

## Scientology, Jehovah's Witnesses, "Cults," and Conspiracy Theories in Russia Before and During the War in Ukraine

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**ABSTRACT:** Russia's repressive policy against groups labeled as "cults" or "extremist religions" received new impetus from the invasion of Ukraine. It was claimed that "cults," including the Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientology, Neo-Pagans, Satanists, and Pentecostals, secretly directed by the American CIA, had organized the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine in 2014, and were exciting Ukrainian anti-Russian feelings in 2022. They have also been accused of acts of sabotage in Russia and of preparing a coup against the Putin regime. While these accusations may be regarded as ridiculous by foreign observers, they play a significant role in domestic Russian propaganda. Russian anti-cultists also quote as evidence that they should be taken seriously the support they received before the 2022 war in Ukraine (and, in some cases, even after) by the European anti-cult federation FECRIS, which did condemn the invasion but continued to maintain ambiguous relations with its old Russian friends.

**KEYWORDS:** "Cults" in Russia, "Cults" and the War in Ukraine, Anti-Cult Movement in Russia, FECRIS, Alexander Dvorkin, Alexander Novopashin, Alexander Korelov, Roman Silantyev, Scientology in Russia, Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

### *Introduction*

On July 12, 2022, the Security Council of the Russian Federation, a body chaired by Vladimir Putin himself that includes the chiefs of the different Russian security agencies, devoted a special meeting to "how to neutralize internal threats to national security" (Security Council of the Russian Federation 2022).

According to the official press release, this dissent is significantly fueled by religious organizations. Participants in the meeting agreed that in Russia there is still too much "religious permissiveness," and religion is often used for "negative purposes."

One of the recommendations made by the Council was to consider introducing a new law on religion, which would distinguish between five categories. “Traditional religions,” whose activities will be promoted and supported, will be at the top. “Destructive cults,” which will be prohibited, will be at the bottom. In the middle will be “non-traditional religions” and “foreign religions,” whose activities will not be prohibited but limited and kept under surveillance (Security Council of the Russian Federation 2022).

This meeting confirmed the recent emphasis on “traditional religions” rather than on the Russian Orthodox Church only. “Traditional religions” is not a code word for “Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).” It includes Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism.

There is a reason why Putin, who in several speeches had promoted the “spiritual security” of Russia by implying that the spiritual identity of the country is intrinsically connected with the ROC, now uses “traditional religions” in the plural. Discussing Russian casualties in the Ukrainian war is forbidden in Russia. However, by looking at various available data, in May 2022 the magazine *Foreign Policy* concluded that members of Buddhist (particularly Buryat) and Muslim (particularly Chechen and Dagestani) religious minorities

appear to be disproportionately fighting and dying in the Kremlin’s army—while ethnic [Orthodox] Russians, especially those from better-off regions such as Moscow and St. Petersburg, overwhelmingly manage to avoid duty at the front (Kovalev 2022).

The magazine reported data gathered by Russian independent (and semi-underground) media according to which

by May 18, Buryatia had lost 117 soldiers (the actual number is likely higher), whereas the city of Moscow, with a population around 15 times Buryatia’s, lost only three (Kovalev 2022).

The article concluded that the “dirty secret of the Russian military” is that religious minorities are used as “cannon fodder” (Kovalev 2022).

The Orthodox hierarchy is not happy about these developments. For example, Archpriest Alexander Novopashin, a popular Orthodox lecturer whose role in the fight against religious minorities I will discuss in the article, reacted to the July 12 meeting by stating in an interview that regarding the ROC as being at the same level with other religions and insisting that in Russia there is really “a separation between the [Orthodox] Church” and the state is “ridiculous” (Vdovik 2022).

On the other hand, we should not over-emphasize Putin's acknowledgement of other "traditional religions." The ROC will still maintain a privileged position, presumably as long as Putin remains in power. There are also signs that religious minorities start rebelling against their "promotion" by being sent to die in Ukraine. In October 2022, the Supreme Lama of Kalmykia, Telo Tulku Rinpoche (also known as Erdne Ombadykow), who is also the head of the Tibetan Buddhists loyal to the Dalai Lama in the Russian Federation, followed the thousand of Kalmyks who moved to Mongolia to avoid conscription, and stated that the war

is wrong; nobody needs this war. We are all living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, all of us want to live peacefully, each country wants to develop. I think the Ukrainian side, of course, is right—it is defending its country, its land, its truth, its constitution, its people. It is very difficult to say and accept that Russia is right. It is very hard to say so (Whitaker 2022).

The Supreme Lama became the highest Russian religious authority who condemned the war, although he did it only after he had left the territory of the Russian Federation.

### *"Cults" and "Religious Extremism" in Russia*

If the law proposed by the Security Council is passed, creating second-class categories of "foreign religions" and "non-traditional religions" would allow for more limitations of the activities of Roman Catholics (who have their supreme leadership outside of Russia), most Protestants, and even the most moderate and peaceful of new religious movements.

Waiting for a new law, however, two notions are used in Russia to discriminate against religious minorities, "destructive cults" and "extremist religions." The difference between the two categories is that there is a law targeting "extremist religions," while so far there is no law against "destructive cults." All "destructive cults" are also considered "extremist," but not all "extremist religions" are considered "destructive cults."

The word equivalent to the English "cult" in Russian is "секта" (sekta). As it happens in other languages using words derived from the Latin "secta," the correct translation of the Russian "секта" is not "sect" but "cult."

“Sekta” has been used for centuries by the ROC to designate dissident groups it considered as “heretics.” However, its arguments were purely theological and were not very effective in the climate of comparative secularization and religious liberty introduced by the administration of Boris Yeltsin (1931–2007), when several new religious movements believed they were now free to operate in Russia.

