



Neomedievalism as a Future Society: The Case of Russia

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In 2006, Mikhail Yuriev, a member of the political council of the political movement “Eurasia,” former Vice-Speaker of the Russian Parliament, President of the League of Russian Industrialists, and a successful international businessman (now the owner of *Amsbale Capital Partners*), published a utopian novel, *The Third Empire: The Russia Which Was Meant to Be*, that was retrospectively called the “favorite book of Kremlin.”¹ With astonishing precision, it describes Russia’s recent political interventions in Georgia and Ukraine, and the annexation of Crimea. Written as a history textbook by a Latin American historian in 2054, it narrates the history of the Third Russian Empire, which is also called “Third Rome,” emphasizing the importance of Russia’s Orthodoxy. This empire is built by Vladimir the Restorer and his successors as a continuation of the traditions of “the great Eurasian Empires of the past – Byzantium and Roman Empire, Russian Empire under the Tsars, and Soviet Empire.”²

Yuriev praises Stalin, whom he calls “Joseph the Great,” as the founder of Russia’s future glory. Stalin is credited with the reconstruction of Russia as a great military power, for the conquest of new lands, for destroying the “internal enemies of Russia” during the Purges, for repressions of small nations during and after the Second World War.³ In this utopia, Russia conquers Europe and the United States “from ocean to ocean.”⁴ The total victory is celebrated by a military parade in the Red Square.⁵ Yuriev compares this parade to the Victory parade of 1945 and pictures as war prisoners not only generals but also “representatives of the American elite, including President Bush III, the former Presidents Bush Junior, Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton, members of the US government and the Senate, leading bankers and businessmen, journalists and lawyers, pop stars and Hollywood celebrities. All of them are dragged through the Red Square in shackles with a nameplate around their necks (...) to demonstrate that Russia won not only against the American army but also the American civilization.”⁶ Under the Russian Empire, some nations are granted survival and even some rights. Others, such as the Baltic states, Poland, and Ukraine are to be annihilated by Russian troops that “were ordered to destroy the maximum of people, buildings, and infrastructure.”⁷ The total war against the West is led in

¹ Maria Snegovaya, “Ukrainskie sobutuya davno opisany v lubimoi knige Kremlya,” (*Vedomosti*, 3 February, 2014).

² Mikhail Yuriev, *Third Empire: The Russia Which Was Meant to Be* (Moscow, 2006), p. 62.

³ Idem., pp. 8–9.

⁴ Idem., p. 57.

⁵ Idem., p. 53.

⁶ Idem., p. 53.

⁷ Idem., p. 59.

order to delay the Apocalypse: The West plots against Russia together with the Devil, whom the Russian Emperor considers his “personal enemy.”⁸

Instead of joining the ongoing discussion of Russia’s imperial ambitions, which painfully affect its neighboring countries, in this article I will focus on a less apparent and yet pertinent question: what ideas about a future society do post-Soviet imperial ambitions presume and disseminate? I will examine how different genres – political pamphlets, post-Soviet novels and movies, statements by high-ranking Russian officials, and everyday language – mirror the rising popularity of the Eurasian ideology that calls for the return to “New Middle Ages” (“Novoye srednevekov’e”), and promotes concepts such as “society of estates,” “caste society,” “slavery,” and “serfdom” among Russians. I will apply the concept of neomedievalism to contemporary Russia and argue that Vladimir Putin’s ideology cannot be accurately assessed without understanding its connection to a specific post-Soviet form of neomedievalism. As part of a complex ideological process, post-Soviet neomedievalism seeks to offer a social alternative to democracy. My analysis will contribute to the ongoing discussion on the meaning of neomedievalism and demonstrate that neomedievalism implies a particular vision of society.

The Eurasian New Middle Ages

Eurasian ideology is advocated by the Eurasia movement and combines Russian messianism and Soviet denial of individuality with the idea of a state-dependent patriarchal society.⁹ The Eurasia movement declares that Russia is a self-sufficient civilization of a higher order than the West and proposes to recreate the medieval society of Ancient Rus. Everything Western should be excluded from the Russian future because Westernization, started by Peter the Great, does not “reflect the Russian national spirit.”¹⁰ Moreover, the “deconstruction of Modernity” is considered the order of the day.¹¹ The implementation of this project entails several social and political changes: Russia should become a theocratic monarchy; a return to monarchy also commands the re-creation of a society of estates and a rigid social hierarchy that would reproduce the feudal society of the Ancient Rus;¹² and orthodoxy should be wholly responsible for culture and education.

Alexander Dugin, the founder of the movement, who is sometimes called “Putin’s Rasputin,” runs Eurasia Party and the Eurasia Youth Union, a Moscow-based Internet news agency, which broadcasts in Russian, English, Romanian, Serbian, and Ukrainian. He considers himself a philosopher and provides the “theoretical background” for Eurasian movement, speculating that the Indian caste system corresponds better than anything else to human nature.¹³ Good social structure should reflect “caste inequality of the souls.”¹⁴ Imitating nineteenth-century German occultists,¹⁵ Dugin claims that “tsar-philosophers and hero-warriors” should dominate Russian society.¹⁶ Devotees of Eurasian ideology argue that there can never be equality among

⁸ Idem., pp. 82, 79.

⁹ The contemporary Eurasia movement should not be confused with Eurasianism, an attempt of the early 20th century Russian émigré thinkers to explain the peculiarities of Russian history and culture by Russia’s geographical position between Europe and Asia. Walter Laqueur (*Putinism: Russia and its Future with the West* (London: Macmillan, 2015), pp. 11, 88, and 96) traces the roots of Eurasianism to mid-nineteenth century mystics.

¹⁰ Natalia Dolmatova, “V sisteme zennostei Rosii net mesta ravenstvu i bratstvu,” *life.ru*, 8 August, 2015.

