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Moscow: The Third Rome? A Historical and Canonical Analysis

Traian NOJEA

Traian NOJEA
Liceul Vocaţional Pedagogic "Nicolae Bolcaş", Beiuş, Romania
Email: traiannojea@gmail.com

Abstract
The concept of politico-religious imperialism is a central element of Russian national consciousness. In the Russian vision, this concept was a historical necessity dictated by the Florentine Union and the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire in the 15th century. Supported by the principle of "imperial transfer", the Church of Moscow became the new center of the Ecumenical Orthodox Church, and the ruler of Moscow became the basileus of the Christian Empire. Russia naturally took on the mission of salvation for all of Christendom. Throughout history, this idea has been formulated as a requirement for awakening Russian national consciousness, the formation of a centralized state, and the organization of the Russian Orthodox Church, clearly positioned between the eternal glory of the Kingdom of Heaven and the temptation of earthly imperialism.

Keywords
Russian Church, imperialism, synodal decisions, translatio imperii, Pentarchy

I. Preliminary Remarks

The Russian Orthodox Church plays a significant role in contemporary Russian politics and society, often being perceived as a supporter of the imperial ambitions of the Russian state. This is manifested through a close

collaboration with the government and the promotion of ideas and values that support the expansion of Russian influence both within and beyond the country's borders. The Russian Church provides moral and spiritual legitimacy to the actions of the state, presenting them as being in line with traditional religious values. The state, in turn, supports the Church through various means, including financial and legislative support, strengthening its position in society. The present study aims to provide an objective, though not exhaustive, analysis of the historical, theological, and political realities in Russia, with a particular focus on the concept of "political-church imperialism". Political-church imperialism represents a complex intersection between religion and politics, where religious institutions are used to support and promote the political ambitions of the state. In contemporary Russia, this phenomenon is evident in the close relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the state, but similar examples can be found in other historical and contemporary contexts.

II. Church and State in the Kievan Russia[1]

The feudal Russian state had particular and special ties to Byzantium, especially since it exerted influence over most areas of activity in the new state, particularly within the Orthodox Church. What does the church influence mean in this context? Specifically, Byzantine influence manifested itself in liturgical practices, in the way of life, and in the monastic organization characteristic of Eastern Christianity, as well as in the entire administrative structure of the Church.

Ionuț Constantin observes that Russian princes gradually sought to draw closer to Byzantium, seen as a neighboring power that radiated prestige, strength, and wealth. Essentially, they replaced a conflictual state with one of cooperation, adopting civilizing values, both politically and

[1] Kievan Rus' or Kievan Ruthenia was the earliest state of the Eastern Slavs, dominated by the city of Kyiv, approximately from the year 880 until the mid-12th century. From a historiographical perspective, Kievan Rus' can be considered the first of the predecessor states of the three modern Eastern Slavic nations: Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Russians.

religiously, understanding the advantages of copying such a prestigious model[2].

Similar to Rome for the West, the Christian center of Eastern Europe was Constantinople, and most of the peoples in these regions embraced the salvific mission of Orthodoxy. These peoples were under the spiritual authority of the Byzantine Patriarch, and their rulers accepted the suzerainty of the emperor of Constantinople over all Orthodox subjects.

The political-military cooperation between Russia and Byzantium began when Emperor Basil II of Constantinople (976–1025), facing the threat of the Bulgarians and other dangers in Asia Minor, sought the support of Prince Vladimir I (958–1015)[3], strengthening this cooperation through the marriage of his sister, Anna, to the "barbarian" Russian prince. This was undoubtedly a desperate move for the Greeks. Anna, a Christian of Orthodox faith, conditioned the marriage on Vladimir's conversion and abandonment of pagan customs[4].

[2] Ionuț Constantin, *Russia, the Eurasian Paradigm*, Geopolitics Publishing House, Bucharest, 2014, pp. 32 – 33.

[3] Vladimir I, or Volodymyr I, also known as the Saint, the Great, and Equal-to-the-Apostles (in Russian Владимир Святославич, Vladimir Sviatoslavich; in Ukrainian Володимир Святославич, Volodymyr Sviatoslavych), was the prince of Kyiv from 980 to 1015.

[4] Prince Vladimir wanted to find out which of the world's religions was the true one. To discover this, he sent a delegation of envoys to a Muslim community located on the great Volga River. Upon their return, the envoys informed Vladimir that to them, those people seemed as if possessed by demons. Then, Vladimir sent them westward, to Germany and Rome. They felt that the Church of Rome was closer to the soul, but it lacked beauty.

Finally, the Kievan envoys visited Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire. After attending a Divine Liturgy in the Hagia Sophia Cathedral, they were overwhelmed and wrote to their ruler in Kyiv: "We no longer knew whether we were in heaven or on earth, but surely, there is no greater beauty in the world… There, God dwells among people". Nevertheless, Vladimir was slow to embrace Christianity, for his soul – still barbaric and unruly – urged him to be the equal of the Byzantine emperors, not their subject. Therefore, the unpredictable prince attacked the Byzantine possessions in Cherson, promising that if the city surrendered, he would convert to Christianity. The city did not surrender; it was taken by force of arms (*manu militari*), and Vladimir dictated harsh terms to the Byzantine emperor, demanding his sister in marriage. "If you do not give me Anna, I will conquer Constantinople", threatened the pagan prince. With great diplomatic tact, the emperor replied to the barbarian from the frozen forests near the Volga: "It is humiliating for our Christian sister to marry a pagan. Convert to Christianity, and you shall have her as your wife",

Prince Vladimir accepted, and Byzantine Orthodoxy became the official religion. The hagiographic tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church consecrated Vladimir as a saint, *isapostolos* (equal to the Apostles), attributing his conversion to miracles[5]. The historical fact shows that, beyond any miraculous components intertwined with Russian popular traditions, Vladimir's conversion was due to his grandmother Olga[6], who was Christian, as well as the influence of the Christian community in Kiev. An important contribution to his decision was also the arrival of Byzantine missionaries to Russia. The translation of the Bible and liturgical books into Old Church Slavonic by Saints Cyril and Methodius, along with their disciples, laid the foundation for a much faster spread of Christianity among the Russian people[7].

It would be a mistake to believe that the history of Christianity on Russian lands began in 988, the year of Vladimir's conversion, even if only because the Bible and Liturgy were translated into Old Church Slavonic much earlier. Since 988, Kievan Rus became one of the suffragan metropolises of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and the Byzantine Patriarch and Emperor supervised the organization of the Russian Church and resolved religious disputes. Initially, the secular power was so weak that it did not realize its competence, and the new ecclesiastical structure developed and expanded rapidly[8]. The first known hierarch, Michael I (988–992), became the head of the Russian Orthodox Church. After

Vladimir accepted, persuaded more by the fact that he had suddenly gone blind. The priests told him that if he converted, his sight would be restored. It appears that his vision did indeed return just before his baptism. Only under such circumstances did Prince Vladimir convert in the year 988 and marry Anna, the sister of the Byzantine emperor Basil II the Macedonian. For details, see Donald Ostrowski, "The Account of Volodimer's Conversion in the *Povest' vremennykh let*: A Chiasmus of Stories", in: *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 1–4 (2006), pp. 567–580.

[5] An important aspect is the later reproduction, in the Russian realm, of the founding models of Byzantium. Just like Constantine the Great, Prince Vladimir was regarded as "Equal-to-the-Apostles," and his grandmother, Olga, was compared to Saint Helena, the mother of Constantine.

[6] The baptism of Saint Olga, the grandmother of Prince Vladimir, took place in the year 955.

[7] Marcin Składanowski, "Cyril and Methodius as Precursors of the 'Rus' World': The Image of the Solun Brothers and Russian Imperialism", in: *Forum Teologiczne*, XXIV (2023), pp. 131 – 142.

[8] I. I. Tsyganov, E. E. Mezina, *The Relationship Between the State and the Church: From a Symphony of Authorities to Caesaropapism*, Moscow, 2012, p. 245.

the conversion, churches were built, culminating with the Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kiev, during the reign of Tsar Yaroslav, between 1025 and 1037, imitating the symbol of Orthodoxy, the Hagia Sophia Cathedral in Constantinople. Similarly, the Pechersk Lavra Monastery in Kiev was organized after the typicon of the Studion Monastery in Constantinople. This foundation was followed by another cathedral, bearing the same dedication, in Novgorod, between 1045 and 1052. Several Russian cities, especially Vladimir and Rostov, hosted Greek schools, which contained libraries with Greek books. The colonial character of Byzantine political and spiritual suzerainty was reflected in the fact that the bishops of the Church were usually Greek, and the Greek language was used in services alongside Church Slavonic.