As analyzed in detail in a valuable study published in 2020 by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the situation started changing in 1992 (USCIRF 2020). In fact, as the USCIRF study reports, the new notion of “cult” (sekta) was introduced in Russia by a specific individual, Alexander Dvorkin, who returned home in 1992 after having spent the previous fifteen years in the United States, where he both earned a Ph.D. in Medieval Studies and was exposed to the ideas of the American anti-cult movement. The arrival of Dvorkin was perceived as a blessing by the ROC, which immediately hired him as a full-time employee. In 1993, under the auspices of the ROC, Dvorkin founded the Center for Religious Studies in the name of Hieromartyr Irenaeus of Lyons, the first Russian anti-cult movement. Although his academic training was in Medieval Studies rather than contemporary religion, in 1997 Dvorkin was appointed as professor of “Cultic Studies” at Saint Tikhon University, which is operated by the ROC.

In the following decade, as the symbiotic relation between the ROC and the Putin regime consolidated, Dvorkin increasingly cooperated with public security and prosecutors. In 2009, he was appointed as head of the State Religious Expert Council of the Ministry of Justice of Russia, which plays a key role in identifying which groups are “destructive cults” and should be “liquidated.”

As far as the definition of “cults” is concerned, two points should be noted. First, the original contribution of Dvorkin was that he was aware of the (theoretical) secular nature of the Russian state and looked for a definition of “cult” that was non-theological. He was inspired by definitions current in the Western anti-cult movement, but came out with a specific Russian definition. His preferred label to designate movements he called the state to crack down on was “totalitarian cult” (USCIRF 2020).

At first sight, the use of this expression is paradoxical, because Dvorkin presents himself as a staunch supporter of Putin, and the Putin regime has been

itself described as totalitarian by many Russian and foreign observers. Some may argue that Putin operates a “totalitarian cult” too.

However, to some extent, this objection misses the point. The fascist and Nazi regimes openly admitted to be “totalitarian.” Yet, at the same time, they persecuted religious organizations such as the Jehovah's Witnesses accusing them of also being “totalitarian.” In non-democratic regimes, totalitarianism is a monopoly of the state. If other organizations are “totalitarian,” in the sense that they regulate the whole life of their members and determine their attitude on almost all conceivable issues, they become competitors of the state and are severely repressed. Members of such organizations, in fact, live in free spaces of their own and cannot be fully controlled by the state.

Dvorkin could present his notion of “totalitarian cult” as entirely non-theological and compatible with a secular state, although in fact he defined as “totalitarian” all groups that proselytized among the members of the ROC.

Second, while his definition of “cult” had quintessential Russian features, Dvorkin believed that to avoid being perceived as a ROC sectarian operation, Russian anti-cultism should become part of the international anti-cult network. The largest umbrella organization for anti-cult movements in Europe and beyond is called FECRIS, the European Federation of Centers of Research and Information on Cults and Sect, established in France in 1994 and largely supported by funds provided by the French government. Dvorkin in turn created an umbrella organization federating different local anti-cult movements the ROC had created in Russia, the Russian Association of Centers for Religious and Cultic Studies (RATsIRS), later also called Center for Religious Studies. The Russian groups became a very visible component, and generous donors, of FECRIS. Dvorkin managed to be elected Vice President of FECRIS, a position he maintained for twelve years, from 2009 to 2021. While the Russian organizations have disappeared from the list of FECRIS members after the war in Ukraine started (without any official explanation, and they claim to be still part of FECRIS: see *Ansobor.ru* 2022c), Dvorkin remains as a FECRIS board member according to the official records.

Contrary to what many in the West believe, however, Dvorkin and his organizations do not have a monopoly on anti-cultism in Russia. Twenty-two years younger than Dvorkin, Roman Silantyev sometimes describes himself as a “sociologist” although his academic training is in geography and anthropology.

He elaborated a competing definition of “cults” that should be prohibited in Russia, which he calls “destructive” rather than “totalitarian.” Dvorkin occasionally uses the expression “destructive cults” as well but Silantyev regards them as part of a sub-category in the larger field of “destructive movements.” He claims to have invented a new science called “destructology,” and a “Laboratory of Destructology” with Silantyev as chair was created for him at Moscow State Linguistic University in 2019.

Although they have common enemies, Silantyev and Dvorkin have been in competition for positions both with the state and the ROC and for the ideological hegemony on Russian anti-cultism. When Dvorkin was appointed in 2009 chair of the State Religious Expert Council of the Ministry of Justice of Russia, Silantyev was appointed as deputy chair.

It is difficult to imagine somebody more extreme than Dvorkin when it comes to “cults,” but Silantyev fits the bill. His notion of “destructive cults” refers to groups he calls “misanthropic” that consciously operate for the destruction of all human values if not humanity itself (Voloshinskaya 2022).

As mentioned earlier, there is no law against “totalitarian cults” or “destructive cults” in Russia. However, there is a law against “extremism,” which also mentions “religious extremism.” The Russian law on extremism was passed in 2002. The date is significant, as the law came in the year following 9/11 and, although penalties for propagating “extremism” were harsh, both domestic and international observers interpreted it as an understandable reaction against the threat of terrorism operating in the name of radical Islam.

However, in subsequent years, amendments and interpretive documents modified the scope of the law, and explained that a group can be “extremist” even if it does not promote nor justify violence. Were defined as “religious extremist” groups those that teach the superiority of their spiritual path with respect to other religions (meaning the ROC, and perhaps now other “traditional religions” as well). It is mostly on this basis that the Jehovah’s Witnesses were declared “extremist” and “liquidated” in 2017 (Kravchenko 2018).