¹¹ <http://kolokolrussia.ru/geopolitika/dugin-prognoz-globalnh-mirovh-processov-na-2018-god>.

¹² Alexander Dugin, “Sredniy klass i drugie: ideologia, semantika, ekzistenciya,” *Odnako*, 29 May, 2014.

¹³ Alexander Dugin, “Sredniy klass i drugie: ideologia, semantika, ekzistenciya,” *Odnako*, 29 May, 2014. See also Dugin, *The Fourth Political Theory* (London: Arktos, 2012).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1985), p. 218.

¹⁶ Dugin, “Sredniy klass i drugie.”

people. For them, the Enlightenment values are part of the “masonic plot” and alien to “the Russian soul.”

From the point of view of the Eurasia movement, state-sponsored terror is the only efficient form of governance because “crowds are to be dominated” by an “authoritarian monarchy.” Post-Soviet Eurasianism praises the reigns of Ivan the Terrible and Stalin as the best incarnation of an “authentic Russian tradition of authoritarian monarchy.” Dugin asserts that: “Stalin expresses the spirit of the Soviet society and the Soviet people” because he was “the Soviet Russian Tsar, an absolute monarch” and the “greatest personality in Russian history.”¹⁷ Just as Ivan the Terrible had built the Muscovite-Russian state, “Stalin created the Soviet Empire” and won the Great Patriotic War.¹⁸

There is one more reason why terror as means of achieving greatness and “expanding Russian Empire” falls naturally among the Eurasianist political preferences: Dugin is known for his pro-fascist views. He romanticized fascism and considered rigid social hierarchy as the foundation of a new fascist state in his book *Templars of Proletarians* in the 1990s.¹⁹ The society of estates and castes, in which “everyone knows his place” is Dugin’s and his Eurasian followers’ social ideal.²⁰

Is it by chance that the sociological surveys of the spring of 2017 demonstrate, alongside the growing nostalgia for Soviet times, that twenty-five percent of Russians agree that Stalin's repression was historically justified?²¹ Most importantly, are there any palpable signs that Eurasian ideology has been powerful enough to impose its discourse and its vision of social structure on the post-Soviet society?

Political Pamphlets on Russian Autocracy

Two years prior to the publication of his 2004 novel, Mikhail Yuriev published an analytical paper entitled *Fortress Russia*. This paper was subtitled: “A conception for the President.” The paper offered the Eurasian ideology as a project for Russia’s future. This anti-democratic, and forcefully anti-liberal program called for isolationism of Russian politics and economics, presented the West as Russia’s primordial enemy, and insisted on a nationalistic propaganda campaign to facilitate the following measures: “Our country is an unassailable fortress! If only it is not surrendered without a fight by a ‘fifth column.’ We have all reasons for optimism! If only we get rid of the possessed reformers. A great future awaits us! If only the supreme power finally gets rid of the ‘liberalism’ hated by the Russian people.”²²

In the spring of 2005, the first volume of an anonymous political pamphlet “Project Russia” [Proekt Rossiya] was delivered by a governmental courier to the Presidential Administration, Government, General Headquarters, the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation

¹⁷ Alexander Dugin, “Vzyat’ Stalina po moduly,” *Odnako*, 2 December, 2013.

¹⁸ Dugin, “Vzyat’ Stalina po moduly.”

¹⁹ Alexander Dugin, *Tamplery Proletariata*, (Moscow: Arktogeya, 1997). On Dugin’s fascist views see: Andreas Umland, “Classification, Julius Evola and the Nature of Dugin’s Ideology,” in: Roger Griffin, Werner Loh, and Andreas Umland, eds., *Fascism: Past and Present, East and West. An international debate on concepts and cases in the comparative study of the extreme right* (Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2006), pp. 486–94.

²⁰ TV broadcast “New Middle Ages After Capitalism and Socialism?” TV Channel “Culture,” 31 May, 2010.

²¹ <https://lenta.ru/news/2017/05/23/stalin/> See also: “Obshchestva v Rossii net,” *lenta.ru*, 14 March, 2016.

²² Mikhail Yuriev, “Krepost’ Rossiya,” *Novaya Gazeta*, 11 March, 2004. See the analysis of this article in Steven Rosefielde, *Russia in the 21st Century: The Prodigal Superpower* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 114-115.

(FSB), Ministry of Interior, Prosecutor's Office, and State Duma.²³ In 2009, Eksmo – the largest publishing house in Russia – printed 1,000,000 copies. This text reflects Eurasian thoughts concerning the future of the Russian society and centers on the conspiracy of the West against Russia, something the anonymous authors considered a matter of extreme urgency. While “Project Russia” commands the reconstruction of the Russian Empire as unambiguous goal for Russian foreign politics, its focus is on the social organization of the Russia of the future. The anonymous authors “propose a new principle of state organization” that combines “the best characteristics of monarchy with the best features of the Soviet system.” Theocratic monarchy is once again proposed as the most appropriate form of government for Russia, and Ivan the Terrible is also regarded as a great statesman: “One cannot imagine a family based on democratic principles, changing its patriarch every four weeks [...]. Ivan the Terrible ruled for 37 years, as well as other great autocrats. Times of hard rule of these autocrats strengthened and fortified Russia.” The authors consider slavery a “human condition”: “Humans are slaves. This is part of human nature because humans cannot be anything else.”