Vladimir's decision to baptize himself along with the Russian people had both a religious and political dimension and a significant historical impact over time. Adrian Ignat, presenting the historical perspective on Vladimir's conversion, renders the following suggestive passage from the panegyric delivered by Metropolitan Ilarion in honor of the Russian prince:

> "The country of the Romans gives praise to Peter and Paul, by whom it believed in Jesus Christ, the Son of God; Asia – to John the Theologian, India – to Thomas, Egypt – to Mark. All countries and all peoples venerate and glorify their teachers who have taught them the Orthodox faith. Let us also raise praise – modest praises that our power allows – to the one who has done great and wondrous things, our doctor and teacher, the great Khagan of our land, Vladimir, the grandson of Igor the Old, the son of the glorious Sviatoslav!"[9]

But the ties between the two worlds, Byzantine and Russian, had to be maintained. In this regard, the Russian colony in Constantinople played a role in keeping the contact between the Russian space and Byzantium. An important contribution to this link was made by the Greek metropolitans sent to Kiev, along with architects, painters, and merchants who came

[9] Adrian Ignat, "The Third Rome – Between Utopia and Reality", in: *Theological Review* 3 (2010), p. 87.

from Byzantium to Russia. Mount Athos, the center of monasticism and Orthodox pilgrimage, played an extremely important role in the spiritual cohesion of the two entities, but commercial exchanges represented the most substantial part of Russo-Byzantine relations.

Naturally, the metropolitans from Constantinople were followed by a significant number of Greeks who held decision-making political and administrative positions in the Church and other domains, predominantly economic. Of the twenty-three metropolitans mentioned in chronicles until the Mongol invasion, seventeen were Greek, while only two were Russian (the nationality of the other four is unknown). Along with these metropolitans came Greek professors who brought Greek books to educate the clergy.

In addition to the missionary clergy from Constantinople, Greeks came to Russia as diplomats, merchants, craftsmen, and artists, while many Russians, in turn, served in the Byzantine army. Russian princesses occasionally visited Constantinople, and some of them married Byzantine princes[10]. Russian monks settled on Mount Athos, as well as in other monasteries in the Middle East, creating a true pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

A significant event in this historical period is also the attempt of Prince Yaroslav (978–1054) to conquer Constantinople in 1043, which ended in failure[11]. After his death, Kievan Rus lost political unity and was divided into several principalities that paid tribute to the Grand Prince of Kiev. The lack of political unity, as well as geographical factors, made Rus vulnerable to incursions by the Pechenegs and Cumans and weakened the economic prosperity of the Kievan region, which was initially based on the security of the commercial route through Novgorod and Kiev. Following these events, three political centers were established: the Grand Principality of Kiev, the Principality of Suzdal, and the Principality of Galicia[12]. In the absence of any significant political center, the unity of the nation was maintained

[10] Several marriages took place between the Byzantine and Russian imperial families; most of them occurred in the 12th century, during the rule of the Comnenus dynasty.

[11] George Vernadsky, *The Byzantine-Russian war of 1043,* Munchen, 1953, pp. 47 – 67.

[12] Nancy Shields Kollmann, "Collateral Succession in Kievan Rus", in: *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 14 (1990), pp. 377 – 387.

by the Church. National unity in Russia was, in fact, inseparable from the nation's ties to Christian universalism, represented by a metropolitan appointed by Byzantium[13].

A period of great flourishing for the Russian Church dates back to the time of the Golden Horde[14]. In a country controlled by the Mongols, the Church was relieved of the obligation to pay tribute, and its wealth was not plundered; because of this, as early as the 14th century, the Church's property included one-third of the country's arable land. The reason the Church was granted such privileges was that the Mongols saw it as an ideological power. The leaders believed that through the spiritual development of the Russian lands, they could easily subjugate the populations of the old Kievan Rus[15]. The relatively high position of the Orthodox Church during the Tatar occupation, however, meant that it played a significant role in the unification of the Russian principalities and the establishment of the Grand Duchy of Moscow[16], encouraging opposition to the Mongol-Tatar yoke[17].

[13] In Central Europe and Russia, Byzantine civilization spread as a driving force of the Christian mission. Thus, in 867, Patriarch Photius announced to the world that the Russians, who had recently attacked Constantinople, had accepted a Christian bishop from Byzantium. The relations between Photius and the Russians must be understood within the broader missionary work organized by the Patriarchate of Constantinople for the Slavic peoples.

[14] The Golden Horde was a Mongol state, later Turkic, that occupied vast territories in Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. It emerged after the disintegration of the Mongol Empire in the 1240s. At its peak, the territory of the Golden Horde encompassed most of European Russia, from the Ural Mountains to the Carpathian Mountains, extending into Siberia. To the south, the Golden Horde bordered the Black Sea, the Caucasus Mountains, and the territories of the Mongols in the Ilkhanate.

[15] J. Kazimierczyk, *Understanding Russia: Universalism in Russian Culture from the 9th to the 16th Century*, Kraków, 2008, pp. 105 – 106.

[16] The Grand Duchy of Moscow, also known as the Grand Principality of Moscow, was a medieval principality that played a crucial role in the formation of the modern Russian state. The Grand Duchy of Moscow began as a small vassal principality of the Golden Horde around the 13th century. The first mention of Moscow dates back to 1147. The Grand Duchy of Moscow was essential in the formation of a unified Russian identity and in the centralization of state power, aspects that laid the foundations for the later development of the Russian Empire.

[17] I. I. Tsyganov, E. E. Mezina, *The Relationship Between the State and the Church: From a Symphony of Authorities to Caesaropapism*, p. 246.

With the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Russia, as an independent Orthodox state, claimed the succession of the culture and civilization of Byzantium, even acknowledging that Church and State should be one ("Byzantine symphony"), a relationship based on mutual support and responsibility towards society.

III. "Moscow – the Third Rome"

III.1. The Emergence and Development of the Concept

The idea of "Moscow – the Third Rome" is one of the most important theological and political theories of Russia. It emerged at the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th century in the Grand Duchy of Moscow. At that time, the Grand Duchy had been freed from the control of the Golden Horde, and the fall of the Byzantine Empire caused the Duchy to confront its status in the Christian world. In the spiritual atmosphere of the Orthodox world, various projects for spiritual centers like "Eternal Rome" emerged, which sought to become the successors of Constantinople. However, the only Orthodox and independent country that successfully centralized its state power was Russia, the largest state in Europe. In this context, a heated discussion began in Russia about the imperial title of its prince, who sought to become the nominal leader of the entire Orthodox world and the patron of all Orthodox Christians, thus replacing the Byzantine emperor. For example, it is known that in the Treaty of Paris of 1515, the Grand Prince Vasili III of Russia (1505–1533) was first called "emperor of the Russians" in Russian history[18]. Later, Peter the Great (1682–1725) would refer to this fact when justifying his imperial title.

Nikolai Berdyaev, in *Types of Religious Thinking in Russia*, observes that "Orthodox thinking in Russia at that time was exclusively tied to the religious mission of the Russian state, laying the foundation for the idea of the Russian Orthodox Empire"[19]. Indeed, another principle of state power

[18] David MacKenzie, *A History of Russia, the Soviet Union, and Beyond*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2006, p. 115.

[19] N. A. Berdiaev, *Istoki i smysl russkogo kommunizma*, Azbuka Publ., Moscow, 2016, p. 12.

and spiritual culture developed in Russia, different from Western Europe, which can be called theonomic or theocentric, meaning based on the law and will of God.

Byzantine Orthodoxy brought the idea of time as a linear unfolding of history into the Slavic world: a person, being the image of God, must overcome the state in which they entered the world, from the old Adam to Jesus Christ, the New Adam. The idea of "transfiguration", "theosis", or "deification" of a person is foreign to Western Christianity. It is extremely important to emphasize this because only in the context of this transfiguration can one understand what the monk Philotheus had in mind when he spoke of "Moscow – the Third Rome".

In this sense, the Church and the Kingdom, although not united, yet inseparable, like the two natures in God – Jesus Christ, the Man, are called to spiritually guide people towards the glory of God[20]. This Byzantine model of the relationship between Church and State dominated the entire spiritual life of the Slavic ethos, uniting them into a single people and establishing the archetype of Russian national identity[21].