Obviously, all religions believe that what they teach is somewhat better than what is taught by the other religions, otherwise why should anybody convert to them? But the subtext was that are “extremist” in Russia religions that try to convert members of the ROC, which was further prohibited in 2016 by the anti-

proselytization laws part of the “Yarovaya laws package” introduced by Duma member Irina Yarovaya (Goble 2016). Parenthetically, this is the same Irina Yarovaya, now deputy chair of the Duma, who on July 18 this year made international headlines by claiming that Ukraine has invented a special drug that transforms its military into zombie-like soldiers insensitive to pain and without any remaining trace of human consciousness (Sborov 2022).

### *Sabotage and “Cults”*

In the last few months, several acts of sabotage and mysterious fires destroyed military and civil facilities inside the territory of the Russian Federation. Ukraine has not explicitly claimed the attacks, and Russian authorities have originally explained away the events as accidents.

However, as these so-called accidents multiplied, the Federal Security Service (FSB), the main heir of the old KGB, has adopted the theory, originally advanced by anti-cult organizations, that sabotage and “terrorist” attacks are conducted in Russia by “cults” directed from abroad by the American and Ukrainian intelligence services.

On August 15, simultaneously in six different Russian cities, churches and private homes of a Pentecostal church based in Latvia called New Generation have been raided by the FSB, and dozens of members arrested (Sokolov 2022). Both the FSB press releases and the main Russian anti-cultists, including Alexander Dvorkin (Sokolov 2022) and his deputy in the RATsIRS, Archpriest Alexander Novopashin, who appeared in television to support the raids, explained that New Generation operated “cells” engaged in sabotage activities on behalf of Ukraine (Solovova 2022).

Paradoxically, New Generation, which is led by Pastor Alexei Ledyayev, is controversial in Latvia because in the past it has supported Putin’s and Patriarch Kirill’s anti-LGBT policies (Springe 2016), and recently has been on the same side of several pro-Russian organizations in refusing COVID-19 vaccination (*Baltics News* 2021). However, it committed the capital sin of sending missionaries to Russia to convert Russian Orthodox devotees to its faith. As a consequence, it was persecuted in Russia as a “cult,” and reacted by siding against the Putin regime after the invasion of Ukraine. While it is both a

prosperous and a controversial church, that it has the desire or the capabilities to carry on activities of sabotage in Russia is not believable.

On September 6, the FSB conducted operations in 46 regions of the Russian Federation arresting 187 alleged members of two connected Satanist cults, also accused of conducting sabotage operations on behalf of Ukraine and the United States, Columbine Satanism and Maniacs: Murder Cult (MKU) (*Ansobor.ru* 2022a).

According to most scholars of religion and Satanism, these organizations do not exist. “Columbine Satanism” has been denounced as the most dangerous “cult” in the world by Silantyev (Voloshinskaya 2022). The name comes from the high school massacre in Columbine, Colorado, in 1999, where two teenagers killed 12 students and a teacher. The massacre certainly happened, but Silantyev claims that it was the result of a cooperation between the American Church of Satan founded by Anton Szandor LaVey (1930–1997) and the CIA, whose experiments aimed at creating young killers and deploying them to wreak havoc in various countries. Later, he added to the number of conspirators “the SBU [Security Service of Ukraine] and the centers of information and psychological operations of the Armed Forces of Ukraine” (*Interfax* 2022a). There is no evidence that the Columbine killers were in contact with the Church of Satan, nor that they belonged to a larger “cult.”

“Maniacs: Murder Cult” was the name of a small group with 13 subscribers that existed for a few months on the social media VKontakte, which is popular in both Russia and Ukraine. Assuming the FSB was not behind it from the beginning, it was operated in Ukraine by a young Black Metal fan called Yehor Krasnov, who was arrested by the Ukrainian police for stabbing a man in the street. The FSB and Silantyev, however, have claimed since 2021 that Krasnov is not in jail but is used by the Ukrainian intelligence to mastermind a transnational terrorist Satanist cult that may also include supporters of dissident Alexei Navalny (Rudenko and Shandra 2021).

It appears that “Columbine Satanism” and “Maniacs: Murder Cult” are just labels conveniently used by the FSB, with the propaganda support of anti-cult activists, to arrest dissidents and find a convenient explanation for the “accidents” destroying strategically important facilities in Russia. The use of “cults” as scapegoats by Russian authorities to explain their failures in Ukraine, however, is not new, and extends to larger groups such as Scientology.



*Maidan and the Alleged "American Coup" of 2014 in Ukraine*

The most persistent argument of Russian propaganda about Ukraine is that the war was not started in 2022 by Russia but by Ukraine and the United States in 2014, when what Russians call a "coup" ousted pro-Putin President Viktor Yanukovich. The "coup," this propaganda claims, "compelled" Russia to react by invading Crimea and protecting the separatists who had created the pseudo-republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in the Eastern part of the Donbass, ultimately leading also to the 2022 war.

In fact, there was no "coup." President Yanukovich had become increasingly authoritarian, and had angered many by announcing that he would not sign the association agreement with the European Union that had been agreed upon, and would rather seek an economic association with Russia. This led to protests by students in Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Kyiv that started on November 21, 2013.

They would probably have remained comparatively small had it not been for the fact that the police entered Maidan Nezalezhnosti and brutally beat the students on November 29. Many who would probably not have protested for the European Union joined the ranks of the protesters. "Small Maidans" were organized in other Ukrainian cities. At the beginning of 2014, protesters were evaluated at one million. There were bloody clashes, which left 108 protesters and 13 security agents dead.