To the authors of “Project Russia,” strict social hierarchy seems to be the most appropriate form of social organization because they think of people as mentally underdeveloped and incapable of taking care of themselves: “As adults protect children from cold and hunger, so the honest elite should protect the people from predators.” As a result of this arrangement, a “harmonic society” is created in which the “elders” – or warlords - protect and take care of the “youngsters,” or dependent poor masses.²⁴

Also in 2005, yet another project was brought to the attention of the Presidential administration. This project, titled “The Concept of State-Civilization and The Foundations of a New Order,” was authored by the Director of the Institute of National Strategy, Mikhail Remizov.²⁵ Reconstruction of the Soviet Empire in its pre-1991 borders is the main ambition of this project.²⁶ Remizov states that Russia should not be considered a European nation-state because this concept does not correspond to Russia's historical development. Also, Russia has nothing to do with the civilization created by the French Revolution and the Enlightenment: It is a civilization in its own right. Russia was formed as a union of various people around the Russian nation and therefore guarantees the stability of the post-Soviet space, which belongs to its legitimate sphere of interests. This document also offers its vision of Russian society. Its political order should be a “people's monarchy” based on dictatorship and strong authoritarian central power. The interests of this civilization are to be given absolute priority over the rights of its citizens.

Despite the fact that Remizov does not himself belong to the Eurasia movement, and that the Eurasia movement did not take responsibility for “Project Russia”, their ideas look remarkably similar to those of Alexander Dugin, Mikhail Yuriev, Mikhail Leontiev, one of Putin's chief TV journalists and an active promoter of the Eurasia movement. Marginal in the 1990s, the Eurasia movement has gained considerable popularity among Russian political class in the 2000s and

²³ This pamphlet created much public agitation. Film director Nikita Mikhalkov, journalist Alexander Khinstein, and the popular newspaper “Komsomolskaya Pravda” put a lot of efforts in promoting this pamphlet in the Russian mass media: stringer news.com, 19 November, 2006.

²⁴ *Proekt Rossiya*, 130

²⁵ Mikhail Remizov, “Proetk Gosudarstvo-tzivilizatziya,” *APN*, 9 February, 2005.

²⁶ According to Galina Kozhevnikova, this document reflected the mentality of this institute and its news agency APN (Agency of Political News). Kozhevnikova explains that majority of the participants of this agency are devotees of the idea of Russian imperialism: “Neo-Empire APN,” in *Romantika i pragmatika liberalnogo konservatizma*, ed. Alexander Verkhovsky (Moscow: Sova, 2005), p. 82.

contributed to the formation of *Izborny Club* (2012) which unites all far-right Russian forces.²⁷ The political credo of the Izborsky Club is defined by “social conservatism.” It could be argued that the Eurasia movement provides an ideological platform for the integration of all Russian conservative ultra-nationalist forces.

Neomedievalism as Social System in Post-Soviet Fiction

The success of these projects probably inspired Mikhail Yuriev to publish, in 2006, his utopian novel *Third Empire*. For the purposes of this essay, the most important aspect of this novel is how Yuriev, one of the political leaders of the Eurasia movement, envisions the social structure of Russian society. In his utopia, Russians are called the “core” nation, and we are told that among the Third Empire’s population “the number of people Russian by blood is growing while the number of other people is declining and will continue to decline.”²⁸ Only Russians have a right to choose freely where to live and what to do, but the citizens of the nations conquered by the Third Empire are not.²⁹ In the novel, the Russian Constitution “differs from the rest of the world” because its social organization is that of a society of estates and because of the “principles of Russian self-identification are those of autonomy and nationalism.”³⁰ The *oprichniki*, the highest estate, have full political power in Russia, including the exclusive right to elect government officials.³¹ Their estate elects the Emperor and the highest authorities and comprises the members of the state administration, army, and police force. The two other estates – the clergy and the Third estate – have no political rights.³² The third estate pays all the taxes, while the *oprichniks* and clergy are exempt from taxation.³³

The *oprichnina* was the first attempt in Russian history to institute state terror as the main principle of domestic policy. The reign of terror that lasted from 1565 to 1584 was conducted by the *oprichniki*, the tsar’s personal guard, who were accountable exclusively to Ivan the Terrible. Often, they were granted the property of their victims, primarily the members of the Russian aristocracy.

Like Ivan the Terrible’s *oprichniks*, Yuriev’s *oprichniks* report directly and exclusively to their tsar and rule the society by unrestrained terror. They live a life of “killings, adultery, fornication, and debauchery,” but this way of life does not, explains Yuriev, make Russian priests look down on them.³⁴ *Oprichniks* are described as a “brotherhood,” and as the incarnation of “the best part of the Russian nation.”

Yet, *oprichnina* is idealized by Eurasian ideologists not only in fiction. In 2005, in one of his public speeches, Dugin stated that “neo-*oprichnina* is the Eurasian conservative revolution,” and considered *oprichnina* as a “model of Russian sanctity” and “anti-Western mobilization.” Ivan the Terrible or his contemporary “equivalent” represents the “sacred center of *oprichnina*.”³⁵

Vladimir Sorokin, probably the most popular post-Soviet writer, wrote *Day of the Oprichnik* (2006) as a response to Yuriev’s novel shortly after the publication of *Third Empire*. Sorokin’s

²⁷ <https://izborsk-club.ru/about>; established in 2012 as an “expert society”; for more details on the Izborsky club see: Marlene Laruelle, “The three colours of Novorossiia, or the Russian nationalist mythmaking of the Ukrainian crisis,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 2015.

²⁸ Yuriev, *Third Empire*, pp. 7, 100.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 115.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 119.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

³⁴ Yuriev, *Third Empire*, p. 116.