In this context, the creation of the concept of "Moscow – the Third Rome" provided the spiritual foundation for the establishment of Russia as an ecumenical empire. As already mentioned, this theory was formulated by the abbot Philotheus of Pskov[22], who argued that Moscow was the

[20] V. N. Lossky, *Essay on the Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Moskovskoy Patriarhii Publ., 1972, p. 98.

[21] Russian Messianism, first articulated by the monk Philotheus, is the idea of the salvation of humanity and the world from universal evil. References to Philotheus' concept can be found in works such as *The History of Kazan*, the *Epistle on the Establishment of the Patriarchate* (1589), *The Psalter of Boris Godunov*, among others. Russian messianism is a complex and profound aspect of Russian culture and history, reflecting both the spiritual and moral aspirations of the Russian people and their political and imperial ambitions. Over the centuries, this idea has deeply influenced how Russia has perceived itself and its role in the world, remaining a subject of ongoing interest and debate.

[22] Philotheus of Pskov (also known as Filofei of Pskov) was a Russian Orthodox monk from the Eleazar Monastery near Pskov, who lived in the 16th century. He is known for formulating the concept of the "Third Rome", which had a profound influence on Russia's self-perception and its role in the world. Philotheus of Pskov remains a key figure in Russian history for his contribution to shaping an ideology that has deeply influenced Russian identity and politics over the centuries, continuing to resonate even today.

successor to Rome and Byzantium, the Third Rome, the God-chosen center of the Orthodox world. The original idea behind this concept was a messianic religious doctrine that defined the perception of the Grand Duchy of Moscow about the world and the obligations the prince had to fulfill. As the only remaining Orthodox state, the Grand Duchy of Moscow was considered the defender of unaltered Orthodoxy. At the time of its creation, this concept had little influence on Russian culture and remained "within the walls of the Church" until the middle of the 19th century. In the 1860s, with the appearance of the first edition of Philotheus' work on the Third Rome, the theory was revived and became increasingly widespread. The idea of "Moscow – the Third Rome" not only caught the attention of historians of the late empire but also found justification in the works of Russian writers and philosophers. As a result of the efforts of these intellectuals, this doctrine began to take shape, gradually transforming into an informal geopolitical concept that laid the foundations of the imperial line of contemporary Russian politics.

Promoted by great Russian thinkers, the idea of "Moscow – the Third Rome" became almost legendary, with many interpretations throughout the centuries and renewed interest in the 21st century[23]. Today, the idea of "Moscow – the Third Rome" is described in the works of theologians and in the vision of politicians in Russia and abroad as a fundamental discovery in the evolution of Russian history, a "key moment" that divided Russian history into two parts. According to the messianic concept of "Moscow – the Third Rome", Moscow succeeded Byzantium in the role of the "Christian Empire", and historical Russia began its "chosen mission" of imperial conquest. The values of the Russian mission, messianic in nature, seem to define the geopolitical imagination of contemporary Russia. This idea has become an integral element of Russian thought regarding the current state of Russia[24]. The influence of the "Moscow – the Third Rome" doctrine can be observed in the "expansionist" foreign policy of the imperial era, the "messianic" ideas of the Slavophiles and Pan-Slavists of the late 19th

[23] Antoaneta Olteanu, *The Myths of Classical Russia*, Paideia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2015, pp. 207–215.

[24] J. Doroszczyk, "Moscow – Third Rome as Source of Anti-Western Russian Geopolitics", in: *Historiai Polityka*, 24 (2018), p. 51.

century, as well as in the "Bolshevik impulse for world domination"[25]. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this ideology gradually became an essential part of Russian geopolitical thinking regarding its expansionist tendencies and anti-Western ideology. As a textual and conceptual symbol for the emergence of Russian universalist messianic consciousness, the idea of "Moscow – the Third Rome" expresses the Russian aspiration to become God's chosen people and an eternal and powerful empire, representing the Russian national consciousness and feelings of ecumenical salvation. It is deeply rooted in Russian national character, in the structure of thought, and in how it is understood. The value of the concept of "Moscow – the Third Rome" in the development of national philosophy and political strategy in Russia has further underscored the need to study this doctrine.

III.2. The History of the Concept of "Moscow – the Third Rome" or the Temptation of Terrestrial Imperialism

The idea of a "Holy Empire" was formed in the Middle Ages and quickly became the key concept of medieval statehood. The idea of a universal power began to take shape as early as Antiquity. For the first time, the foundation of a world power was discussed due to the conquests of Alexander the Great (336 – 323 BC). Later, the Roman Empire formed the universal concept of the state, which became associated with the entire civilized world. In Ancient Rome, a special concept emerged, the "Pax Romana", which equated the concepts of "world state", "civilization", and "cultural world"[26].

Christianity made special adjustments to the idea of a universal empire. Byzantium, or the Eastern Roman Empire, inherited and elevated Roman traditions to an absolute level. The model of world order in Byzantium was conceived as follows: one God, one emperor, one universal Roman Empire. The emperor was the representative of God on Earth.

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[25] M. Poe, *Moscow, the Third Rome: The Origins and Transformations of a "Pivotal Moment"*, Geschichte Osteuropas, 2001, p. 413.

[26] "Pax Romana" refers to a period of approximately 200 years of relative peace and stability throughout the Roman Empire, lasting from 27 BCE to 180 CE. This era began under the reign of Emperor Augustus and ended with the death of Emperor Marcus Aurelius.

The Byzantines not only preserved the concept of "Pax Romana", but, based on the authority

of the Scriptures and the Church Fathers, they created the idea of a new universal empire, in which the symphony of the two authorities became its main feature. Symphonia is the harmonious coexistence of spiritual and secular authorities within a single universal state. The emperor was obliged to care for and protect the Church, while the Church was obliged to support the emperor's power through its spiritual authority and prayers. In other words, the two forces could not ideally exist without each other[27].

The idea of "Moscow – the Third Rome" was inextricably linked to the Councils of Basel, Ferrara, and Florence[28], as well as to the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire in the 15th century. In the first half of the 15th century, the Byzantine Empire faced the threat of the Turks and needed military assistance from the Western world. Western Catholic aid for Byzantium was conditioned on the union of the Orthodox Church with the Western Church. Thus, from 1438 to 1439, unionist councils were held in Ferrara and Florence. After many debates, pressures, and deliberations, the 33 Orthodox delegates signed a union agreement "with pain and deep sorrow in their hearts". Major concessions were made in this agreement, which were later not respected. The convocation of the Ferrara-Florence Council was a great shock to the Russians, and in the eyes of the Church of Moscow, it meant the apostasy of Byzantine Orthodoxy from the true faith.

However, Moscow was not yet bold enough to break away from the Mother Church of Constantinople; after all, it was almost impossible to exist independently (autocephaly) in its relations with other Orthodox Churches. Eventually, the Russians opted for a cunning compromise solution: they wanted to consecrate their own metropolitan, maintaining the formal appearance of unity with the Patriarchate of Constantinople, while separating from it. In 1448, the Russian Church consecrated a certain Ionas as bishop and elevated him to the rank of metropolitan, thus

[27] Stanley S. Harakas, *Living the Faith: The Praxis of Eastern Orthodox Ethics*, Light and Life Publishing Company, 1993, pp. 259 – 293.

[28] The Council of Basel – Ferrara – Florence (1431 – 1449) was one of the most important councils of the Middle Ages. It took place in three main stages, in three different locations, and addressed major issues of doctrine, reform, and interchurch relations, including the attempt to reunify the Orthodox and Western Churches.

effectively separating from the Ecumenical Patriarchate. On May 29, 1453, Constantinople fell under the Crescent. Although Orthodox patriarchs were reinstated later, the situation of the Patriarchate of Constantinople became unacceptable to the Russian people[29]. According to Russian church historians, the fall of Constantinople was one of the main driving forces behind the independence of the Church of Moscow from Byzantium[30].

The consecration of Bishop Ionas by Moscow without the permission of the Patriarchate of Constantinople was undoubtedly a violation of canon law. However, the Russian Church defended its action. After the appointment of Metropolitan Ionas, a point of view gradually emerged within the Church of Moscow, according to which Russian Orthodoxy was superior to Greek Byzantine Orthodoxy. The Russian people should replace the Greeks in the Orthodox world, take primacy, and consequently, the ruler of Russia should take the place of the Byzantine emperor in the Orthodox Church. This idea of contesting Greek Orthodoxy did not exist at first, but gradually emerged and gained momentum in Russia after the Union of Florence and the fall of Constantinople.

