernible disorder, it remains unclear whether it serves as a defense mechanism against potential feelings of inferiority, a condition that could afflict both leaders and subjects.
- (3) It appears that Muscovites have a longstanding tradition of harboring *childlike accusations* (as in point 2) related to black magic, witchcraft, heresy, and the persecution of alleged practitioners. Paradoxically, they engaged in such practices themselves until relatively recently, despite the presumed religiosity of the population, even during the era of communist oppression. This sets them apart from Ukrainians, who lack a similar historical legacy. While this historical basis and continuity do not fully explain the same phenomenon in 2022, they do shed light on the foundation, legacy, and persistence of both superstition and accusations of superstition against others (see Bennetts, 2015). This historical context is why these accusations seem natural and commonplace to *them* but abnormal to *us*. For instance, concepts like Holy War or Jihad are typically reserved in Europe for discussions of medieval history, such as the Crusades, or for contemporary interpretations of Islam and the reading of the Quran, rather than for *contemporary Christianity*, notwithstanding the presence of certain *messianic* elements in some aspects of modern Western politics.

To establish plausible research hypotheses that connect (1), (2), and (3), a set of additional conditions needs to be satisfied for the radicalization process to transition from political to religious, and *from mild to extreme religious accusations*. Some of these conditions include low levels of democratization, limited judicial independence, restricted economic freedom, constrained media independence, elevated corruption levels, nepotism, and conflicts of interest. Furthermore, a surge in religiosity, alongside a simultaneous increase in superstition, declining life expectancy, a high percentage of abortions, insufficient investment in the education system, elevated alcohol consumption, a high mortality rate due to alcohol-related diseases, widespread domestic violence, a substantial percentage of individuals grappling with HIV-related issues, and other indicators reflecting a very low standard of living, should also be considered (see Evans & Northmore-Ball, 2012 and Bennetts, 2015). It is not necessary to provide extensive proof for these points here, as most of them can be readily verified online when comparing Russia with the EU, the US, Asia, and other regions.

These conditions depict a life that is, at a minimum. Such a life is marked by an amalgamation of conflicting beliefs and actions within the realms of both professional and pri-

vate existence. These discordances in beliefs and actions, essentially *forms* or *ways of life*, have the potential to *foment crises*, at least at the individual level. Moreover, they can give rise to an array of *social and socio-psychological issues* within various vulnerable groups and, on a broader scale, at the national level. Individuals in these conditions, or those facing such conditions, appear highly susceptible to manipulation. They can easily adopt beliefs in narratives and stories that bear no factual foundation and come to perceive them as truth (1). Subsequently, the creation of a self-image that is equally disconnected from reality, along with an image of *others*, becomes a relatively uncomplicated process (2). Finally, the act of accusing *others* (3), which resists conforming to *their* narrative about themselves, is seen as a threat, a peril to them, and therefore, must be eliminated for their continued existence. Their inability to define themselves without invoking their *enemies* serves as the initial signal of such a condition.

Given these general conditions combined with (1–3), and some aspects of previously presented explications of *religious accusations*, a mostly militarized state, and messianism, can in some ratio and mutual relation be taken as *necessary and sufficient conditions not only for the creation of Moscow's false and fabricated religious accusations against Ukrainians* (by government, and church respectively) but also *the capability to believe in them as being completely true* (by nation or at least a relevant part of it). However, this cannot be researched here, but only proposed for some further research.

3. Conclusion: Objections to the proposed explications and an alternative suggestion

3.1. Objections

Considering that all four attempts aim to explicate, if not explain, the phenomenon of Moscow's unfounded religious accusations against Ukrainians, certain objections can be raised concerning each of them. These objections can be grouped under a few overarching concepts and ideas (I didn't find similar objections in the subject literature).

- *Attributing a mental disorder to individuals and groups is* not advisable for a variety of reasons, including those outlined below: Lack of Reliable Data: There is often insufficient or unreliable data available to assess the mental health of specific individuals mentioned. Additionally, making claims about their mental state without concrete evidence can be misleading. Escaping Accountability: Labeling a totalitarian leader as mentally ill, especially if someone collaborated with them for an extended period, can appear as an attempt to evade one's own responsibility for supporting and enabling such a person to maintain power. This can undermine accountability for one's actions. Group Generalizations: Attributing mental disorders to groups of people, such as mass hysteria or delusions, can lead to stereotyping and stigmatization. It can wrongly portray leaders and groups as irrational; thereby suggesting they are incapable of being sane and responsible for their actions. In summary, it is essential to exercise caution and rely on credible information when discussing the mental health of individuals in power, and to avoid making sweeping generalizations about groups. Doing so can contribute to a more nuanced and responsible discourse on these topics.

- *Addressing the partiality and perplexing aspects of extreme progression*, it is noteworthy that all four explanations provided may offer only partial insight into certain aspects of the phenomenon, but they do not constitute complete explanations. For instance, these explanations can shed light on the existence of accusations characterized by the aforementioned features like progression, continuity, expansion, and internal consistency. However, they do not elucidate the mechanism by which these accusations transition so seamlessly from non-religious to religious and from mild to extreme religious claims, leaving this aspect shrouded in mystery.
- Thirdly, consider *the potential for a counter effect*. We can make an assumption that the creators of these accusations, unless they are themselves deeply disturbed, are aware of the intended impact of these accusations on their primary audience, such as the citizens of the RF, to influence them to act in specific ways, as mentioned earlier. However, this does not necessarily mean that they are aware of the possible or likely adverse consequences that may befall their own citizens, and ultimately themselves. In other words, it is not inconceivable that, at some point, Russian citizens might cease to believe these false claims due to the significant losses they endure, including the loss of their family members, a decline in their standard of living (regardless of how low it may be), and the forfeiture of the comforts and routines they have grown accustomed to. Although such a scenario might seem improbable, individuals in this situation could become quite volatile. Their potential danger would not be primarily directed towards the alleged *Antichrists* but rather toward their own government and the entire RF.