³⁵ Alexander Dugin, “Metaphysics of Oprichnina,” *actor.ru*, 26 February, 2005.

dystopia describes the New Middle Ages, and his novel's plot takes place in Moscow in 2027 after a period of unrest, which readers easily recognize as similar to the era of Russian liberal reforms of the 1990s. Walled off from the rest of the world by the Great Russian Wall, the Russian economy subsists by selling oil and gas as well as the duty fees raised by the transport of Chinese goods into Europe. In Sorokin's dystopia, Russia is also a monarchy and a society of orders that reproduces the social structure of the Medieval Rus'. There are "stolbovye" boyars (pre-Petrin aristocracy), high bureaucracy, *oprichniks*, paramilitary security, and serfs, or "smerdy."³⁶ The *oprichnina* is at the center of the social structure, and terror is the 'social glue' that holds this society together. The relationships between *oprichniki* are largely reminiscent of those between members of a criminal gang, which is increasingly hinted at by the use of post-Soviet criminal slang fused with Russian folk expressions. By describing atrocities, violence, human denigration and destruction of culture, Sorokin tried to alarm his fellow citizens about the danger of the Eurasian medieval dreams.

A response to Sorokin's dystopia followed. In 2008, Maxim Kononenko, an anti-liberal blogger and a journalist, published an anti-utopian novel entitled *Day of the A-student (Den' Otlichnika)*, which also uses a neomedieval setting. In this novel, the medieval order is established by the 'Birch Revolution.' This Revolution, led by Boris Berezovsky (a Russian oligarch, engineer and mathematician, member of Boris Eltzin's "inner circle" who was politically opposed to Putin since Putin's election in 2000, immigrated to the UK, and openly confessed that his mission was to destroy Putin's regime),³⁷ brought victory to the liberal democratic intelligentsia, which makes Human Rights Watch its symbol. Russia becomes an egalitarian society and overcomes corruption by banning money, prohibiting production of oil and gas, and the usage of electricity. Russia's natural resources are sold to an international corporation, Procter and Gamble, which is considered a benefactor. This society lives in the state of terror imposed by Human Right Defenders and in quasi-medieval poverty: horses are the only means of transportation, "comfortable" house trailers are lighted by candles and heated by burning birch. The hierarchy of this society is represented as a 140 story Freedom House building, where a high bureaucracy is placed according to their ranks. Procter and Gamble managers occupy the top floor. The social structure of this society resembles Greek democracy: Russians are all equal, but Kirgiz and Bashkir people are domestic slaves.

In post-Soviet films, the *oprichnina* is also used as a metaphor for the Russian state. The film *Tsar* by Ivan Lungin (2009) depicts the horrors of the *oprichnina*, while *Boris Godunov* by Vladimir Mirzoev (2011) transplants the action of Pushkin's drama *Boris Godunov* to Putin's Moscow and makes medieval customs look normalized in a contemporary post-Soviet setting.

Clearly, both the critics of Putin's authoritarian regime such as Sorokin and anti-liberal writers such as Maxim Kononenko are using neomedieval symbolism to express their ideas about Russia's future, which is described as a society of estates run by *oprichniks*, and serfdom and slavery appear as an inevitable part of its social structure.

Post-Soviet Politics of Neomedievalism

It should be noted that, on several occasions, Putin mentioned Eurasianism as an important part of Russian ideology and the founding principle of the Eurasian Union.³⁸ Furthermore, the

³⁶ Vladimir Sorokin, *Day of the Oprichnik* (Moscow: Zakahrov Books, 2006), p. 21.

³⁷ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6708103.stm>. Vladimir Berezovsky was allegedly murdered by Kremlin agents in London in March 2013.

³⁸ <https://er.ru/news/82334/>; Vladimir Putin "Evraziystvo = 'no tradiziia nashei politicheskoi mysli"; <http://eurasia.com.ru/putin2012.html>; rumor also has it that Dugin introduced to Putin a Russian reactionary philosopher, Ivan Ilyin (1883-1954), whom Putin now admires. On the roots of Putin's ideology see: Timothy Snyder, "How A

leaders of Eurasia movement – Mikhail Yuriev, Alexander Dugin, Mikhail Leontiev, – showed their support for Putin during the recent elections.³⁹

Neomedievalism is also high up on the agenda of Russia's politics of memory. On October 14, 2016, a first monument to Ivan the Terrible was erected with the support of the Russian Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinsky, in the provincial Russian city of Orel. On November 2, 2016, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the leader of the ultra-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party, called for Lenin Avenue in Moscow to be renamed Ivan the Terrible Highway.⁴⁰ Two days later, on November 4, 2016, the 17-metre monument (56ft) monument (architect Salavat Zherbakov) to Prince Vladimir, the 10th-century ruler of Kievan Rus, who according to a legend forcefully baptized his subjects, was erected in Moscow and inaugurated by Vladimir Putin. And in July 26, 2017, another monument to Ivan the Terrible was erected in Moscow (architect Vasily Selivanov). Putin stated that “[M]ost likely, Ivan the Terrible did never kill anyone, including his son. This is a legend invented by the Vatican nuncio who visited him at that moment.”⁴¹ However, no matter how popular are these medieval despots, Stalin undoubtedly has the largest number of monuments erected for him all over Russia.⁴² The movement of erecting monuments to Stalin in Russian cities, towns, and villages has emerged in the early 2000s.

There are some indications that social neomedievalism resonates with Russian public opinion. Over the past decade, the terminology that refers to social stratification of medieval Russia has proliferated in public debates, media, fiction and film. It has become a commonplace to refer to Putinism as a feudalism and to speak about emerging estates.⁴³ Some analysts and the leaders of the political opposition support this view, arguing that Russia is governed by fifty families within Putin's circle,⁴⁴ and that the formation of an estate that includes state apparatchiks, police, and the FSB, MPs, and the top management of state corporations has been already completed.⁴⁵ The medieval term – “servants of his majesty,” (*lydi gosudarevy*), - has become popular among high ranking bureaucrats in the mid-2000s. And the medieval word ‘kholop’ (serf), previously used uniquely as a curse word, has re-emerged in contemporary Russian as a synonym for ‘people’ and become widely used not only to denounce social injustice but also to praise someone as ‘barin,’ the owner of serfs.⁴⁶

New Russian Serfdom?