The emergence of the Union of Florence shocked the Russians. In their view, it was a betrayal of Orthodoxy, and the fall of Constantinople was seen as God's punishment for betraying the Orthodox Church. At the same time, the Russians realized that they had preserved the purity of Orthodoxy, which had been lost by the Greeks, and that Russian Orthodoxy was generally superior to Greek Orthodoxy, primarily due to its piety.

Confident in their primacy within the Ecumenical Orthodox Church, Russian scholars found support in an ancient ideological foundation, a historical concept from Byzantium. According to this theory, the existence of the Church in the world required an Orthodox empire led by a monarch with the functions of "bishop for external affairs, protector, and guardian of the Church"[31]. According to this theory, the fate of the Church and Orthodoxy was closely tied to the political fate of the Roman Empire and

[29] Thierry Camous, *Easts and Wests: 25 Centuries of Wars*, translated by Mira-Maria Cucinschi, Cartier Publishing House, Bucharest, 2009, p. 174.

[30] A.V. Kartashev, *Essays on the History of the Russian Church*, vol. 1, ABC of Faith, Moscow, 2017, pp. 293–296.

[31] Antoaneta Olteanu, *The Myths of Classical Russia*, pp. 207 – 215.

its position toward its emperor. As a result of the decline of the Western Roman Empire, the Byzantines, in order to explain their ideology, began to emphasize the principle of the "transfer of the Christian empire's legacy" (*translatio imperii*)[32]. In the Byzantine vision, the Eastern Roman Empire replaced the Western Roman Empire, becoming the center of universal Christianity[33].

However, the reality of the situation shattered the Greeks' illusions, and in 1453, the Eastern Roman Empire fell definitively. The religious and national ideals of the Slavs came to life as the Eastern Roman Empire destabilized. The young neighboring Slavic nations began to detach themselves from their ecclesiastical and political dependence on Byzantium and aspired to possess privileges specific to Byzantium. In the 14th century, Bulgarian and Serbian rulers dreamed of conquering Constantinople and crowning themselves with the glory of the basileus. They began to call themselves "emperors" and adopted the court rituals of the imperial city of Constantinople. However, history soon shattered their hopes as well. One by one, the capitals of these Balkan countries, the so-called new imperial cities, fell under Turkish domination. The Slavs found it difficult to accept this fact and turned their attention toward Moscow, the capital of the newly

[32] "Translatio imperii" is a medieval concept referring to the transfer of imperial authority and supreme political power from one empire to another. This concept was used to legitimize claims to imperial power in Europe and was often invoked in political and religious contexts.

[33] The Byzantine basileus respected those who recognized his authority. An example of this can be seen at the end of 1140, when three princes (knyaz) were fighting for hegemony in Russia: Iziaslav of Kiev (a grandson of Vladimir Monomakh), his uncle Yuri Dolgoruki of Suzdal, and his cousin Vladimirko of Galicia. The first was an ally of Hungary and an enemy of Byzantium, while the other two supported the Empire. A Byzantine historian from that period described the prince of Suzdal as an ally (symmonachos) of the emperor, and the prince of Galicia as his vassal (hypospondos), and therefore imperial support was supposed to go to the ally, in this case Yuri Dolgoruki. On the other hand, Byzantium also showed support when the princes contributed financially to the Empire's needs. In 1346, a part of the structure of the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia, weakened by recent earthquakes, collapsed. The ruler of Moscow sent a significant sum of money for its repair. Another sum was sent in 1398 to help Constantinople, which at that time was under Turkish blockade (cf. Dimitri Obolensky, *Byzantium: An Orthodox Commonwealth*, Corint Publishing, Bucharest, 2002, pp. 254, 287.)

born Russian world. The idea of a "new imperial city" found a foundation again and began to develop. With the fall of Constantinople, the Byzantine theory of a Christian empire, the idea of "the transfer of the Christian empire's legacy", began to be implemented in Moscow, and the idea of Russian domination in the Orthodox world gradually developed.

Russia began to be portrayed as replacing the Greek Orthodox empires that had betrayed their mission. The Church of Russia was presented as the supreme representative of the Orthodox world, and as a result, the rulers of Moscow began to be presented as the supreme defenders and protectors of Orthodoxy. The ecclesiastical status of the Byzantine emperor was replaced, after the "devout sun had set" in the imperial city, by the title of the "Orthodox Tsar anointed by God"[34].

Thus, after Ferrara-Florence and the fall of Constantinople, Russia began to emphasize in its discourse that Moscow had inherited the divine rights and duties of the Byzantine Empire. In the opinion of the Russians, if the Greeks had remained faithful and adhered to Orthodoxy, Constantinople would not have fallen. The betrayal of Orthodoxy by the emperor annulled his role as protector of Orthodoxy. The role of the protector of the Church was now clearly attributed to the Grand Prince of Moscow, who was to take the lead in safeguarding Orthodoxy. The Russians came to believe that Orthodoxy in its most authentic form was preserved only in Russia, and the universal capital of Orthodoxy was not the ruined Constantinople, but Moscow.

After Ionas, the Synod of Bishops in the Church of Moscow continued to consecrate more bishops, each of whom was appointed with the direct involvement of the secular ruler of Moscow. In 1472, during the pastorship of Metropolitan Philip (1464 – 1473), Ivan III of Russia, the Grand Prince of Moscow (1462 – 1505), married Zoe (baptized Sophia), the granddaughter of the last Byzantine Emperor, Constantine IX Paleologus (1449 – 1453). The Moscow idea of transferring the powers and privileges of the Byzantine emperor to the Russian princes found support in this marriage[35].

[34] A.V. Kartashev, *Essays on the History of the Russian Church*, vol. I, p. 445.
[35] Ionuț Constantin, *Russia, the Eurasian Paradigm*, pp. 36–37.

Thus, in the view of the proponents of this theory, the Grand Prince of Moscow officially and legally received the authority of Byzantine power. This idea was recognized by the Pope, and in 1473 the Venetian Senate wrote to Ivan III, stating that, with the cessation of the male imperial line, the Eastern Empire should belong to the Grand Prince of Moscow following his marriage to Zoe. Through this, the Pope hoped to convince Moscow to undertake a crusade against the Ottomans, and while the princes could have declined the Pope's request, they did not want to miss the opportunity to use the moment to increase their power and prestige. At the same time, Ivan III adopted the double-headed eagle, the emblem of the Roman Empire, as the emblem of the Grand Duchy of Moscow, which was an important symbol of the succession of power in Byzantium. Ivan III was also the first of the princes of Moscow to officially receive the title of "autocrat" (αὐτοκράτωρ)[36], insisting on using this title in his foreign relations to symbolize his enhanced power. In any case, this marriage to the Byzantine imperial family provided the Grand Prince of Moscow with legitimate support for inheriting the power of the Byzantine Empire. The Grand Prince became increasingly self-aware and began to intervene more and more boldly in the affairs of the Church. The Metropolitan of Moscow, appointed at his will, received divine power from him, while the prince continued to consolidate his political authority. Through this strategic combination, the new authority was sealed[37].

Politics and socio-historical development have always been perceived by the Russians as a kind of sacred mission. Walter Schubart rightly notes that "Russians differ from Europeans in this regard as well. Their national idea is the salvation of humanity by and through the Russian people"[38]. The imperialist doctrine became a secular expression of the eschatological aspirations of the Russian people. Whereas the ancient Jews awaited the coming of the Messiah to save and unite them, in Russian eschatological

[36] In the context of the Byzantine Empire, the term "autocrat" refers to the Byzantine emperor, who held absolute power and supreme authority over the empire. This form of governance was characterized by strong centralization and a complex bureaucratic structure.

[37] A.V. Kartashev, *Essays on the History of the Russian Church*, vol. I, pp. 313, 316.

[38] V. Schubart, *Europe and the Soul of the East*, Moscow, 2000, p. 194.

tradition, the messianic function was transferred to the entire people, as noted by Paul Evdokimov[39].

Thus, the entire socio-historical process transformed into an anticipation, the goal of which became the messianic sacrifice of the Russian people. Because of this, Moscow was transformed into a center of unity and, more importantly, of protection for Russians—whether or not they were subjects of the Grand Prince of Moscow. The idea of Pan-Russianism laid the foundations for the imperial policy of the Russian state, which lasted not only until 1917, but significantly influenced the political tradition and socio-historical development of modern Russia[40].