On February 21, 2014, with the mediation of the European Union, Yanukovich signed an agreement with the opposition that would have taken the country to new presidential elections. However, in the night between February 21 and 22, he escaped Kyiv and eventually went to Russia. On February 22, the Ukrainian Parliament voted that, having deserted his functions, Yanukovich should be removed from office. The same day, Russia invaded Crimea. The following week, armed Russian separatists started attacking government buildings in Donbass.

The 2014 events generated a large scholarly literature discussing issues of Ukrainian constitutional law and international politics. I would not enter this field, since the purpose of my paper is to examine conspiracy theories about the Maidan Revolution, and in particular the theory that the Church of Scientology, acting on behalf of United States' intelligence services, was among the forces secretly promoting it.

To understand this strange claim, we should first examine the broader conspiracy theory that the United States organized the 2014 Maidan.

### *The Nuland Connection*

The so-called evidence offered by Russian propaganda for this claim centers on one particular American diplomat, the then U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland. Stories about Nuland have been revived today, since Nuland is a political associate of President Joe Biden, who was Vice President in 2014. Nuland currently serves as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs.

One reason Nuland has been presented as the villain in many conspiracy theories is that she happens to be the wife of Robert Kagan, one of the best known American neoconservative theorists. There is no doubt that neoconservatives offered a rationale for the war in Iraq and support an anti-Russian policy, although in conspiracy theories they are accused of much more and seen as part of a “deep state” that is trying to rule America dictatorially.

Allegedly, Nuland “confessed” that the United States had organized Maidan in a leaked phone call of February 2014 with U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey R. Pyatt, whose audio file was posted on YouTube and divulged by Russian propaganda media. In the phone call Nuland, while not “confessing” anything nor implying that the U.S. had organized Maidan, used an offensive word to designate what she saw as the lack of action by the European Union, which she compared unfavorably to the U.S. support for the anti-Yanukovych forces, and expressed her preference, among different politicians of the Ukrainian opposition, for economist Arseniy Yatsenyuk (*BBC News* 2014).

In fact, she did not say that Yatsenyuk was more pro-American than others, but that as an economist with a distinguished career as president of the National Bank of Ukraine he was well-placed to rebuild the Ukrainian economy, which was in a very bad shape (*BBC News* 2014). Yatsenyuk did become Prime Minister after Yanukovych was ousted in February 2014, but—Nuland’s opinion notwithstanding—was never considered as a serious candidate for the Presidency, and in 2016 his government collapsed because of his contrasts with the President elected in 2014, Petro Poroshenko, on economic matters.

Alexander Dvorkin, which I mentioned as the main leader of the Russian anti-cult movement, went to Serbia in April 2014, where he explained the Maidan events as the result of a conspiracy of “cultists” behind whom was the CIA. Dvorkin said that “behind the Ukrainian crisis there is a secret plan of a group of religious cults and sects in which the political leadership of Ukraine itself is participating.” At the center of this conspiracy was Yatsenyuk, who was “controlled by the CIA through Scientology” (*Srbinfo* 2014).

Two days before his trip to Serbia, in an interview with the radio station *Voice of Russia*, Dvorkin had offered more details. He admitted he had no evidence that Yatsenyuk was an active Scientologist, but claimed he had taken Scientology courses. He explained what auditing in Scientology is all about and claimed, not incorrectly, that it is similar to the Catholic or Orthodox confession, and that Scientologists may tell the auditors about actions they would not like to advertise in public. Dvorkin said:

Yatsenyuk, before his political career, he did take several Scientology courses and paid for it. It is no secret that Scientology as of 1994 has been cooperating very closely with the CIA of the United States of America. The State Department of the USA lobbies the interests of Scientology in all the countries of the world. And Scientology, apparently, shares some of the information it gathers with the Central Intelligence Agency. So, it means that, at least in Yatsenyuk's case, he can be controlled by the CIA (*Voice of Russia* 2014; see Nguyen 2014).

In another interview, to his own website, Dvorkin said:

This, I emphasize, is the most important thing in the story with Yatsenyuk. He took courses in Scientology. So, they probably have a folder of compromising evidence on and about the Prime Minister of Ukraine. Accordingly, he is held tightly by his most sensitive parts. They can control him very easily. It seems to me that this situation is even worse than if he were an open member of the organization. Then it would be clear who he is and what can be expected from him (Chernykh 2014).

The Prime Minister of Ukraine, Dvorkin added,

is a man whose file is kept by a very tough foreign totalitarian organization, and, as many experts note, with ties to the CIA. It is clear that such a person is an absolute puppet. And he will do whatever he is told (Chernykh 2014).

In December 2014, Dvorkin insisted that

Scientologists had put Yatsenyuk into a trance, and pumped out all compromising information about him. So he passed under the control of Scientologists. Scientology has

concluded a secret agreement with the U.S. CIA; therefore, it is clear under whose control Arseniy Yatsenyuk is (Shatilova 2014).

Dvorkin's theory is that, when Scientology was recognized as a religion for tax purposes in the United States in 1993, it agreed in exchange that Scientologists throughout the world would work as CIA agents. "According to many experts, Dvorkin said, from that moment Scientology began to share the information it collected with the CIA" (Chernykh 2014). As Dvorkin said in a popular Russian TV talk show,

In 1993 Scientology signed a secret agreement with the US Internal Revenue Service [to obtain a tax-exempt status], and a secret protocol was attached to this agreement, and according to which, as experts say, they discuss, Scientology supplies its information to the United States Central Intelligence Agency, and for this, the US State Department lobbies the interests of Scientologists in all countries of the world (*Russia 1* 2014).

Everywhere in the world, he claimed, Scientologists work in close connection with American embassies. In particular,

As soon as the Kyiv junta, which came to power as a result of a coup, where the prime minister is suspected of having links with Scientology, began to have problems, the director of the CIA arrived incognito in the capital of Ukraine and held secret meetings (Chernykh 2014).