Should the return of the word “kholop” be regarded as a purely discursive occurrence, a linguistic paradox? To answer this question, let us consider the statistics of human trafficking and slavery in Russia. In the Global Slavery Index of 2016, which demonstrates the prevalence of slavery based on the percentage of the population enslaved and the estimated number of

Russian Fascist is Meddling in America's Elections,” *The New York Times*, 20 September, 2016. Anton Barbashin, and Hannah Thoburn, “Putin's Philosopher. Ivan Ilyin and the Ideology of Moscow's Rule,” *Foreign Affairs*, 20 September, 2015.

³⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4ghmV0OKWU>.

⁴⁰ <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26602/3618094/>.

⁴¹ <https://www.business-gazeta.ru/news/352660>.

⁴² On Putin's re-Stalinization see: Dina Khapaeva, “Triumphant Memory of the Perpetrators: Putin's Politics of Re-Stalinization,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 49 (2016): 61–73

⁴³ For example: <http://echo.msk.ru/blog/ddobrodeev/714539-echo/>; <http://designingthefuture.ibord.ru/viewtopic.php?id=1480>.

⁴⁴ Genry Meyer and Ilya Arkhipov, “Otzu i deti i rossiyskie igrizha v borbe za vlast',” *InoPressa*, 20 May, 2011.

⁴⁵ Solomon Kordonsky, *Sosloynaya struktura postsovet'skoy Rossii* (Moscow: Institut Fonda obshchestvennoe mnenie, 2008).

⁴⁶ Boris Vishnevskiy, “Moral sey Bashni,” grani.ru, 10 July, 2010; Nikita Krechevskiy, “Are we kholops or taxpayers?” *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 10 June, 2010. “Shevchuk i Putin: polnaya tsenogramma vstrechi,” blog *Novaya Gazeta*, 29 May, 2010. <http://afisha.116.ru/text/owntime/406918.html>. While in Russian the word ‘gospodin’ operates as a term of formal address equivalent to ‘Sir’ in English or ‘Monsieur’ in French, the ‘barin’ exists only in opposition.

people enslaved in any country, Russia occupies the 16th place. This means that more than 0,73% of Russia's population is enslaved, which is equivalent to more than 1 million people.⁴⁷ Among the structural elements that are considered contributing to the high prevalence of slavery in Russia is the country's active role in the slave trade: Russia is regarded as one of the leading dealers in human trafficking.⁴⁸ Russian slaves, mainly but not exclusively women and children, are sold into more than 50 countries for sexual exploitation and forced labor. Russia is also a transit site in the slave trade and the recipient of slaves from Central Asia and other countries.⁴⁹ Sexual slavery, slavery in construction industry and in agriculture are the main spheres in which slave labor is used in Russia.⁵⁰

This general statistic finds daily confirmations in the Russian news. Occasionally, the Russian press reports cases in which people are rescued by Human Rights activists. Frequently, these are Russia's own citizens from the provincial areas and illegal immigrants forced to work in inhumane conditions.⁵¹ Sometimes officials take action – as it happened with the Glukhovskaya weaving mill in the Moscow region where 35 children from Tadjikistan and Korea, aged from 10 to 12, were enslaved.⁵² Sometimes, victims' testimonies make it to court, as it happened in the case of 17 sailors enslaved by their captain and his companions.⁵³ But most often, state officials and local courts reject these claims, as it occurred when 11 people from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were kept captive and forced to work in a Moscow grocery store.⁵⁴ As human rights activists constantly emphasize, slavery is not restricted to the unprotected inhabitants of remote Russian provinces or illegal immigrants: Muscovites are also falling victims to slave trade and human trafficking.⁵⁵ There are also numerous cases of forced labor in Russian prisons: the imprisoned leader of the Pussy Riots movement, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, provided ample evidence based on her own experience.⁵⁶

These cases illustrate the situation in a country where slavery affects large groups of the population. One reason for this level of slavery is that the local police is not encouraged to be proactive but has quotas for various crimes. Currently, the use of slave labor and human trafficking is a criminal offence under the Penal Code of RF (N 63-Φ3 article 127.2).⁵⁷ However, the police is not allowed to open up more than a certain number of files under article 127.1 of the Penal Code (Slave Trade). According to the experts, while there were more than 10,000 cases falling under article 240 (Organizing and Involving in Prostitution) from 2003 to 2013, only 900 of these cases were filed under article 127.1.⁵⁸

The unresponsiveness of law enforcement is only part of the story. Corruption among the law enforcement structures in Russia by mafia groups involved in slave trade is another reason for

⁴⁷ <http://www.globallslaveryindex.org/findings/>. My use of the term slavery follows the definition of modern slavery by Walk Free Foundation that includes “the crimes of human trafficking, slavery and slavery like practices such as servitude, forced labour, forced or servile marriage, the sale and exploitation of children, and debt bondage.” <https://www.walkfreefoundation.org/understand/>. This is also how it is defined by The Criminal Code of RF.

⁴⁸ Yury Levchenko «Torgivlya ludmi i legalizatsiya prestupnuh dohodov» *Rossiskaya Ustizhza*, 6 (2004): 28–29.

⁴⁹ <http://kras-pravda.ru/newspaper/2011/11/v-rossii-po-prezhnemu-primenjaetsja-rabskij-trud.html>.

⁵⁰ Elena Tuyrukanova, “Torgovlya lud'mi v Rossijskoi Federazii,” Moscow, 2006.

⁵¹ “Uroki Rabskogo truda:skolko v Rossii stoit nevolnik,” aif.ru, December 2015 http://www.aif.ru/society/people/uroki_rabskogo_truda_skolko_v_rossii_stoit_nevolnik.