After uniting the Russian lands under its leadership, Moscow defined new objectives. The Muscovite principality was no longer just one of the Orthodox states; it now claimed the position of the sole universal Orthodox state. The idea of Pan-Russianism, mixed with the idea of Byzantine heritage, inevitably led the political development of the Russian state toward the idea of Pan-Slavism[41]. According to the Byzantine imperial

[39] Paul Evdokimov, *Christ in Russian Thought*, translated by Father Ion Buga, Symbol Publishing House, Bucharest, 2001, p. 52.

[40] Pan-Russianism is a political and cultural ideology that promotes unity and solidarity among all Russian peoples – that is, Russians across the entire territory of the former Soviet Union and other regions where significant Russian communities live. This idea is based on the belief that there is a shared identity and common destiny among all these groups, regardless of current national borders, a perspective that can generate conflicts and tensions in regions with distinct national identities.

[41] Throughout its history, the term "Pan-Slavism" has been used to designate both the cultural and/or political movement aimed at uniting all Slavic peoples, as well as any form of solidarity between two or more Slavic nations. This means that despite its etymological meaning implying the involvement of the entirety, regional unionist manifestations—such as Austro-Slavism (the desire to unite the Slavs of the Habsburg Empire), Yugoslavism (the Illyrian movement of the South Slavs), or attempts to unite the East Slavs (Russia, Ukraine, Belarus) – fall under the umbrella of Pan-Slavism. In a seminal work dedicated to this topic, Michael Boro Petrovich states that "Pan-Slavism is understood as the historical tendency of Slavic peoples to express, in a concrete manner, whether cultural or political, their awareness of ethnic kinship". The confessional, linguistic, cultural, socio-political heterogeneity, and territorial divergences of the Slavic peoples have led to the emergence of multiple Pan-Slavist projects – complementary or antagonistic, liberal, democratic, imperialist, or revolutionary. Pan-Slavism is therefore an umbrella term that must encompass all possible configurations of "Slavic identities", cf. Dimitri Stremoukhoff, "Moscow

doctrine, the universal state had to be Orthodox. After the fall of Byzantium and the rise of the Ottoman Empire, Muscovite Russia remained the only independent Orthodox state. The Grand Princes of Moscow began using the titles "Tsar" and "Autocrat", literal translations of Byzantine imperial titles[42].

From this period onward, the belief that Russia was the "successor of the Christian Byzantine Empire" grew stronger, and the idea began to emerge in Moscow that it was the "Third Rome". In 1492, Zosima (1490–1494), Metropolitan of Moscow and all Rus', called Moscow the "new Constantinople" and Ivan III the "new Tsar of the new Constantinople".

However, the most substantial and representative expression of the "Moscow—the Third Rome" theory was presented by the monk Philotheus, abbot of a monastery in Pskov, in a letter to Grand Prince Vasili III. In this letter, Philotheus states that the Orthodox Church

> "moved from the Old Rome to the New Rome, Constantinople. However, there was no peace there because they united with the Latin Church at the Council of Florence. As a result, the Church of Constantinople was destroyed and left in ruins. Then it moved to a Third Rome, the new Russia. The Church of Old Rome fell due to the Apollinarian heresy; the Church of the Second Rome, Constantinople, fell into the papal heresy; this current Church of the Third, New Rome – of your sovereign Empire: the Holy Apostolic Catholic Church (...) shines brighter across the entire universe than the sun. And let Your Majesty know, O devout Tsar, that all empires of the Orthodox Christian faith have gathered into your one empire. You are the sole Emperor of all Christians throughout the universe... For two Romes have fallen, and the third stands, and there will never be a fourth, for your Christian Empire shall not be given to others"[43].

the Third Rome: Sources of the Doctrine," in: *Speculum*, 1 (1953), p. 85; see also Michael Boro Petrovich, *The Emergence of Russian Panslavism 1856–1870*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1956, p. ix.

[42] V. V. Zenkovski, *Khristianskaya filosofya*, Institut russkoi tsivilizatsii publ., Moscow, 2010, p. 324.

[43] Cyril Toumanoff, "Moscow the Third Rome: Genesis and Significance of a Politico-Religious Idea", in: *The Catholic Historical Review*, 4 (1955), p. 438.

Still, the imperial idea was not originally conceived on Russian soil. The socio-historical development of Russia during the era of Ivan III merely followed the path first established by the southern Slavs. As is well known, the rulers of the southern Slavs were the first to use the titles of "Tsar" and "Autocrat". P. N. Milyukov, quoting a 14th-century Bulgarian manuscript written at the order of "Tsar and Autocrat" Ivan Alexander, highlights parallels well known from the national idea of Moscow: "All this happened with the Old Rome; our New Constantinople stands and grows, strengthens and rejuvenates"[44]. After the Ottoman Turks conquered both the "Old" Constantinople and the "New" Constantinople in Tărnovo, the southern Slavs began to search for a new source for their political and eschatological aspirations[45].

At the same time, the expression "Third Rome" inevitably led to the derivation of the Byzantine conception that Russia was the only Orthodox Empire in the world, and its rulers naturally enjoyed full authority over ecclesiastical matters. It is important to note that this view was promoted specifically by the Church of Moscow. Due to excessive dependence on imperial authority, the Church's interests had long merged with those of the State. The Russian Church had to support imperial authority. This is evident from the words of Joseph of Volokolamsk (1439–1515), founder of the famous Russian monastery bearing his name. He presents a text by Emperor Constantine addressed to Orthodox monarchs ("The Tsar is, in essence, like all men, but in power, he is the same as the Most High God"), to underline the supremacy of state power. According to Joseph, supreme jurisdiction in ecclesiastical matters belonged to the monarch, because God had given him "mercy and judgment, the church and the monastery and all Orthodox Christianity, all Russian lands"[46]. Therefore, "the imperial court cannot be judged by anyone". We thus observe how some church leaders tried to place the tsar's authority above that of the Church[47].

[44] P. N. Milyukov, *Ocherki po istorii russkoi kultury*, vol. III, Moscow, 1994, p. 43.
[45] Philip Longworth, *The Making of Eastern Europe: From Prehistory to Postcommunism*, Curtea Veche Publishing, Bucharest, 2002, p. 241.
[46] A.V. Kartashev, *Essays on the History of the Russian Church*, vol. I, pp. 469 – 470.
[47] A.V. Kartashev, *Essays on the History of the Russian Church*, vol. I, p. 320.

However, this authority required justification. Gradually, a set of legends developed to support the special role of the Russian Church in the history of universal Orthodoxy[48]. In this context, legends appeared supporting the claims of the Moscow Church to autocephaly[49]. The Moscow clergy attempted to demonstrate that the newly established patriarchate was equal to the ancient Orthodox patriarchates (the Pentarchy).

Under the son of Ivan III, Vasili III (1505–1533), Moscow's claim as the sole guardian of Orthodox traditions was generally accepted. The first step toward creating a global Orthodox empire was taken when Ivan IV (1533–1584) adopted the imperial title in 1547. The Synod of 1561 proclaimed Ivan the Terrible as "Tsar and Sovereign of the Orthodox Christians of the whole universe"[50].

In 1589, the Ecumenical Patriarch Jeremiah II of Constantinople, along with other Eastern patriarchs, recognized the elevation of the Moscow Church to patriarchal status, with Metropolitan Job becoming the first Russian patriarch (1589–1605). From this moment, the Russian state became fully aware of the concept of a universal Orthodox empire. Moscow now had its own tsar as well as its own patriarch. To substantiate their claims of universal dominion, the Grand Princes of Moscow not only invoked Byzantine heritage but also crafted a genealogical legend, asserting the inheritance of the universal insignia of Byzantium by the Russian state. The right to inherit imperial authority was affirmed in the famous "Legend of the Princes of Vladimir", which links Rurik to a certain Prus, brother of Roman Emperor Octavian Augustus. Ivan the Terrible

[48] The desire to be freed from the Tatar yoke probably prompted the Russians to adapt another legend, which had appeared in northern Russia in the 13th century in a Serbian translation from a Latin original. The legend describes the existence in India of a legendary Christian kingdom, capable of helping other Christians in their fight against the unbelievers. The despair that gripped all Russians at that time seems to explain the popularity of the Legend of the Twelve Dreams of King Mamer, with its apocalyptic tendencies. The legend is of Eastern origin, like many others, including Stefanit and Ihnilat, and was particularly popular, cf. Francis Dvornik, *The Slavs in European History and Civilization*, All Publishing, Bucharest, 2001, p. 274.