Dvorkin and the Russian media have continued to this very day to claim that Scientologists "secretly influenced" or even organized Maidan. They have offered no evidence, except the claim that Yatsenyuk's sister Alina Steel, who lives in the United States, is "a Scientologist and possibly the head of the Scientology mission in Santa Barbara" (Chernykh 2014), as Dvorkin said. He noted that Scientology had stated that Yatsenyuk's sister was not a Scientologist. "Scientology refutes, Dvorkin objected, but it has never been known for its veracity" (Chernykh 2014).

Even Tony Ortega, one of the most extreme anti-Scientology activists in the United States, investigated the matter in February 2014 and explained that he had refused to join Dvorkin's campaign against Yatsenyuk because he found no evidence that Alina Steel was or had ever been a Scientologist. Ortega reported on February 27 that

Last night, we reached Alina Steel's daughter, Ulyana Biloskurska, 26, who assured us that the rumors about the family's Scientology involvement were completely untrue. "That's crap," she said. "We don't even know what Scientology is." Ulyana, who lives in California, said she had heard the allegation about her mother and uncle, and assured us

that neither of them have any involvement in Scientology. "We read about the rumor, but there's no truth to it," she says. "The only thing I know about Scientology is that Tom Cruise is in it" (Ortega 2014).

However, Dvorkin's website still reprinted an article in August 2014 calling Yatsenyuk "a follower of the Scientologists" (Sokolov 2014). By December 2014, he was promoted in the same website to "one of the leaders of Scientology in Ukraine" (Lanfrankova 2014). On October 25, 2022, even the Assistant Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, Alexey Pavlov, wrote that "Yatsenyuk was a Hubbardist, a follower of the Church of Scientology" (Pavlov 2022).

By 2015, Dvorkin's website had found a way to answer widespread objections that, rather than a Scientologist, Yatsenyuk was known to be an active member of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in communion with the Vatican, called by the Orthodox "Uniate." The answer was that he had changed his affiliation from Scientology to the "Uniate" Church when he was exposed by Dvorkin, and at any rate the Uniates were themselves part of a "cult" almost as bad as Scientology. An article explained that the fact that Yatsenyuk was

An active practicing Scientologist was already known to all those interested. When this information was widely disseminated, Yatsenyuk promptly changed his religion to "Greek Catholic." However, for adherents of Lafayette Ron Hubbard [1911–1986], the founder of the cult of Dianetics and Scientology, such a public change in their ideals and commitment is one of the foundations of the doctrine: "all for the good of the organization." You should know that penetration into the power structures of any state, influence on this power in order to strengthen and expand Scientology structures on the territory of the state is one of the most important goals of the Hubbard organization. As early as the beginning of 2011, when there was no question of any Maidan, Scientology structures were actively infiltrating Ukrainian schools and universities, conducting active "enlightenment activities." Therefore, the "religious maneuvering" of Arseniy Yatsenyuk in the logic of Dianetics does not look like something surprising. And it is extremely difficult to understand whether he really cut off all ties with the "Hubbardists," or whether this is just a public gesture and nothing more. At the same time, it is important to understand that the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church is also one of the most active subjects of the Maidan policy and the revolution. A huge number of Greek Catholic priests took part in the Kyiv events either as missionaries, or directly as agitators and propagandists for the overthrow of the government. [...] Therefore, from a purely political point of view, Arseniy Yatsenyuk did not change his principles and ideology one iota, even if he really ceased to be an active Scientologist (Chausov 2015).

Dvorkin and other Russian anti-cultists have continued to this very day to explain the 2014 Maidan events and the anti-Russian feelings prevailing in Ukraine and inspiring the resistance to Putin's 2022 invasion as a result of a conspiracy where American and Ukrainian intelligence use "cults," including Scientology, Satanists, Uniates, Neo-Pagans, and Pentecostals, to instill in the Ukrainian population hate against Russia and sympathy for the European Union and the United States.

On June 24, 2022, Novopashin gave an interview to the *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, where he claimed that the conspiracy in Ukraine started well before 2014:

Cultist, primarily neo-Pentecostal, and neo-pagan organizations began to be created in Ukraine from the beginning of the 1990s, in which tens of thousands of Ukrainians were fraudulently involved (*Komsomolskaya Pravda* 2022).

"Plans had been prepared by Western and American experts who are pretty well versed in destructive activities." After a long preparation, in 2014 according to Novopashin, "thousands of members of the cults came to the square in the center of Kyiv," Maidan, and set in motion the events that made the 2014 and 2022 Russian invasions necessary. Novopashin said that these were defensive moves, since Ukraine was infiltrating Russia with "cultist" terrorist cells, ready to kill, destroy. Ukrainians are even accused of "making cannibals out of children."

"Canned meat from a Lugansk separatist," "Shawarma of Russian children"—these are the dishes offered to Ukrainians in recent years. Culinary holidays are held in Ukrainian schools, children cook their own meals, and then come up with names for them. And the names are: jelly "Zhirinovskiy's Brain" compote [referring to Russian ultra-nationalist politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, 1946–2022], "Blood of Russian babies" and so on. Although in inventing the name, of course, Ukrainian school teachers helped them. They make cannibals out of children. Even if they are not such in fact, but this kind of impact on the psyche leaves a deep mark on it. And this is what is needed. Young Ukrainians are taught to see Russians as sub-humans, non-humans whom it is not even enough to kill. And then adults add fuel to the fire. A man in a white coat (I can't call him a doctor) publicly declares that Russian prisoners of war should be castrated. A seemingly prosperous Ukrainian girl writes on social networks that prisoners of war should be sold for organs. And she gets likes. The worst thing is that these are not just statements, this is a call to action (*Komsomolskaya Pravda* 2022).