⁵² <http://www.svoboda.org/a/451616.html>.

⁵³ <http://www.ntv.ru/novosti/1458318/>.

⁵⁴ “Aktivistu obzlyuyut zakrutie dela o rabah v Moskve,” *BBC-Russia*, 21 November, 2012.

⁵⁵ “Uroki Rabskogo truda.”

⁵⁶ <http://lenta.ru/articles/2013/09/23/tolokonnikova/>.

⁵⁷ *The Criminal Code of RF* (Ugolovniy Kodeks), Article 127.2. <http://www.zakonrf.info/uk/127.2/>.

⁵⁸ Georgy Neyaskin, “Desyat' let rabotrgovli: pprestuplenie i nakazanie,” *slon.ru*, 7 April, 2015.

this state of affairs.⁵⁹ At the same time, Russia remains among the few countries that have never signed the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings that came into effect on February 1, 2008.⁶⁰

It could be argued that so far we have discussed marginal groups of the Russian society – immigrants, minorities, or prisoners. To review the prevalence of slavery, we should look at what is considered a social norm that affects everyone in contemporary Russia. The Russian army remains a conscription army. The conscription age is 18, and military service lasts two years. Usually, young conscripts are sent to serve far away from home. Disconnected from their social networks, they lose any source of protection and become more easily abused by the older soldiers (known in Russia as ‘dedovschina’) and officers. Forced unpaid labor is a routine in the Russian army. The Russian media are constantly reporting on the exploitation of soldiers by the officers. Soldiers are forced to build their superiors’ country houses, working as manual laborers as well as house servants or serfs. Sometimes, perpetrators are punished, and these cases receive attention from the media.⁶¹ However, these exceptional cases do not change the rule: In the absence of any efficient legal protection for soldiers, army discipline makes conscripts slaves of their commanders.⁶² Agriculture is another sphere in which slave labor is widely used in post-Soviet Russia. According to Human Rights activists who are helping people escape from slavery, “slave labor is widely practiced in agriculture in Volgograd, Rostov, and the Kalmukian regions, and in Dagestan “people are sold as cattle for heavy duties in brick factories.”⁶³

Still, slave labor is not limited to the Russian army, construction, agriculture or brothels. Judging from the most scandalous cases that make it to the media, slave labor penetrates almost all spheres of Russian life. For example, in the provincial city of Tula, famous especially for its Leo Tolstoy’s museum at Yasnaya Polyana, Russian citizens were enslaved and forced to work at the municipal hospitals.⁶⁴ As it becomes clear from this short overview, slavery touches the entire society. However, instead of growing protests against this state of affairs, Eurasian ideas about the social structure of the future Russian empire create the silent assumption of those Russians who dream about future Russian Empire: The low estates or castes will be formed by non-Russian immigrants from the former Soviet republics – Tajiks,⁶⁵ Bashkir people as well immigrants from North Korea and China.⁶⁶

In this context, it becomes especially telling that high-rank state officials publicly speak approvingly of slavery. Valery Zorkin, Chair of the Constitutional Council, wrote in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, the official newspaper of the Russian government, that serfdom had served as a ‘social glue’ for the Russian society and expressed his nostalgia for this form of social organization.⁶⁷

⁵⁹ “V Rossi prozvetaet rabskii trud”, *Segodnya*, 29 May, 2012.

⁶⁰ Status as of 21/04/2018: https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list//conventions/treaty/197/signatures?p_auth=ZalqnXGr.

⁶¹ For example: <http://grani.ru/War/Draft/m.99871.html>.

⁶² old.nasledie.ru/voenpol/14_24/article.php?art=9; www.kirov.kp.ru/daily/25915.4/2868243/

⁶³ “Uroki Rabskogo truda.”

⁶⁴ <https://democrator.ru/petition/rabskij-trud-v-tule-i-tulskoj-oblasti/>.

⁶⁵ “Rabskii trud tadjikov v Rissii,” seafarersjournal.com, May 2015.

⁶⁶ <http://www.newsru.com/finance/24jul2015/runorthkoreanlabor.html>.

⁶⁷ “Despite all the disadvantages of slavery, it served as a bridge that held the nation together. It is not coincidental that peasant slaves used to tell their former lords after the abolishment of slavery in Russia: ‘We were yours, and you were ours.’ This means that the most important social tension between tsarist authorities and the peasants had lost, due to the reforms, the most important go-between, namely, the landlords. And this led to the development of peasant uprisings and eventually brought about a revolution.” Valery Zorkin, “Sud skoryi, ravnyi i pravyy dlya vsekh,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 26 September, 2014.

Nostalgia for serfdom complements the desire to restore autocracy. Nikita Mikhalkov, a filmmaker, and Maxim Sokolov, a journalist, and The Very Reverend Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, are advocating for the coronation of Putin, and the petitions are all over the Russian Internet.⁶⁸ Significantly, protests against Putin's regime in 2012 were conceptualized as directed against a "society of orders."⁶⁹

In post-Soviet Russia, the acceptance of the neomedieval discourse, which promotes the society of estates, caste society, slavery, and serfdom, is closely related to anti-humanist attitudes to people that the unprocessed memory of Soviet crimes has made to appear normal. The ideological combination of neomedievalism and re-Stalinization supported Russia's imperial politics, which has been crucial in improving the popularity of Putin's regime after its crisis in 2011-2012.⁷⁰

Neomedievalism as a Future Society

Shall we conclude that contemporary Russia is returning to the medieval times as has been argued more than once? For example, some economists, and in particular Richard Eriksson (1999), explained the peculiarities of Russia's economy under Boris Eltzin as featuring elements of feudalism.⁷¹ Most recently, Andreas Åslund published an article titled "Russia's Neofeudal Capitalism."⁷² Contrary to what he stated in his 2007 book, in which he claimed that Russia created a "normal market economy" based on private property and was rapidly becoming a society with "a strong middle class," he now believes that Russia is going back to feudalism and that the oligarchical structure of the crony capitalism in Putin's Russia represents his administration's conscious attempt to repeat "the success" of the feudal system of Ancient Rus. Building on the Marxist theory of social formations, Vladimir Shlyapentokh has argued that different social formations, such as capitalism and feudalism, can "coexist" in time and that their "coexistence" explains the peculiarities of post-Soviet Russia.⁷³ These researchers share the belief that the renewal of medieval practices in contemporary Russian realities may be interpreted as a repetition of history.⁷⁴ This view is also widely present in Russian public debates.

