

INTERVIEW / MARTA DELL'ASTA

Why Putin wants to conquer Ukraine. Religion is only a pretext

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In a speech on February 21, Russian President Vladimir Putin recognised the independence of the separatist republics of Lugansk and Donetsk. At the same time, he also called into question the very existence of Ukraine as an independent and sovereign

state.

«I would like to emphasise once again that Ukraine is not just a neighbouring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our history, culture and spiritual space. Since time immemorial, people living in the southwest of what has historically been Russian territory have called themselves Russians and Orthodox Christians. This was the case before the 17th century, when part of this territory joined the Russian state, and after that”, stated the Russian president. So what is his goal? The Donbass or actually Kiev? Given the recent recognition of the Patriarchate of Kiev by the ecumenical patriarch Bartholomew I, is Putin also acting for a religious cause, on behalf of the Moscow Patriarchate? The Daily Compass spoke to Marta Carletti Dell'Asta, a researcher at the [Russian Christian Foundation](#) in Italy, who specialises in the themes of dissent and the Soviet state's religious policy and is editor-in-chief of the magazine [La Nuova Europa](#).

Dr. Dell'Asta, Putin has said he doesn't consider Ukraine just a neighbour, but an "inalienable part of our history, culture and our spiritual space". By this definition, he means Orthodox Christianity. Does this mean there is a religious cause to the conflict in Ukraine?

I wouldn't say that. Putin has always talked a lot about religion as a fundamental element of his plan, but lately the way in which the Russian president perceives religion is emerging with increasing clarity: an approach that is instrumental and even somewhat paganistic. It is just one of the elements he employs to strengthen his power.

What do you mean by a "paganistic" conception of religion?

Let's take a recent occurrence as an example. On 4 February, the process of a presidential decree was concluded, on the "traditional values at the foundation of the Russian state" and is still awaiting the definitive signature. This document is very indicative. It lists a series of values on which Russia is to be founded, such as "patriotism", "constructive work", giving the image of an ethical state, in which the law prescribes that citizens must be honest, generous and patriotic. This list includes "high spiritual values" but without ever naming God or any religious denomination. It is therefore an instrumental use of these values, defined as "traditional" but which no longer have a specific link with Christianity. It means that religion is used when necessary, as a mere spiritual arm of political power.

Putin has accused the Ukrainian government of using the autocephalous Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church of Kiev (recognised only in 2018 by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I) of instigating hatred against the Russians and denounces a plan by the Kiev government to destroy the churches of the Patriarchate of Moscow. How well-founded are these allegations?

These exaggerated tones are typical of a pre-war state, deliberately aimed at provoking strong feelings of antagonism. In reality, it is usual for the Orthodox Church to identify itself with its own ethnic community. In fact, we have a Russian Orthodox Church, a Romanian one, and so on. As Ukraine embarked on its path towards independence, the will to have its own national Church also became stronger. Right or wrong, it is consistent with the logic that goes with orthodoxy. As for persecutions, so far there have been none. There have been sporadic cases of churches being disputed between the two communities. It was not a huge phenomenon and it did not cause any serious accidents. These churches coexist peacefully. Epiphany, primate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, made an appeal on February 22, one day after the Russian troops entered the Donbass, asking the faithful to absolutely respect the churches belonging to the Moscow Patriarchate.

Does this mean Putin is really criticising Ukrainian identity rather than its Church?

Yes, also because the Russian president does not have the competence to enter into an intra-Orthodox ecclesial debate. He uses it, inappropriately, for nationalistic reasons. Then, if we go back in history, we find that the very origin of the Church in Ukraine precedes that in Russia: the Church was born in Kiev, only after the invasion of the Mongols did it move to the North and to Moscow. It was initially called the Metropolia of Kiev, then its name was changed to become the Patriarchate of Moscow. The story is not quite as simple as the president suggests.

Putin has accused the Soviet Communist regime, starting with Lenin, of having "created" Ukraine. But Russia has always reacted strongly against any form of "revisionism" of the Soviet's past, protecting a historiography that glorifies the successes of the USSR. How can this contradiction be explained?

The accusation Putin makes in his speech against Lenin is purely formal. This is also because the autonomy of national entities in the Soviet Union was only on paper, it has never been applied. The right of secession has never been applied. It was just fiction. Therefore, the substance of Putin's speech is not about communism, but is about the denial of the Ukrainian right to be a state entity separate from Russia. And this assumption is based on a historical falsehood, because Ukraine was a nation long before Lenin ruled and it had declared its independence at the time of the Russian Revolution and the subsequent Civil War (1917-1921). If Lenin was able to think about the creation of a Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, it is only because Ukraine already existed. Putin's real problem is what he himself declared in 2005: "The greatest geopolitical tragedy of the twentieth century was the dissolution of the Soviet Union."

And that says it all. It is the idea that the empire should never have been dismantled and must be reconstituted, starting with Russia, Belarus and Ukraine.

Two months ago, the Russian judiciary dissolved two of the main sections of the Memorial association, the main source of study of the crimes of communism. Is the current Russian government therefore a direct descendant of the USSR?

Yes and no. I think that the correct interpretation must always be in view of reconstructing the empire, in the name of which, any obstacle must be eliminated. Preference is not only expressed for the Soviet's past, but to everything that glorifies Russia's greatness, such as victory in World War II. Ideologically non-homogeneous figures are re-evaluated and celebrated, from Ivan the Terrible to Stalin, including the Romanov family. There is a new ideological criterion: history is rewritten to glorify the country. If the Memorial association writes the truth, not a mythologised, history of the Soviet Union, it will have to be silenced, in the same way orders were given to close the archives and independent newspapers were shut down.