[49] These include, for example, the "Legend of the Journey of Saint Andrew the First-Called Apostle".

[50] V. M. Storchak, *Thema rossiiskogo messinianstva v obschestvenno-politicheskoi i filosofskoi mysli Rossii*, Moscow, 2004, p. 18.

often stated, "Due to Roman kinship, we are relatives of Augustus Caesar, and you judge us against God"[51].

On January 16, 1547, at just 17 years old, Ivan IV was crowned tsar by Metropolitan Macarius (1542–1563). This coronation marked a remarkable moment in the ecclesiastical history of Russia, signifying the gradual emergence of the Moscow monarch as a despot not only in secular but also ecclesiastical matters. The title "God-Crowned Tsar" ultimately ensured supreme guardianship over the legitimate interests of the Orthodox Church. At the same time, the tsar's power over ecclesiastical affairs increased, and the Church became increasingly subordinate to the regime, ultimately losing its independence[52]. In this climate of caesaropapism, it is not surprising that Metropolitan Dionysius (1581–1587) was dismissed and exiled by Tsar Boris Godunov in 1587 without being judged by a church synod[53].

In the 17th century, the "Moscow – the Third Rome" doctrine became once again highly relevant. Before the Romanov dynasty ascended the throne, this thesis was perceived strictly in eschatological terms – Holy Russia was the heir of Byzantium and the guardian of the purity of universal Orthodoxy. Starting with the early Romanovs, Philotheus' formula began to be interpreted in purely political terms. The sacred doctrine of "Moscow - the Third Rome" became the dominant socio-historical narrative of Russian history. The idea of restoring the Byzantine Empire under the leadership of the Moscow tsar drove the entire reformist policy of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich (1645–1676) regarding the Church[54]. Patriarch Nikon (1652–1666) became his ally in this matter. Like Alexei Mikhailovich, Nikon aspired to become an ecumenical patriarch. He even entertained the idea of transferring the Eastern patriarchates to Russia. This led to the construction of the New Jerusalem Monastery, whose main church was modeled after the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem[55].

[51] Peter J. S. Duncan, *Russian Messianism: Third Rome, Revolution, Communism and After*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, p. 16.

[52] A.V. Kartashev, *Essays on the History of the Russian Church*, vol. I, pp. 350 – 361.

[53] A.V. Kartashev, *Essays on the History of the Russian Church*, vol. I, p. 368.

[54] Stephen L. Baehr, *From History to National Myth: Translatio Imperii in Eighteenth-century Russia*, London, 1978, pp. 1 – 13.

[55] Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia and the Russians. From Earliest Times to 2001*, Penguin Books, 2002, p. 168; also see Sergei V. Lobachev, "Patriarch Nikon's Rise to Power", in: *Slavonic and East European Review*, 3 (2001), pp. 290 – 307; Matthew Spinka,

As far as the socio-historical and ideological development of Russian statehood is concerned, the 17th century is a crucial moment in its history. The messianic idea became the key to understanding Russian statehood. Ideologically, beginning with the reign of Mikhail Fyodorovich (1613–1645), messianism was projected onto the image of the Russian state. The idea of a holy universal power gradually became embodied in Russian state policy[56]. For the Russian tradition of political science, the idea of a universal Orthodox state shaped the path of development until 1917. Naturally, the idea of imperial sovereignty developed according to religious traditions, which is why the concept of "Moscow – the Third Rome" fused the geopolitical and national aspirations of the Russian state[57].

Russian theologians and historians saw the principle of "imperial transfer" and the idea of "Moscow – the Third Rome" as both a necessity and a response to historical realities and circumstances. These two interlinked ideas supported the adoption of the Byzantine double-headed eagle emblem, the marriage of Ivan III to the niece of the last Byzantine emperor, and the use of the title "Tsar." By asserting that "the Church of Moscow is the new center of the Ecumenical Orthodox Church" and that "the Moscow monarch is the sovereign of a new Christian empire", the Moscow Church gained de facto spiritual independence from Byzantium. In the political context of rising nationalism, the Church's independence far exceeded religious matters and became highly politicized. The emancipation of the Moscow Church from Byzantium was achieved with direct help from state power, which also served the interests of the Muscovite princes. In this way, the authority of the Moscow monarchs was sanctified religiously and empowered politically. As a result, Moscow was now entrusted with messianic responsibilities, becoming the sole patron of Orthodoxy in the world. The idea of "Moscow – the Third Rome" thus became the primary source of Russian ecumenical messianic consciousness[58].

"Patriarch Nikon and the Subjection of the Russian Church to the State", in: *Church History*, 4 (1941), pp. 347 – 366.

[56] B. P. Kutuzov, *Tserkovnaia "reforma" XVII veka*, Moscow, 2003, pp. 160 – 161.

[57] Henry R. Huttenbach, "The Origins of Russian Imperialism", in: Tomas Hunczak (ed.), *Russian Imperialism from Ivan the Great to the Revolution*, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1974, pp. 26 – 30.

[58] Emanuel Sarkisyanz, "Russian Imperialism Reconsidered", in: Tomas Hunczak (ed.), *Russian Imperialism*, pp. 51 – 52.

III.3. Ideological Foundation

In the first half of the 19th century, "the third Rome" remained an insignificant doctrine outside the church community. Interest in this idea did not significantly grow until the time of Alexander II (1855 – 1881). During this period, historian Vladimir Ikonnikov developed a new interpretation of the imperialist doctrine. According to him, Filofei's thesis confirmed the existence of a new Moscow-based imperial ideology around the year 1500: the Byzantine Empire had fallen, Moscow had taken its place, and Filofei expressed Russia's new awareness of its place in the world as the third Christian historical empire. Furthermore, Ikonnikov's assertion that "there will be no fourth Rome" marked the beginning of Moscow's messianism[59]. According to Ikonnikov, Filofei's support reflects this mindset: the monks of Pskov and the Muscovites saw the end of the world and felt it was their duty to prevent this through their righteous deeds. This interpretation, as a universal empire and the savior of the world, influenced the Russian understanding of the concept. It became the basis for the standard academic interpretation of Filofei's thesis in the late 19th and early 20th centuries[60].

Researcher Kerstin Rebecca Bouveng observes in her excellent book *The Role of Messianism in Contemporary Russian Identity and Statecraft* that Filofei continued to assert that the Russian people were the new Israel, a people chosen by God, the first of all Christian nations, and that the Russians were destined to fulfill the Kingdom of Christ on Earth[61]. Later, the universal imperial idea quickly spread among the educated public. Through the efforts of these intellectuals, the concept began to take shape in the mid-19th century[62].

Initially, the thesis was based primarily on Russia's self-perception as the spiritual center of the world, offering a new way of understanding its early history. In the 1870s and 1880s, as panslavism developed, ideologues

[59] Cyril Toumanoff, "Moscow the Third Rome: Genesis and Significance of a Politico-Religious Idea", in: *Catholic Historical Review*, XL (1954–5), p. 438.

[60] M. Poe, *Moscow, the Third Rome: The Origins and Transformations of a "Pivotal Moment"*, pp. 421 – 422.

[61] Kerstin Rebecca Bouveng, *The Role of Messinanism in Contemporary Russian Identity and State Craft*, Durham University, 2010, p. VI.

[62] Dmitri Obolensky, *Byzantium: A Medieval Commonwealth*, p. 395.

became aware of the potential of the imperialist doctrine to influence the modern state[63]. For panslavists, this doctrine seemed to prove the historical continuity of Russia's "mission" to save the Orthodox Church from both the "East" (Ottomans) and the "West" (Europeans). After Vladimir Lamansky's assertion that "the notion of Moscow as the third Rome" was not a "historical falsity" but rather "a gigantic cultural and political task, a worldwide historical triumph entrusted intentionally to the great Russian people and its leaders"[64], the idea of the "Holy Russia" emerged, the new people of God, the "new Israel"[65].