Silantyev in a different interview added that, in addition to children, even “Russian cats” are at risk, since they are ritually sacrificed by Ukraine-directed “cultists” (*Interfax* 2022 b).

### *Two Main Targets: Scientology and the Jehovah's Witnesses*

Why does Scientology play a special role in these conspiracy theories? In fact, Scientology shares the dubious privilege of being the main target of Russian anti-cult conspiracy theory with the Jehovah's Witnesses. What they have in common is that they have their headquarters in the United States. Scientology seems perfect for the role: it is quintessentially American, and Tom Cruise, perhaps its most famous member, even repeatedly played the role of an American secret agent. However, even the peaceful Jehovah's Witnesses have been accused to prepare a coup against the Putin regime—in cooperation with Scientology, of course.

On October 11, 2022, Novopashin's website launched the “sensational revelation” (its own words) that a coup was being prepared by the Jehovah's Witnesses and other “cultists” (*Ansobor.ru* 2022b). The article was accompanied by a caricature where a Jehovah's Witness was depicted with a monster-like yellow face, big ears, an enormous nose, and the eyes replaced by small cameras identified as “made in USA.” The iconography was reminiscent of traditional Russian anti-Semitism, except that the Jehovah's Witnesses were targeted rather than the Jews.

The revelation comes from a famous Russian attorney, Alexander Korelov, the official lawyer of the anti-cult federation RATsIRS (FECRIS 2017) and an associate of Dvorkin and Novopashin. He was even invited at the Belgian Parliament in Brussels in 2017 by the European anti-cult federation FECRIS, where he shared the podium with Belgian MP André Frédéric and with the General Secretary of the French governmental anti-cult mission MIVILUDES (Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires, i.e., Inter-Ministerial Mission for Monitoring and Combating Cultic Deviances), Anne Josso (FECRIS 2017). A text by Korelov continues to appear on FECRIS' official website to this very day (Korelov 2017).

The Jehovah's Witnesses were banned and “liquidated” in Russia in 2017. However, according to Korelov,

the extremist cult of the Jehovah's Witnesses did not cease to operate. As we expected, they went underground, holding their meetings in safe houses, receiving instructions from the American center through instant messengers, blogs, and so on. But lately the picture has changed. From the leading centers located in the United States, instructions are sent to the illegal divisions of the cult in our country through "closed" channels, which indicate an attempt by the cult to organize a coup d'état in Russia similar to the Maidan in the now former Ukraine (*Ansobor.ru* 2022b: all the following quotes in this paragraph are from that text).

In fact, Korelov claims,

in Russia, the Western intelligence services intend to repeat the already developed scheme, implemented in Kyiv in 2014. Its essence is this. To begin with, "peaceful protesters" are being taken out onto the streets, the backbone of which is primarily adherents of cults.

including Pentecostals, Neo-Pagans, and Scientologists. Then,

all kinds of dissatisfied elements, the mentally ill, drug addicts, criminals and just curious people are drawn to them. Everything seems to start peacefully, under pacifist slogans. Gradually, the crowd begins to "warm up" with specially trained provocateurs, as well as on social networks.

And finally, the government is reversed:

According to the information at our disposal, this is precisely what is being intensively prepared in the milieu of cults. Now we have absolutely certain data that Jehovah's Witnesses are turning from an extremist organization into a terrorist one. We warned about this already several years ago.

Korelov insists that

the leaders from the Brooklyn center [sic; in fact, the Jehovah's Witnesses sold their Brooklyn headquarters and moved to Warwick, New York, in 2016] are turning Russian adherents into cannon fodder to achieve their goals. Just like in Ukraine, the United States is fighting with the hands of Ukrainians and mercenaries, so in Russia they are ready to waste biomaterial they do not need in the form of adherents of this cult. The American leadership of Jehovah's Witnesses is made of people unencumbered by moral standards. They are ready for anything. At the same time, ideological support is being launched among American-sponsored religious scholars, who have already started talking about the need for a "rehabilitation" of the Jehovah's Witnesses

Now the Jehovah's Witnesses

"sleeping" extremist cells under the leadership of their center in the United States. And the fact that the Brooklyn [sic] center of this cult is under the complete control of the American secret services is no longer a secret.



Scientists and the Jehovah's Witnesses are described as

just puppet organizations in the hands of a behind-the-scenes puppeteer. This is an element of the socio-political structure of the United States, which they are trying to impose on the whole world. It is also obvious that all American cults are guided from a single center.

Korelov believes that "cults" and in fact the United States as a whole are

something vile, unworthy. Notice the stupidity of their leaders. The same Hubbard—the founder of Scientology—was a degenerate personality. What about the false prophecies of the Adventists? It clearly smacks of mental illness. Therefore, when mentioning American cults, you can twist your finger at your temple. The United States is the spiritual garbage dump of humanity. I have never taken their public-state matrix seriously. In their country there are no people capable of thinking globally, there is no knowledge of their own, everything is bought. Primitive, in a word. [...] The United States has a very vulnerable socio-political system that can be destroyed in a few months. You just need to know their vulnerabilities and be able to influence them.

If Russia has not destroyed the United States so far, Korelov explains, it is

because too abrupt changes mean hundreds of millions of people who die from wars and upheavals in all countries. I doubt that anyone is ready to take responsibility for such sacrifices. Everything must be progressive and carefully thought out. This is the art of politics.

Russia's patience, however, has limits.

Russia is not at war with Ukraine. Russia, in fact, is at war with the Satanists of the West FOR Ukraine and the Ukrainian people, to save people, to protect them from the arbitrariness of the United States and other pseudo-democratic states.

