

# “We Live in the Country of the Victorious Kafka”: Witchcraft and Magic in Present-Day Russia<sup>2</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the problems associated with witchcraft and magical beliefs in contemporary Russia. It analyzes media discourse in online publication, video streams, social networks, and comments in public media resources in which ordinary people and social and political elites describe and discuss witchcraft and paranormal beliefs and rituals. The paper talks about magic in a broad sense, including esotericism, occultism, astrology, divination, parapsychology, and so on, as people engaging with these issues understand it. The paper discusses the following facts and trends: (1) the Russian media contain many references to magical rituals, which suggests people's interest in the topics of magic and witchcraft, esotericism, and occultism; (2) Russian public media and social networks discuss magic and witchcraft among celebrities and elites; (3) in a context of political instability, narratives of magic and conspiracy theories are incorporated into the official propaganda to create a negative image of the enemy and form moral panics, on the one hand, and to create a positive image of Russia, its power, and its future, on the other hand; (4) the state media broadcast this narrative of magic to the wider society, where it is contaminated with the grassroots witchcraft narrative and keeps it in a “working” state; (5) The result is grassroots denunciations, accusations, and new rumors of magic and witchcraft among political and economic elites.

## KEYWORDS

Witchcraft; magic; Russia; media; propaganda.



In December 2013, a woman from a village in the Arkhangelsk region (Russia) accused her neighbor she attempted to kill her. Allegedly, the neighbor and her underage daughter entered her house at night trying to beat her with a poker. An official investigation begun. The reason for the attempted murder, according to investigators, was that the accused wanted to keep her “gift of a witch” and pass it on to her daughter [1].<sup>3</sup>

In May 2015, the mother and daughter were found guilty and convicted of attempted murder. The investigators emphasized that the accused attempted a ritual murder. The 34-year-old woman was sentenced to seven years in prison,

and her 15-year-old daughter was sentenced to four years. The daughter was released from prison ahead of schedule in 2018, and the mother was released in 2022.

Rumors, gossip, and conflicts related to witchcraft beliefs are typical in rural communities. In Russia, witchcraft beliefs did not go beyond everyday relations (e.g., rumors and conflicts) and were not the subject of litigation in the last two hundred fifty years. Since the 1770s, when Catherine the Great issued her decrees regarding witchcraft, witchcraft ceased to be considered as a crime. As a result, accusations of witchcraft began to be seen as a crime, as insults, and have been subject to

administrative punishment (Ryan 1998; Lavrov 2000; Mikhailova 2018).

In the case described above, the moral panic at the level of community was supported by the intervention of law enforcement agents. Why was that? Why was the punishment so severe, although the alleged victim was alive and well and no one could prove her version of the story? In this paper, I will answer these questions by analyzing this case in the context of witchcraft and magic beliefs in contemporary Russia.

I need to make two remarks from the start. Firstly, the paper discusses witchcraft and magic in relation to how ordinary Russians understand these practices. The paper relies on data from sociological surveys between 2016 and 2022 presented below and data presented in the media. People commonly understand magic broadly, as pertaining to different fields, such as astrology, predictions, or parapsychology. Each of these fields have their “magic specialists,” including witches, fortune-tellers, psychics, and shamans. Secondly, my research focused on several media, including state media, pro-government and opposition media, and public and private social networks. Unfortunately, conducting interviews in the current political situation is impossible because people are afraid to talk.

The material of my field research conducted in rural and urban communities in different regions of Russia<sup>4</sup> and my research on the Russian media since 1995 suggest the following conclusions:

(1) Witchcraft and magic beliefs in Russia in the Soviet period were widely considered superstitious but well preserved in small rural and urban communities.

(2) During the 1990s, these beliefs came out of the underground and inundated the media and the magical and occult services market, reflecting people’s craving for novelty and their uncertainty or despair about the future.

(3) At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Russian society does not stigmatize beliefs in witchcraft and magic, except for the Muslim regions of the North Caucasus. On the contrary,

witchcraft and magic became a fashion. The author of the “witchcraft narrative” has changed. It is no longer a victim of witchcraft, but a witch performing public rituals (Khristoforova 2010; 2016). The following two examples illustrate these assertions.

In May 2022, I overheard two women talking at a Moscow gym. They were talking about a common friend. One woman said she did not like how her friend was all the time complaining about everything. “There is only negativity that comes from her. I want to tell her stop complaining and stop spreading negativity. But I’m afraid she’ll bewitch me – that’s not good either.” The second woman, after a pause, answered her: “She cannot [bewitch]; she is a doctor.” It remains a mystery why she thought a doctor cannot cast spells – because an educated person would not believe in witchcraft or because the medical oath would stop her?