By the end of the 19th century, the imperialist doctrine had echoed in the works of neo-romantic and idealist writers and philosophers, who gave Russia and its Church a historical and eschatological universal significance. The most representative philosopher was undoubtedly Vladimir Solovyov. In this doctrine, Solovyov discovered Christian universalism. He believed Russia's mission was to reconcile the East and the West[66], to overcome all forms of particularism, and to open an era of organic unity on a global level[67]. "The third Rome" demonstrates the historical nature of Russia's mission with universalist nuances. According to Solovyov, the antagonism with the West (Europe) was inherent in the Byzantine Empire ("the second Rome"). The task of the "third Rome" was different – to reconcile "the two hostile entities", the West and the East, Europe and the Mediterranean[68], which should become "Russia's new policy"[69]. Russia should "become, in

[63] S. L. Baehr, *The Paradise Myth in Eighteenth-Century Russia*, Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 21.

[64] Nataliya A. Vasilyeva, Maria L. Lagutina, *The Russian Project of Eurasian Integration. Geopolitical Prospects*, Lexington Books, 2016, p. 89.

[65] Michael Cherniavsky, "Holy Russia: A Study in the History of an Idea", in: *The American Historical Review*, 3 (1958), pp. 617 – 637.

[66] Kerstin Rebecca Bouveng, *The Role of Messinanism in Contemporary Russian Identity and State Craft*, pp. 17 – 19.

[67] V. S. Soloviov, "The National Question in Russia. Issue 1: Morality and Politics – The Historical Responsibilities of Russia [1883]", in: *Collected Works of Vladimir Sergeevich Solovyov*, 2nd ed., vol. X, Brussels, 1970, p. 20.

[68] V. S. Soloviov, *The Great Debate and Christian Politics. Works in Two Volumes. Philosophical Journalism*, vol. I, Pravda, Moscow, 1989, p. 72.

[69] V. S. Soloviov, "Holy Russia. An Essay on the Development of a Religious-Social Idea", in: *Pax Rossica: Russian Statehood in the Works of Foreign Historians*, Bondareva, Moscow, 2012, pp. 234–269.

the highest sense, the third player in the conflict"[70]. Distinguished writer Fyodor Dostoevsky was also a supporter of the "third Rome" idea. In a journal entry, the writer noted: "Russia is a natural magnet that irresistibly attracts Slavs, thus preserving their integrity and unity". At the same time, Dostoevsky directly referred to the concept of political-church imperialism, arguing that Filofei's providential ideas had not yet been implemented, and this would only happen when the Russian Empire became "the leader of Orthodoxy, its patron and protector"[71].

In 1914, the historical work of V. Kirillov was crucial for spreading this ideal. Kirillov argued that the idea was not propaganda by Ivan III but a fundamental change in the Russian people's mentality, marking a new era in Russian history. It reflects the fact that the Russian nation became self-aware and assumed a worldwide historical mission as the divine protector of the Orthodox Church[72]. Kirillov's position adequately summarizes the traditional understanding of the concept by Ikonnikov and Solovyov and the transformation from an obscure doctrine supported by a Greek patriarch into a "key moment" in Russian history[73].

After the emergence of the Soviet Union, it seemed that the entire history of Russia (including the imperialist concept) had been left behind, following an ideological line toward atheism. However, according to some researchers, some ideas of the Soviet period were a sort of "metamorphosis" of the imperialist concept. The rise of communism in Russia gave a new meaning to the term "Moscow – the third Rome". Among the most representative of these were Berdyaev's ideas. According to Berdyaev, "Russian messianism" was the fundamental element of "Russian religious psychology" and the main force behind Bolshevism:

> "The ancient Russian messianic idea continues to live in the deep spiritual layers of the Russian people. However, in the conscious

[70] V. S. Soloviov, "The National Question in Russia. Issue 1: Morality and Politics – The Historical Responsibilities of Russia [1883]," p. 20.

[71] F. M. Dostoievski, "A Writer's Diary, March 1877", http://sloven.org.rs/rus/?p.56 (accessed 22.05.2024).

[72] V. M. Storchak, *Tema Rossiyskogo Messianizma v Obshchestvenno Politicheskoi i Filosofskoi*, Mysli Rossii, Moscow, 2003, p. 48.

[73] M. Poe, *Moscow, the Third Rome: The Origins and Transformations of a "Pivotal Moment"*, pp. 424 – 425.

> mind, its formula changes; the messianic idea emerges from the collective unconscious of the people's life and takes another name: instead of Filofei's third Rome, we receive Lenin's Third International"[74].

In conclusion, from the second half of the 19th century, Russian historians and theologians found the "roots" of their claims in Filofei's writings, relating the idea of "Moscow – the third Rome" to the political reality of the time. Lamansky found the roots of panslavism; Solovyov found the origins of Christian universalism; Berdyaev found the descent of Bolshevism, and Kirillov's assertion made the Russian imperial theory a "key moment" in Russian history.

IV. Expansion of the Political-Church Imperialism Concept in the Geopolitical Sphere of Contemporary Russia

At the beginning of the 21st century, the concept of "Moscow – the third Rome" was reactivated. The main strategic challenge for Russia was to maintain its identity as a sovereign and integral Eurasian state, a leader of Eurasian integration. There was a strong need for a solid idea to fill the ideological void. At this point, contemporary historical interpretations of political-church imperialism and the resulting arguments for the uniqueness of Russian civilization provided critical ideas for the development of a new geopolitical strategy for Russia.

Although the "Moscow – the third Rome" doctrine was not the official political doctrine, and could only be described as an unofficial source of geopolitical doctrine, it became the dominant idea in the defense of Russian imperial politics. This idea was not only one of the fundamental historiographical concepts that established and defined the national identity of Moscow but was also crucial in defining the starting point of Russia's contemporary activities in international relations[75]. It is both the

[74] N. A. Berdiaev, *The Russian Revolution*, Moscow, 1931, p. 41. This vision of Berdiaev was widely disseminated.

[75] V. Gerdt, "The Origins of Russian Geopolitics", in: *Bulletin of Chelyabinsk State University*, 12 (2012), pp. 26–30.

theoretical, mystical, and religious basis of Russia's international efforts and the guarantee of the survival of Russian spirituality in a globalized world[76]. In contemporary Russia, the geopolitical significance of the "Moscow – the third Rome" idea reflects the dichotomy between East and West in Russian geopolitics, an idea that is the inspiration and expression of Russia's anti-Western will. Although this ideology has undergone many transformations throughout history, it has always been anti-Western in its essence. In contemporary Russian geopolitical thinking, the anti-Western element of the imperialist concept is determined by its religious dimension. The concept has long been essential for Russian national consciousness and identity. Thus, the belief emerged that Russia, having inherited the Roman and Byzantine empires and being the only Orthodox empire in the world, is the last guardian of true faith and traditional values and is naturally responsible for the salvation of the world[77].

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the failure of Russia's Westernization project accelerated and antipathy toward the West grew, even leading to increased anti-Westernism. In Russia's vision, the West had lost its ideological authenticity by rejecting Christian values and all moral principles. At the same time as Rome, Moscow was the cradle of traditional values, Orthodox religious spirituality. The West is Russia's primary enemy and a threat to Russian moral standards, focused on destroying the uniqueness of Russian spirituality and thought, and working to diminish Russia's role and place in the modern world. The values of the spirit and Russian culture can only be preserved by rejecting and repudiating the secular liberalism represented by the West. Furthermore, based on the contemporary interpretation of the imperial idea, Russia, as the only truly Orthodox country in the world, has naturally assumed the responsibility of saving the West and the world, not only by defending the Russian world but also by attempting to save "declining moral Western societies"[78].

[76] J. Doroszczyk, "Moscow – Third Rome as Source of Anti-Western Russian Geopolitics", p. 55.

[77] I. B. Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe: A Study in Identity and International Relations*, London, Routledge, 1996, pp. 8 – 9.

[78] J. Doroszczyk, "Moscow – Third Rome as Source of Anti-Western Russian Geopolitics", p. 48.

An influential Russian politician, Sergei Baburin, observes that

> "the socio-economic, political, and legal processes of the modern world, even though they give rise to new challenges for the people and states involved, make us remember old geopolitical axioms and reconsider old approaches to the world. Russian statehood, in one of its origins, came from the Tatars, and the Moscow state arose due to the Tatar yoke. The Russian tsar was the heir to the Mongol khan, and the overthrow of the Tatar yoke was reduced to replacing the Tatar khan with an Orthodox tsar and transferring the khan's seat to Moscow"[79].

The relationship between religion and the state in Russia developed, as V. V. Zenkovsky emphasized, "not in the sense of the supremacy of spiritual power over secular power, as happened in the West, but in the direction of the state assuming a sacred mission"[80]. In this process, Christianity in its Byzantine form played a fundamental role.