In Ukraine, he claims,

there are US bacteriological laboratories that spread the infections around the world, there are secret concentration camps where Ukrainians are tortured and killed, they organize the trade in Ukrainian children and much more. I have seen how the brainwashing technologies of the cults turn the people of the former Soviet republic into zombies. [...] The once flourishing Soviet republic of Ukraine has been turned into a Nazi hell by the American occupiers. I can say with absolute certainty that the United States is carrying out genocide of the population of Ukraine. They methodically send Ukrainians to their death under the pretext of confrontation with Russia, they shoot and hang, or corrupt Ukrainian children in towns and villages. It is scary to watch when our troops enter the villages, and there are dozens of hanged children

—hanged by "the United States and NATO," that is.

In another interview, published in the popular daily *Izvestia*, Korelov claimed that evidence that the Jehovah's Witnesses were preparing a coup had come from the remote Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, on the Arctic Circle, where reportedly mysterious men knocked at the residents' doors and asked "Where can I find the answer to the question about happiness?" Although the men did not identify themselves as Jehovah's Witnesses, Korelov claimed that the question exhibited their "handwriting," and confirmed that the Witnesses were active again and getting "ready for active protests, including physical resistance to representatives of law enforcement agencies." To the possible objection that there are not enough Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia to organize a coup, Korelov answered that they had already enlisted the help of Pentecostals and Scientologists, and that the American and Ukrainian intelligence services, the real organizers of the coup, were also trying to involve "Indian Satanists" (by which the lawyer meant the followers of Indian spiritual master Sri Mataji Nirmala Devi, 1923–2011, the founder of Sahaja Yoga and a frequent target of Russian anti-cultists) and even Islamic ultra-fundamentalists. "It is known for sure, Korelov said, that the Ukrainian special services and their [American] handlers considered the possibility of integrating religious fanatics to fight Russia. They dreamed of creating a crazy cocktail of 'Islamic' extremism and Ukrainian neo-Nazism" (Petrov 2022).

#### *Western Anti-Cultists' Support for Russian Conspiracy Claim*

There are several studies of how the international anti-cult federation FECRIS has consistently supported Dvorkin and other Russian anti-cultists (Berzano et al. 2022). FECRIS has publicly condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine (FECRIS 2022), and has removed the names of its Russian affiliates from its website (Berzano et al. 2022, 27). However, it has not publicly disassociated itself from RATsIRS (which continues to claim to be part of FECRIS: *Ansobor.ru* 2022c), and according to public records Alexander Dvorkin is still a member of its Board.

Worse, as late as July 15, i.e., three months after the names of the Russian affiliates had been removed from FECRIS' website and while evidence of atrocities in Ukraine mounted, according to a Chinese governmental organization, Didier Pachoud, FECRIS' treasurer, hosted Silantyev in a

conference organized by his association (and FECRIS affiliate) Groupe d'Étude des Mouvements de Pensée en vue de la Protection de l'Individu (Group for the Study of Thought Movements for the Protection of the Individual, GEMPPPI) (*TimesNewswire* 2022; Su 2022). This is the same Silantyev that told *Interfax* he was looking forward to “the upcoming parade of victory over Ukrainian Nazism” (*Interfax* 2022a). Perhaps the parade was delayed, and he had time to go to the FECRIS event instead.

In his statement about a CIA-Scientology conspiracy against Russia and in favor of Ukraine, Dvorkin claimed to be supported by “many experts” (Chernykh 2014). These are the Western anti-cultists who invited him and Silantyev to the West and were in turn invited to lecture against Scientology in Russia (Berzano et al. 2022).

FECRIS' support is in turn used in Russia to show that even Westerners agree with theories about evil conspiracies where Scientology, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the “US Intelligence” cooperate against Russian interests.

### *Conclusion*

These are not mere curiosities. Hundreds are in jail in Russia accused of being part of “cults” engaged in sabotage on behalf of Ukraine. More, particularly Jehovah's Witnesses, had been already detained before the war because their religion had been declared “extremist.” Dvorkin, Novopashin, Korelov, and Silantyev are not unimportant figures. Although they are unleashed when needed and can be criticized when they become an embarrassment for the government, Dvorkin and Silantyev hold positions in the government, and were instrumental in having “extremist” religious organizations “liquidated,” as it happened to the Jehovah's Witnesses in 2017.

Korelov is well-known as a lawyer in Russia and, as mentioned earlier, has even spoken at the Belgian Parliament where he was invited as an expert on “cults.” Silantyev and Novopashin spoke at an educational conference in Nizhny Novgorod on August 24, 2022, on how to deal with terrorism supported by Ukraine and the West. The audience included officers from the Office of the President of the Russian Federation, the National Anti-Terrorism Committee, the FSB, and the Main Directorate for Combating Extremism of the Ministry of

Internal Affairs of Russia. They were all exposed to conspiracy theories about sabotage perpetrated by “cultists,” including the elusive “Columbine Satanists” (*RIA Novosti* 2022). In the article of October 25, 2022 I already mentioned, the Assistant Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, Alexey Pavlov, wrote that “denazification” is not enough in Ukraine and should now escalate to “desatanization,” as there is evidence that Satanism, particularly in the shape of LaVey’s Church of Satan, “has spread across Ukraine” thanks to the active “support from Ukrainian authorities” (Pavlov 2022).

In conclusion, I would like to address the question why such theories, notwithstanding their inherent absurdity, are taken seriously and believed in Russia. Answering the question requires a consideration of five different themes.

The first is that most Russians believe that their country is special and unique. I have discussed elsewhere how the myth of Russia as the “Third Rome” was created in Czarist times to support this claim to uniqueness, and has persisted to this day (Šorytė 2020).