The second example is an older one. On 5 February 2019, a “circle of power” of fifty “witches” gathered in a mansion in the center of Moscow to “support Vladimir Putin and prevent the enemies of the president and Russia” [2]. This meeting was organized by Alyona Polyn, head of the Russian occult organization “The Empire of the Most Powerful Witches.” The video of the ritual was widely distributed in the Russian media. “Let the strength of Russia grow stronger, let Vladimir Putin see the right paths. I curse the enemies. Enemies are cursed,” the 38-year-old red-haired witch Alyona Polyn loudly conjured from the center of the circle. “Let it be,” her colleagues agreed in chorus [3]. (Fig. 1.)

This performance has become Russia’s most mediatized witchcraft ritual in recent years. Many internal and international news agencies reported it. At the same time, there were many jokes about the ritual. For example, Alexei Navalny (a famous Russian dissident who survived the “Novichok” poisoning in 2020, now in prison in Russia) was ironic: “I don’t know if I fell under a terrible witch’s curse, but if something happens to me now, know that the witches are to be blamed” [4]. At the same time, he wondered why the Russian authorities





Fig. 1. Alyona Polyn and her “circle of power.” February 5, 2019. *All illustrations of the article are from public sources on the Internet.*

forbade the prayer meetings of Jehovah’s Witnesses but had nothing against these witches. I will return to this question soon. First, let us compare the media ritual of the Moscow witches with the private conversation between the two women in the gym. I suggest the two examples show two different levels of witchcraft beliefs in present-day Russia:

- 1) “Basic” witchcraft (according to Mary Douglas), characteristic of pre-industrial societies, primarily rural ones (Douglas 1970, XXX–XXXIII).
- 2) “New Age” witchcraft representing new practices primarily in urban areas (Luhmann 1991; Hanegraaff 1996; Hutton 1999; Ezzy 2003; de Blécourt 2004; Davies 2004; Cornish 2005).

The main conditions for “basic” witchcraft are well known: small-scale, settled, and neighboring communities, ecological, economic, and social crises (for example, during crop failure, famine, epidemics, or wars), social conflicts, and human emotions (such as envy or hatred). The main social functions of “basic” witchcraft have been documented. Witchcraft can explain misfortunes by including them in social spaces (Evans-Pritchard 1937) and can reproduce social homeostasis, for example, fear of witchcraft and fear of being accused of witchcraft can work as social behavior regulators (Kluckhohn

1944; Gluckman 1955; Foster 1965). Witchcraft can lead to conflict resolution through the destruction of relations, for example, in a tense situation, magical practices and especially accusations of witchcraft work like a knife that legitimately cuts social ties (Marwick 1964).

In the case of “basic” rural witchcraft, the authors of the witchcraft narrative consider themselves victims (see, for example, Favret-Saada 1980; Sabeau 1984; Pina-Cabral 1986; Hoch 1986; Cole 1991; Briggs 1996). They tell and retell stories of bewitchment, speak of their fellow villagers as witches, and commit acts of revenge against alleged witches. I documented many such stories I encountered during fieldwork in different regions of Russia (Khristoforova 2010; 2016). I give a recent example from an investigative case in the Arkhangelsk region:

The investigating authorities of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation for the Arkhangelsk Region and the Nenets Autonomous Okrug initiated a criminal case against three local women from the Plesetsk District suspected of committing a crime under Part 3 of Art. 30, p. “e, f, g” part 2 of article 105 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (attempted murder committed by a group of persons by prior agreement, with particular





severity and in a generally dangerous way). According to investigators, in the evening of 2 December 2015, in the village of Puksoozero, Plesetsk district, the suspects were intoxicated with alcohol because they disliked a local woman. The suspects decided to burn the woman and her house. The suspects propped up the front door of the house from the outside, put rags and paper under the front door, and set them on fire with a lighter. After the wooden doors of the home and the porch began to burn, they fled the crime scene. The criminal intent was not brought to an end due to circumstances beyond their control. A passer-by saw the burning of the wooden structure and put out the fire. The suspects have been detained. During the interrogation, the men justified their action by alcohol intoxication and dislike for the victim. They argued the victim used to *privazhivaet* [uses witchcraft to attract men]. Initially, they wanted to beat the victim. She did not come out to them, so they decided to set the house on fire. An investigation is underway. [5]

Unlike the case that opened the paper, the case described above is quite typical for a rural community. People attack an alleged witch accused of crimes against the group. The case is also ordinary for the Russian legal system in which the state opposes lynching and blames the attackers, while the alleged witch acts as a victim and is part of the accusation. Such cases happen in contemporary Russia. This case entered media attention because suspects caused significant harm to the alleged witch.