To my mind, the idea that contemporary society experiences a return to the Middle Ages (or any other historical epoch for that matter) can be regarded not as an analytical tool, but rather as a symptom of the crisis of the perception of historical temporality based on the idea of progress and the irreversibility of time.⁷⁵ However, this does not diminish the value of the concept of neomedievalism for the understanding of current Russian ideology.

⁶⁸https://censor.net.ua/video_news/355074/izbrat_tsarem_nashego_gosudarstva_putina_vladimira_vladimirovi_cha_v_rossii_hotyat_provozglasit_konstitutsionnyu; <https://topwar.ru/111317-aksenov-moi-slova-o-neobhodi-mosti-monarhii-v-rossii-byli-vyrvany-iz-konteksta.html>.

⁶⁹ Sergei Belanovsky, and Mikhail Dmitriev, *Political Crisis in Russia and How It May Develop*. Abridged version of the report of the Center for Strategic Research Foundation (CSR), 2011.

⁷⁰ On post-Soviet neomedievalism and Gothic Society see Dina Khapaeva, "Historical Memory in Post-Soviet Gothic Society," *Social Research* 76/1 (2009): 359-94; and *Portrait critique de la Russie: Essais sur la société gothique*, trans. N. Kehayan (Paris: Editions de l'aube, 2012).

⁷¹ Richard E. Erikson, *The Post-Soviet Russian Economic System: an Industrial Feudalism?* (1999): http://sintak.unika.ac.id/staff/blog/uploaded/5811998215/files/russian-economic_system.pdf.

⁷² Andreas Åslund, "Russia's Neofeudal Capitalism," *Project Syndicate* 2017: <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/russia-neofeudal-capitalism-putin-by-anders-aslund-2017-04/russian?barrier=accessreg>.

⁷³ Vladimir Shlyapentokh, *Contemporary Russia as Feudal Society* (Moscow: Staliza-print, 2008).

⁷⁴ Similar ideas about the return of new feudalism were widely spread among political scientists since the publication of Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

⁷⁵ On these terms as symptoms of the crisis of historical temporality, see Khapaeva, *Portrait critique de la Russie*, pp. 142–57.

What does the Russian case contribute to the analysis of neomedievalism as a global phenomenon? Numerous interpretations of neomedievalism emphasize its various aspects and manifestations, including its capacity of “laughingly reshaping itself into an alternate universe of medievalisms, a fantasy of medievalisms, a meta-medievalism,”⁷⁶ viewing it as a reaction to postmodernism and linguistic turn in historiography,⁷⁷ exploring it as a particular historical temporality, or considering it as a product of commodification of the past.⁷⁸ Important as they are, these epistemological, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions of neomedievalism should not obscure the political and, most importantly, social meaning of the concept originally conceived by Umberto Eco in “Il Medioevo e già cominciato” and in his famous article “Dreaming the Middle Ages.”⁷⁹

At the core of the concept of neomedievalism (Nuovo Medioevo) lies an observation of a wave of “neomedieval interest” in the U.S. and Italy that Eco defines as a “midway between Nazi nostalgia and occultism.” In other words, Eco emphasizes the challenges neomedievalism presents to the social organization of contemporary democratic society. He speaks about “[p]ostmodern neomedieval Manhattan new castles as the Citicorp Center and Trump Tower, curious instances of a neomedievalism, with their courts open to peasants and merchants and the well-protected high-level apartments reserved for the lords.”⁸⁰ Even if Eco highlights the importance of the Middle Ages for modernity, the main point of his essay is to document the “pervasive nostalgia” for the Middle Ages he calls “dreaming of the Middle Ages.” He discusses the complex and ideologically charged images of the Middle Ages that are used in contemporary culture and have nothing to do with the Middle Ages as a historical period. He speaks about “fantastic medievalism,” which evokes eschatological feelings, “as a barbaric age, a land of elementary and outlaw feelings. [...] These ages are Dark par excellence, [...] one is asked to celebrate [...] brute force.” The crucial feature of this image, according to Eco, is the sunset of reason, occultism and a “neo-Fascist will for power.”⁸¹

In his other essay, “Living in the New Middle Ages,” Eco discusses striking antidemocratic tendencies that superficially resemble the stereotypical representations of the Middle Ages: “the Vietnamization of territories, theaters of permanent tension because of the breakdown of the consensus. [...] In these same cities public buildings look like fortresses.”⁸² By introducing the concept of neomedievalism, Eco emphasizes not the continuity between the Middle Ages and Modernity, as did the American medievalists led by Leslie J. Workman regarding medievalism, but the challenge neomedievalism as an alternative system of values presents to democracy.⁸³

⁷⁶ Carol L. Robinson and Pamela Clements, “Living with Neomedievalism,” *Studies in Medievalism XVIII: Defining Medievalism(s) II*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2009), p. 56. See also Carol L. Robinson and Pamela Clements, eds., *Neomedievalism in the Media: Essays on Film, Television, and Electronic Games* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2012).

⁷⁷ Amy S. Kaufman, “Medieval Unmoored,” *Studies in Medievalism XIX: Defining Neomedievalism(s)*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), pp. 1-11, here p. 6.