Second, an old Russian tradition, and one very much influential on Putin and Patriarch Kirill, maintains that, because of its uniqueness, Russia is under constant threats and attacks by the West. Since at least the Great Schism that separated Orthodox and Catholics in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the West is described as more materialist, less spiritual, and always trying to challenge the legitimate role of Moscow as the only Third Rome. The speech Putin delivered on May 9, 2022, during the commemoration of the victory in the Great Patriotic War, is a textbook example of this attitude: the West created the war in Ukraine, the West hates us, the West even wants to deny that we were the main force in winning the war against Nazism (Putin 2022a).

Putin concluded another speech, the one before he signed the annexation of parts of Ukraine to the Russian Federation, with a quote from Russian émigré philosopher Ivan Ilyn (1883–1954), whom he called “a true patriot” (Putin 2022b). The speech also included a reference to the fact that the West is dominated by “a ‘religion in reverse’—pure Satanism” (Putin 2022b), which shows how Putin’s speechwriters, the ROC, and the anti-cultists play different roles but are part of the same propaganda machine.

It was not the first time that Putin quoted Ilyn, and he personally went to Switzerland to recover the body of the philosopher, who was buried there, to have

it reburied in the cemetery of the Donskoy Monastery in Moscow (Snyder 2018). There has been a discussion among Western scholars on how influential Ilyn actually is on Putin (for opposite views, see Snyder 2018 and Laruelle 2018), with some arguing that Ilyn is a more important reference for Patriarch Kirill than he is for the Russian President.

Be it as it may be, Ilyn supplies a third element, which is why he is quoted by both Kirill and Putin despite the fact that he called himself a Fascist and admired Benito Mussolini (1883–1945). What interests Putin in Ilyn's thought is not Fascism, but the idea that Holy Russia was under constant attack from the West. Ilyn explained that the three main tools of this attack were the Western idea of democracy, the justification of homosexuality, and "cults" (called in Russian "sects"). In his time, the "cults" Ilyn was afraid of were mostly Theosophy (whose main founder had been, ironically, a Russian, Madame Helena Blavatsky, 1831–1891) and Anthroposophy (Ljunggren 2014, 115–23), but the idea that there is a conspiracy of "cults" against Russia has been adopted by Putin himself (*Vzglyad* 2012).

The fourth theme is that "cults" do not enter Russia, or Ukraine to promote anti-Russian feelings, spontaneously but because of a conspiracy of the American intelligence services. This is the element introduced by Russian anti-cultists such as Dvorkin, with a little help from Western anti-cultists, who claim that as "experts" of Western "cults" they are in a position to confirm that what Dvorkin and others claim is true. In turn, anti-cultists such as Dvorkin, Korelov, or Silantyev are valuable to the Kremlin's propaganda because thanks to the FECRIS network they are invited in the West and are allowed to present Russian disinformation to audiences that other Russian operatives would not be able to reach.

The fifth theme is that most Russians, including those otherwise critical of the Soviet Union, are proud of its role in the Great Patriotic War against Nazism. The Great Patriotic War serves as a unifying myth for the populations of the immense Russian Federation. Putin and the Russian propaganda are aware of this, and they invariably accuse their opponents of being "Nazi." The invasion of Ukraine is constantly justified with the obviously false argument that Ukraine is dominated by Nazis and should be "denazified."

This is paradoxical, since those familiar with Ukraine know that, notwithstanding a Russian propaganda that puts an undue emphasis on the tiny

minority that supports another minority, those who collaborated with the Nazis, a large majority of Ukrainians also share the narrative on the Great Patriotic War, and are proud of the role Ukrainian soldiers played in the effort to defeat Germany. In fact, more than three million Ukrainians fought in the Red Army, and more than two million died. It has been estimated that at one stage in the war almost 40% of the Red Army consisted of Ukrainians (Vityk 2018).

Anti-cultists support Russian propaganda by claiming, as Novopashin said, that Nazism dominates Ukraine and “Nazism and Satanism are synonymous words” (*Komsomolskaya Pravda* 2022), then extending the equivalence to all “cults.” The United States are in turn accused of organizing and promoting Nazism in Ukraine (*Ansobor.ru* 2022b). Novopashin even advanced the strange claim that the “American” idea of international religious liberty was originally invented by Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) to spread “cults” in Russia and destroy the soul of the nation, the ROC (*Ansobor.ru* 2022d).

Perhaps to explain that such a theory is absurd, that American ideas of religious liberty have nothing to do with Hitler, that the ROC had already been largely destroyed by the Soviet regime when Hitler invaded Russia, is not even necessary. These articles are not written for a Western audience. They are part of domestic propaganda in Russia, where it is hoped that any reference to Hitler and the Nazis would trigger patriotic feelings and generate support for the war in Ukraine.

There is of course a risk to regard both the Russian anti-cult movement and Russian conspiracy theories about Scientology, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Satanism, or the “cults” as more important than they actually are. The aggression against Ukraine is a historical event—and a crime—of monumental importance, whose consequences will affect all of us for years and decades to come. Russian propaganda aimed at justifying the war Putin has waged on Ukraine since 2014 is in turn a massive phenomenon. Blaming the “cults,” and Scientology and the Jehovah’s Witnesses in particular, for the alleged American attempts to undermine the Russian Orthodox identity in Russia, conduct sabotage activities there, and excite anti-Russian feelings in Ukraine is just a part of a broader propaganda. It is not uninteresting, however, as it opens a window on the use of a traditional rhetoric of self-victimization, claiming that Russia is under siege by malevolent foreign enemies, to justify both the repression of religious minorities in the Russian Federation and wars of aggression about neighboring countries.

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