3.2. An alternative suggestion: Democracy breach

Last but certainly not least, there is something exceedingly challenging to elucidate. Specifically, when we consider these accusations collectively, encompassing political, ethical, moral, ideological, and, ultimately, religious dimensions, they remain segregated by the fundamental principles of a constitution (this way of elucidating Russian religious accusations by means of democratic constitution or democracy isn't present in the available subject literature). While unacceptability in political terms is commonplace, and perhaps occasionally in ethical and moral terms, it is unequivocal that ideological and religious unacceptability is beyond consideration, at least in democratic societies. Freedom of religion, and for that matter, the freedom to be an atheist, is guaranteed. Now, it is precisely this shift from moral to ideological unacceptability, progressing to *religious unacceptability* that Moscow has executed. They have effortlessly breached the *democratic firewall* designed to safeguard against such accusations and actions, as if democracy and standards no longer apply. This is why it may appear to *us* as something extreme, perilous, and peculiar, while seeming entirely normal to *them*. In democratic politics, politicians are not permitted to cross this boundary from political and ethical realms into the realm of ideological and *religious accusations*. Such a transition is simply not allowed.

If this is indeed the case, then it raises the possibility that something far more perilous is unfolding. We might have been deluding ourselves into believing that, owing to our own economic interests, there exists, and must be, some semblance of democracy there, perhaps slightly less refined than our own, but essentially differing only in degree, not in essence. If this supposition is false, it implies that *there* was never any real democracy to

begin with, only the illusion of democracy–possibly a convenient fabrication and narrative, akin to a *Potemkin village*, but ultimately a mere façade, not a substantive reality. For if a genuine democracy were in place, even if somewhat weaker than our own, wouldn't at least some individuals protest its denial and the violation of its principles? Yet, do we hear of any such protests there? Are there even a few million citizens in the major cities of a nation with a population of 140 million who raise their voices in dissent? We remain unaware of such protests. Consequently, one is left to *wonder whether the citizens themselves no longer believe in their fictional* democracy and are willing to endure, or perhaps more accurately, tolerate a totalitarian, invasive, and potentially war-criminal government, much as they have for decades previously. It's possible that no one truly believes in these *religious accusations*, neither the government nor the citizens, but rather that they all play their roles in this theatrical performance to preserve their lives and avoid ending up in a prison or on a battlefield in Ukraine–plain and simple.

Perhaps these *religious accusations* represent nothing more than a "cynical misuse of religion for ideological (propaganda) and military purposes," as outlined by the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner in 2022. If this is indeed the case, then this cynicism, being so evident, should be acknowledged by those at whom it is targeted. If that's the scenario, then how does it still manage to be effective? Of course, there remains the possibility that the creators' cynicism is not recognized, or at the very least, that nobody is entirely certain whether they are genuinely cynical or that they genuinely hold these beliefs. In the current climate, especially in the RF, such uncertainties can be unsettling.

In short, and in terms of "concluding this unscientific postscript" of a sort, it should be said that none of the explications clarify the phenomenon completely.

- Methodological remark. Some things always remain non-explicated. Perhaps on this matter some things simply cannot be "made explicit" because (a) our tools of explication are not suitable for such extreme phenomena, our vocabulary isn't suitable for an explication and (b) the phenomenon is too close and too unimaginable to at the same time. To be on the safe side, concerning (a) and (b), of course, there are various, sometimes quite dubious beliefs and practices concerning the *influence of religion on politics* and *vice versa* in the West. For sure there are citizens of democratic societies who see their leaders as some kind of political *messiah*, and others as some kind of *demons* or *devils*.
- Perspective remark. Why do our explications work "here", but not "there"? Because such people do not make a majority in any democratic, free market society with at least an average rule of law, democratic standards, etc. Furthermore, even if such citizens would participate in political power, in most cases they wouldn't dare to say anything of this sort or even close to *Moscow's religious accusations* officially and publicly, and by that violate democratic standards, not because these standards are perfect or immutable, but because at the moment we don't have others that would be comparatively better. In short, because we exist within a democratic, not only political, but also cultural, framework.

Clearly, there are individuals who do not reside in a distant medieval history (Crusades) or in distinct religions (Islam) and cultures. Instead, they are firmly situated in the present day (2023) and are part of a religion (Russian Orthodoxy) and culture that, at least on the surface, appears to share similarities with ours (Roman Catholicism, Reformed Christianity, etc.). However, *they* exhibit ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving, that are

not merely different but profoundly divergent from *our own*, to the extent that it appears diametrically opposed to our own modes of thought, communication, and action. What prompts *their* manner of thinking, speaking, and acting (*religious accusations*) to appear so paradoxical and undemocratic to *us*?

Perhaps the juxtaposition of the proximity of this phenomenon (Moscow's religious accusations against Ukrainians) in physical (measured in kilometers), cultural (within Eastern Europe), and religious (within Christianity) dimensions, combined with its distance in terms of rationality (or irrationality), religious aspects (heresy, superstition, religious madness), and cultural context (utilization of Orthodoxy to justify the invasion), gives rise to a paradox. However, it's worth noting that this paradox appears to be "ours" (European) rather than "theirs" (see Bajt and Buzar, 2023; Buzar, 2023). As Wittgenstein would suggest, it's possible that we diverge in our *forms of life*.

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