Before moving on to the urban environment, let us discuss sociological surveys. According to a survey conducted by VCIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Center) on 22 and 23 October 2016, 36% of the respondents believed in magic and 27% confirmed they encountered manifestations of witchcraft. 41% did not believe in witchcraft and 23% could not say for sure. 29% of the respondents tried to protect themselves from witchcraft, the evil eye, and other magical influences, while more than half of them (57%) resorted to

Christian remedies (prayers, going to church, or wearing a cross). More than a quarter of respondents (27%) confirmed that the main reason for believing in witchcraft was despair. VCIOM interviewed one thousand six hundred people. The sample was based on a complete list of telephone numbers in Russia. Data was checked for the probability of selection and socio-demographic parameters. The publication of the survey results on the VCIOM website was accompanied by the title: "People in our country don't like sorcerers, but they ask them for help!" [6].

In April 2022, Levada Center conducted a survey. According to the data gathered, 29% of the respondents believed in evil eye and witchcraft and 22% believed that witchcraft most likely exists. 13% doubted the existence of evil eye and witchcraft, 30% did not believe in witchcraft, and 6% found it challenging to answer. This survey was conducted on a representative all-Russian sample of the urban and rural population of 1,616 people aged 18 years and older in 137 localities from 50 regions of the Russian Federation. The study was based on personal interviews conducted in the respondent's homes. The distribution of responses is given as a percentage of the total number of respondents [7].

In July 2022, the Russian service "Rabota.ru" asked its users (a sample of 3,200 people) if they believed in astrology. It turned out that 29% of Russians surveyed tended to focus on horoscopes when making important decisions, 13% of respondents were ready to reconsider their plans to change jobs in case of unfavorable astrological predications and 12% would refuse a significant deal like buying a car. Every tenth person would assign important events only on good days. Some respondents were ready to cancel business meetings (3%) or refuse to work with people of a particular zodiac sign (2%). 39% of the respondents used to read horoscopes only when it caught their eye. One in ten used to read the horoscope forecast for the week and 2% used to check the forecast for the month ahead. 49% of the respondents did not read astrological predictions. At the same

time, every fourth person would like to have an individual forecast made by an astrologer. 13% already made a forecast once, and 2% used to go to an astrologer regularly. 45% of the participants used to read astrological forecasts for entertainment. 15% believed in star reading only if it showed something good and 11% said this kind of predictions usually come true. 39% of the respondents considered astrology anti-scientific and did not believe astrology forecasts and horoscopes [8].

According to the results of another VCIOM survey conducted on 30 October 2022, one in three Russians believed in the ability of individuals to predict fate (28%), 26% doubted this ability, and 46% did not believe in fortune-telling. Every fourth respondent believed in witchcraft and the power of some people to cast spells (25%), 24% doubted it, and 51% did not believe in it. At the same time, 12% of Russians believed in the possibility to communicate with the souls of the dead, 28% doubted that was possible, and 60% did not think such a communication was possible. On the other hand, 15% of Russians believed in astrological forecasts and horoscopes, 25% doubted the influence of stars, and 60% did not believe in horoscopes. As the authors of the survey noted, mystical beliefs are a kind of system in which if a person believes in one kind of magic, then s/he also believes in another. For example, among those who believed in the ability to predict fate, 59% believed in witchcraft, 30% believed in the ability to communicate with the souls of the dead, and 36% trusted astrology forecasts. The number of Russians who believed in everything at once (witchcraft, predictions, spiritualism, and stars) was much smaller (4%). The percentage of those who denied all of the above was 30%. The remaining 66% believed partially in some kind of magic.

At the same time, astrology is the only mystical belief with the primary audience among young people and residents of large cities. Other beliefs are common among older Russians (45+ years old) and people living in rural areas and small towns with less than 100,000 residents) [9].

