

Putin's vision from the mountaintop

A speech by the Russian leader in a Greek monastery in 2016 holds the key to explaining why Russia is at war today

Thomas Weber

On May 28, 2016, Vladimir Putin seated himself on the throne of the Byzantine emperors inside Protaton, the oldest and holiest church on Mount Athos, the Holy Mountain of the Orthodox churches, in northeastern Greece. That day Putin laid out his vision for recreating the ancient split of the Roman Empire into east and west, with Putin himself serving as a new Eastern emperor who would unify the elements of the Orthodox and Russian world and fight the decadence and nihilism of the West. “Today,” Putin told the world, “we restore the values of patriotism, historical memory and traditional culture.”

It should be no surprise that six years after Vladimir Putin's speech, his vision of imperial restoration has turned to violence, as Russian artillery pulverizes centuries-old Ukrainian cities and slaughters Ukrainians without religious distinction. In fact, the seeds of that vi-

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sion had been sown long before the Russian president's journey to the “Holy Mountain.” And the DNA of those seeds made it likely that his vision would lead him not just to the Byzantine throne of Mount Athos but to war. For his vision could only have been implemented peacefully if the people of his would-be eastern empire had found Putin's ideas for their future irresistible.

Putin's choice of Mount Athos was symbolically significant. The Holy Mountain is special: It is a self-governing, monastic republic. Women – even female animals – are banned. So too are those who have been classified as heretics or schismatics. It is in Greece, and thus within NATO territory, but within its boundaries Greek law does not apply. More important, however, Putin

had chosen to lay out his personal role in history from a place that had once been a symbol of the unity of Eastern Christendom, and that lies, significantly, outside of Russia. In his speech, Putin left no doubt that his was an expansionist vision, aimed at resurrecting Holy Russia – the eternal czardom of God in Heaven and on Earth – and of simultaneously rebuilding a Russian and Orthodox world while destroying Western ideas of liberty.

For those wedded to the idea that NATO's behavior is the root cause of the current war, all this is of course irrelevant. Putin did not have specific strategic goals in mind, we are told, when he gave speeches like that he delivered on Mount Athos. For scholars like American political scientist John Mearsheimer, Putin is no different from any other leader of the past or present. For Mearsheimer, all leaders are out simply to maximize the power of their country. His is a lens that filters out the world of ideas that leaders subscribe to and that motivate and sustain their actions.

The dismissal of the idea that Putin's vision for the Russian world – as expressed on Mount Athos as well as in earlier speeches – would almost inevitably lead to war is based on a misapprehension of the motivating power of ideas in international politics as well as their logical development. In the case of the war in Ukraine, this applies to the beliefs of both Putin and of those whom the Russian leader tried to woo with his vision of a new Eastern world. For it was the clash between Putin's vision for the future and, crucially, that of the peoples inhabiting Russia's orbit, rather than with NATO's post-1990s vision for the future of Eastern Europe, that paved the path to war. It is the way that the populations living in Russia's neighborhood have responded to Putin's Mount Athos speech and to earlier addresses, that holds the key to understanding why Russia is at war.

The belief that, as Mearsheimer has put it, “the United States is principally responsible for causing the Ukraine crisis” is based on a highly questionable counterfactual. Had NATO not moved into Russia's backyard in the 1990s and not promised, in Bucharest in 2008, that one day, Ukraine would be able to join the organization, so goes the counterfactual, Vladimir Putin would not have invaded Ukraine, not in 2014 and not in 2022. He would not have needed to do so, as his sphere of influence would have remained intact. This argument is seductive, but wrong.



“Today,” Putin told the world at the Protaton church in 2016, “we restore the values of patriotism, historical memory and traditional culture.”

Alexandros Avramidis / Pool Photo via AP

In fact, what emerges from Putin's evolving world of ideas and their logic is that NATO-centered explanations are exactly the wrong counterfactual to explain why Ukraine is at the receiving end of a war of aggression. We need to look at a different counterfactual.

This becomes clear only if Putin's world of ideas is taken seriously. As emerges from intriguing research by two Dutch researchers – Niels Drost and Beatrice de Graaf – the quasi-millennialist vision of Vladimir Putin for the future of the Russian world has been a long time in coming. It is based both on how he understands history and on how he sees his own role in a centuries-old historical process. It is also a vision aimed at the entire world of Eastern Christendom rather than merely at the Russian part of it, playing on popular, ancient bonds of loyalty and belonging to try and woo would-be allies into Russia's orbit. It is a vision expressed in language and actions full of religious connotations, in which Putin models himself after Peter the Great and Czar Alexander I. If we take seriously Putin's understanding of the Russian past and his vision for the future, then one thing

becomes clear from his expressed desire to re-establish Holy Russia: His is a vision that motivates and progressively radicalizes his action. It is a vision that points toward war.

The logic of Putin's emerging and evolving ideas was always that he would want to recreate Holy Russia, as well as a Russian world in that image, through seduction if possible, but if necessary, through brute force. Once Putin's song of seduction had failed to entice the peoples in Russia's orbit, a brutal and bloody game of thrones, Russian-style, was the only option left to him. In other words, taking Putin's world of ideas and its developmental logic seriously (in inspiring and driving his actions) means realizing that the real counterfactual we should consider relates to the behavior of the peoples of Eastern Europe, rather than that of NATO's member states. Had the former felt the pull of Putin's vision, the likelihood of his embarking on a series of wars, foreign incursions, meddling and assassinations would have been minuscule.

Once Putin had failed in his attempt to court the populations of his would-be new Rome, it wasn't inevitable that

he would opt for a full-blown invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Yet the developmental logic of Putin's world of ideas, once it came into contact with unwilling populations living in the former Soviet world, was this: It was clear that he would use force, but it remained unclear just where and how he would deploy it.

It is here that NATO's actions are indeed relevant. The Western alliance has always had the power to influence how Putin chose to deploy force, although not (or not directly) on his decision to do so. This is still the case. NATO member states do have the means, moral as well as military, to support the peoples of Russia's neighborhood who have failed to find Putin's Mount Athos vision irresistible. Doing so is not just a moral imperative, it will also function as a powerful incentive for other would-be autocrats around the world to forgo their own game of thrones and to leave their neighborhoods in peace.

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