The concept of "Moscow – the Third Rome" became a cornerstone of Russia's religious and political identity. On one hand, it affirmed Russia's mission as the last bastion of Orthodox Christianity and the spiritual successor to the Byzantine Empire. On the other hand, it fostered a messianic consciousness that evolved into nationalism and expansionist tendencies. Supported by this ideology, the dream of restoring the Russian Empire was gradually revived, and Russia's diplomatic strategy began to take on increasingly neo-imperialist features.

A key example of this evolution is the "Russian World" (Русский мир) project, ideologically influenced by philosopher Alexander Dugin[81]. In

[79] S. Baburin, "Civilizational mission of Russia «Moscow is the Third Rome» as a political, legal and geopolitical challenge of the modern Russian Federation", in: *Bulletin of the Moscow Regional State University. Series: History and Political Sciences*, 3 (2019), pp. 10 – 16.

[80] V .V. Zenkovsky, *Khristianskaya filosofiya*, Institut russkoi tsivilizatsii publ., Moscow, 2010, p. 324

[81] Alexandr Dugin's imperialist theory is a complex concept rooted in his geopolitical and philosophical vision of Russia and its place in the world. Dugin, a contemporary Russian political thinker and philosopher, is known for promoting Eurasianism and

2007, President Vladimir Putin founded the "Russian World Foundation", with the declared aim of promoting the Russian language and the values of Russian culture, while also supporting educational programs for learning Russian abroad[82]. In essence, the project sought to form a shared identity in the post-Soviet space, based on a common language, culture, and religion – thus creating a spiritual community that transcends national borders[83].

The Russian Orthodox Church played a central role in promoting and legitimizing the "Russian World" project. Since 2009, Patriarch Kirill has undertaken a series of pilgrimages across the post-Soviet space, with the aim of spiritually retracing the borders of "Holy Rus" (Святая Русь) – a territory that includes not only present-day Russia, but also parts of Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, and, to some extent, Kazakhstan.

The geography of "Holy Rus" is polycentric – Moscow being only one of several spiritual centers, often less significant than others, such as Kyiv, which is viewed as "the Jerusalem and Constantinople of Holy Rus, the place where Russia was baptized"[84]. In other words, this is a

influencing segments of the Russian political elite. He proposes a "Fourth Political Theory" intended as an alternative to liberalism, communism, and fascism. This theory blends elements of traditionalism, conservatism, and Eurasianism, rejecting Western modernity and rationalism. Within this framework, the state and society are organized around spiritual and cultural principles, contrasting with Western materialism and secularism. Dugin advocates for a reconfiguration of the world order, with Russia playing a central role. He views Russia as having a historic mission to oppose Western hegemony and to protect traditional civilizations from the destructive influences of modernity. In conclusion, Dugin's imperialist theory is deeply influenced by his Eurasianist worldview and desire to see Russia as a global leader in a multipolar world. It involves a harsh critique of the West and a call for unifying nations under a common Eurasian identity based on traditional values and national sovereignty. For reference, see Alexandr Dugin, *The Fourth Political Theory*, Eurasian Movement, Moscow, 2012, 246 pp.

[82] "Ukaz Priezidienta Rossiiskoi Fiedieratsii ot 21.06.2007 gh. 796 - O sozdanii fonda Russian world", 21st of June 2007, available on http://www.kremlin.89ru/acts/bank/256 (accessed 23.05.2024).

[83] A. HuWeiwei, "The Idea of the State and the Idea of the Church: An Analysis of the Double Dimension of the Russian world", in: *Siberian Studies* 1 (2021), p. 38.

[84] Mikhail Suslov, *Geographical Metanarratives in Russia and the European East: Contemporary Pan-Slavism*, p. 583: "our Jerusalem and Constantinople", "the place where Russia was baptized" (trad. aut.).

(postmodern) space where the "centers" are located on the periphery—Crimea, Sviatohirsk, Pochaiv Lavra, Novgorod, Karelia, Kolyma[85].

In conclusion, Russia is seen as a collection of Russian-speaking and Russian-cultural communities. The "Russian World" cannot be sustained by a single state or political structure, but only through the roots of Russian culture – namely, the Orthodox faith and the Russian Orthodox Church. The concept of the "Russian World" is anti-Western by nature and implies the restoration of the unity of the Russian people. These ideas align closely with the core tenets of "Moscow – the Third Rome"[86].

In modern Russian political discourse, the idea of "Moscow – the Third Rome" remains a critical element of "Russian thought" and a key factor in shaping the geopolitical and strategic priorities of Russia's actions in the post-Soviet region. As Professor S. Baburin notes:

> "Now, when universal Orthodoxy is under threat, God Himself is calling Russia to return to its mission as the sole guardian of Christ's truth in its purity – to the mission of 'Moscow – the Third Rome.' The main obstacle to such a return is not the apparent social passivity of the Russian Orthodox Church, but the absence of the mission's core: the Orthodox Tsar. It is time to remove from the current Russian Constitution those norms that enshrine anti-Orthodox neoliberal values and to enshrine in it the role of Orthodoxy as the spiritual and moral bond of Russian society"[87].

This idea also implies a hegemonic role for Russia in the post-Soviet space represented by the "Russian World". Thus, Russia assumes the role of guarantor of the rights and protector of the Russian people – even if that implies the use of military force to defend its compatriots. The concept of

[85] M. D. Suslov, "Holy Rus: The Geopolitical Imagination in the Contemporary Russian Orthodox Church", in: *Russian Politics and Law*, 3 (2014), pp. 77–79.

[86] S. Baburin, „Civilizational mission of Russia «Moscow is the Third Rome» as a political, legal and geopolitical challenge of the modern Russian Federation", pp. 10 – 16.

[87] J. Doroszczyk, "Moscow – Third Rome as Source of Anti-Western Russian Geopolitics", p. 56.

the "Russian World", which transcends national borders, and the idea of "Moscow – the Third Rome" reflect the neo-imperialist tendencies of the Russian Federation. The religious ideology behind "Moscow – the Third Rome" not only shapes the anti-Western nature of Russia's expansionist geopolitical strategies but also provides legitimacy for its actions in the post-Soviet region. In turn, the geopolitical implications of the "Russian World" have led to new interpretations of the "Moscow – the Third Rome" concept in modern Russia.

V. Conclusions

The concept of politico-religious imperialism is a central element of Russian national consciousness. In the Russian vision, this concept was a historical necessity dictated by the Florentine Union and the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire in the 15th century. Supported by the principle of "imperial transfer", the Church of Moscow became the new center of the Ecumenical Orthodox Church, and the ruler of Moscow became the basileus of the Christian Empire. Russia naturally took on the mission of salvation for all of Christendom. Throughout history, this idea has been formulated as a requirement for awakening Russian national consciousness, the formation of a centralized state, and the organization of the Russian Orthodox Church, clearly positioned between the eternal glory of the Kingdom of Heaven and the temptation of earthly imperialism.

At its beginning, Russian imperialism was a messianic religious doctrine that defined Russia's rights and obligations as the last Christian empire. Over time, thanks to the efforts of Russian historians, philosophers, and theologians, this idea gradually merged with politics and transformed into an informal geopolitical doctrine, thus defining the guiding line of contemporary Russian politics. Since the beginning of the 21st century, this idea has gradually become the foundation of Russian state and national thought and the primary source of Russian geopolitical thinking. As a combination of religious and political elements, the idea of a "Moscow – the third Rome" provided the ideological foundation for the expansionist trend in modern Russian geopolitical thinking. This idea, supported by the

uniqueness of Russian civilization and the idea of universalist messianism, became a determining factor in Russia's anti-Western geopolitical line and formed the basis of Russia's assertive foreign policy defense.

Today, the imperialist concept is deeply rooted in Russian historical tradition and has become an indispensable source of thought for the Russian public and elite, as demonstrated by the various periods of Russia's existence. However, it must be noted that this idea is essentially a religious, spiritual teaching; therefore, neither this concept nor the universal and messianic ideas derived from it can justify or legitimize Russia's intervention in other countries. The idea of "Moscow – the third Rome" and the "Russian World" project are spiritual concepts intrinsic to the spiritual mission of the Orthodox Church for the Russian nation. They should not be political or territorial. Only in this way can the idea of "Moscow – the third Rome" be truly freed from political influence and instrumentalization, so that "what is Caesar's be given to Caesar, and what is God's be given to God".