⁷⁸ *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture*, ed. David M. Marshall (Jefferson: McFarland, 2007).

⁷⁹ “Il Medioevo e già cominciato,” in *Documenti su Il Nuovo Medioevo*, ed. Umberto Eco, Furio Colombo, Francesco Alberoni, Giuseppe Sacco (Milano: Valentine Bompiani, 1973), pp. 7–28.

⁸⁰ Umberto Eco, “Dreaming the Middle Ages,” in Eco, *Travels in Hyper Reality: Essays* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), pp. 61–62.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 69, 71 and 79.

⁸² Umberto Eco, *Living in the New Middle Ages*, pp. 74, 76. See also David Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2015), especially his analysis of Eco’s understanding of neomedievalism, pp.17-19.

⁸³ As Richard Utz points out, they considered medievalism as “the ongoing process of recreating, reinventing, and reenacting medieval culture in postmedieval times.” (“The Return to Medievalism and the Future of Medieval Studies,” in *Anglistentag 2016: Proceedings*, ed. Ute Berns and Jolene Mathieson (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2017), p. 142). See also Kathleen Verduin, “The Founding and the Founder: Medievalism and the Legacy of Leslie J. Workman,” *Studies in Medievalism XVII: Defining Medievalism*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer,

Eco's analysis finds interesting parallels in Gabrielle Spiegel and Paul Friedman's observations of the global paradigmatic shift in the reception and representations of the Middle Ages that affected professional historiography. In their 1998 article, "Medievalisms Old and New: The Rediscovery of Alterity in North American Medieval Studies," they show that this shift was conditioned by the postmodern re-interpretation of the Middle Ages and argue that "a (postmodern) defamiliarization of the resulting demodernized cultural artifacts, an analytical gesture that at the moment appears to entail a certain demonizing of the Middle Ages."⁸⁴ The Middle Ages appeared, due to this shift, as marginal, grotesque, and Gothic: "The most popular topics in medieval cultural studies in America at the moment – by some reports – are death, pus, contagion, defilement, blood, abjection, disgust and humiliation, castration, pain, and autopsy."⁸⁵

If previously the Middle Ages were considered as the Other in relation to Modernity,⁸⁶ now democracy, humanism, and individualism – the main values of Modernity – have emerged as a marginal Other in relation to this new (and highly alluring for popular culture) image of the Middle Ages. The power of this image became apparent in the 2000s, when conservative American political circles started using medieval allusions for legitimizing torture, as Bruce Holsinger shows in *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror*.⁸⁷ These attempts alarmed scholars about political and ideological usages of medieval allusions in contemporary society.⁸⁸ Richard Utz, President of the International Society for the Study of Medievalism, who draws attention to the persistence of the dark side of medievalism in his 2017 book *Medievalism. A Manifesto*⁸⁹ and analyses the political manifestations of neomedievalism in contemporary American culture, shows how medieval symbols become appropriated by adherents of racist, white supremacist, white nationalist, anti-Semitic, and neo-Nazi ideologies "in an attempt to find historical support for their hateful ideologies."⁹⁰

What does the analysis of the Russian case add to these interpretations of neomedievalism? It demonstrates that the concept of neomedievalism captures a newly emerging symbolic meaning of the Middle Ages, in Russia and beyond: an alluring image of a future society. There are obvious similarities in the representations of society in the Russian Eurasian neomedievalist creed and in American popular culture, for example, in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and the HBO television series *Game of Thrones*. To the same extent as post-Soviet Eurasian ideology, Martin's fantasy world fascinated with Gothic and the grotesque is also replete with

2009), pp. 9, 15; Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz, "Making Medievalism: A Critical Overview," in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. Emery/Utz (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2014), pp. 1–10.

⁸⁴ Paul Freedman and Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "Medievalisms Old and New: The Rediscovery of Alterity in North American Medieval Studies," *The American Historical Review*, 103/3 (1998): 698.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 700.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 678.

⁸⁷ Bruce Holsinger, *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2007). Holsinger's point about political and ideological uses of medievalism by conservative forces is continued by Andrew B. R. Elliott, *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017).

⁸⁸ On appropriations of medievalism by contemporary political discourse, see the debate between Gabrielle Spiegel ("Getting medieval: history and the torture memos," in *Perspectives on History*, September, 2008) and Bruce Holsinger (*Neomedievalism*). On the political uses of the new medievalism, see Frank Ankersmit, "Manifesto for an Analytical Political History," in Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow, eds., *Manifestos for History* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 179, 196.

⁸⁹ Richard Utz, *Medievalism. A Manifesto* (Kalamazoo: ARC Humanities Press, 2017).

⁹⁰ Richard Utz, "Brave New Medievalisms?" ("Divnye novye medievalismy?") in *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, 117/1 (2018). On the distinctions between medievalism and neomedievalism see also: Utz, "The Return to Medievalism," p. 142.

theocratic monarchies and societies of estates, ruled by terror. Blood and lineage become the central concepts that define the rights and destinies of the protagonists in this gory universe based on an inherited rigid social hierarchy.

It could be argued that in contemporary popular culture and political debates one of the functions of neomedievalism is to offer a society of estates, inherited social inequality, and personal dependence as an appealing social alternative to democracy. An ideological and aesthetic construct that may or may not have some family resemblance with the historical Middle Ages, it makes its adherents dream about an alternative, antidemocratic, and antihuman social organization, which becomes its best-selling point. Neomedievalism is an expression of the crisis of democracy; it symbolizes a dissatisfaction with democracy as a social system, which the post-Soviet case makes apparent. Regrettably, since November 8, 2016, Russian neomedievalism can no longer be dismissed as an irrelevant episode from a remote corner of the globe that has no bearings for American democracy.