In modern urban Russia, one can find two main variants of witchcraft discourse. The first variant is the continuation of the “basic” witchcraft in relatively small communities, such as communal apartments and work offices. Typically, this kind of witchcraft represents a way to explain misfortune and legitimately project hatred and malice on one community member who is accused of witchcraft. In small urban communities, the witchcraft narrative is reproduced in the same way as in rural communities, and has three essential parameters: misfortune, social conflict (or a suitable object for accusations, like someone who demonstrates socially disapproved feelings, and/or who is disliked for some reason), and an authoritative witchcraft believer who can interpret events according to this model. The author of the witchcraft narrative is always the alleged victim. The witch is more of a narrative character than an actual social actor. To a smaller degree, misfortune is explained by means of a kind of witchcraft in which there is no fixation on a particular agent of evil, that is, the witch is depersonalized. This kind of witchcraft corresponds to the basic characteristic of a city – the anonymous crowd. Getting rid of misfortune is also depersonalized: not by punishing a specific witch, but through general cleansing patterns or by resorting to divine protection (Khristoforova 2010, 270-78).

The second option of the urban witchcraft discourse is the so-called “New Age” witchcraft that supposes new urban practices involving an active role of the witch. The witch is the author of the narrative and the agent of rituals. “New witches” openly declare their abilities, publish commercial offers of “occult services” using different media outlets including the Internet, and defiantly conduct rituals, like in the case of Alyona Polyn mentioned above (Pachenkov 2001; Brown and Rusinova 2002; Lindquist 2006; Khristoforova 2010).

The first post-Soviet years were instrumental in the emergence of the “new witchcraft.” Since late 1980s, central TV channels started to broadcast performances and therapeutic sessions conducted by “magicians,” “white





sorcerers,” and “psychics,” including Anatoly Kashpirovsky, Alan Chumak, and Yuri Longo. In 1993, the Russian government banned mass healing sessions. These sessions were no longer present on TV, but psychics traveled around the country and performed their rituals in Houses of Culture and clubs in rural and urban areas. These people used to travel a lot during the Soviet era as well, but only as “original genre artists,” that is, as hypnotists. They did not heal, but they arranged entertaining hypnotic sessions. This practice had begun in the 1960s and knew a brief interruption between late 1970s – early 1980s, when the Soviet government banned public sessions of hypnosis (Menzel 2012, 151-85; Panchenko 2021, 19-24; Konakov 2022, 89-126).

In early 1990s, a market for occult services appeared in Russia. The increase in the supply of such services led to a rise in demand. Initially, advertisements for occult services used to be published in newspapers. Since mid-2000s, these advertisements appeared on the internet. At the same time, the yellow press and the occult and conspiracy literature became very popular in Russia. TV shows were dedicated to magic and occultism. For example, in 2007 the TNT TV channel started to broadcast the show “Battle of the Extrasensory.” In 2011 the REN-TV channel specialized in magic, occultism, paranormal, ufology, cryptozoology, alternative science, and various conspiracy theories. The TV program “Battle of the Extrasensory” was copied from the British show “Britain’s Psychic Challenge.” Similar shows existed in many other countries. This demonstrates that the spread of the new age culture was part of the internationalization of Russia.

However, these new trends have several implications in the Russian context. Firstly, reinforced and the widespread belief in magic and witchcraft. Soviet and post-Soviet society perceived newspapers and TV as authoritative voices. These voices no longer stigmatized folk beliefs but, on the contrary, supported them. This move was surprising for people and an essential stimulant for witchcraft believers and promoters. Secondly, there has been a change

in the popular perception of the concept of “witch” itself, towards destigmatization and legitimation. A witch is no longer someone evil, who harms people and hides so that one must seek them with the help of magical tricks. Rather, the “witch” has become someone who openly declares their evil abilities and offers their services as diverse as assistance in business or improvement of personal life and health. Being a witch nowadays has become not only safe but also honorable. Fiction, including Joanne Rowling’s influent *Harry Potter* series, has also influenced the destigmatization of the “witch.” The first book in *Harry Potter* series was translated into Russian in 2000. Soon after, Russian writers produced stories about child witches, such as Dmitry Emets’s *Tanya Grotter* series consisting of 14 books written between 2002 and 2012. In post-Soviet Russian literature, the image of the witch was most of the time ambivalent, in line with folk culture. This kind of ambivalence can be seen in the *Dozors* series by Sergei Lukyanenko (six books written between 1998 and 2014).

In the 2010s, rumors emerged that the Russian political elite actively resorted to the services of astrologers, numerologists, fortune-tellers, and other specialists in magic. In part, the spread and intensification of rumors about magic among the elite was related with the tightening political situation in the country. I will rely only on public information in the media to discuss these rumors.

Ordinary people and opinion leaders spread rumors about magic among the elites. Quite credible people discuss this subject on respected and popular platforms, like the “Echo of Moscow” radio station or the “TV Rain” channel. The spread of such rumors intensified significantly in the winter and spring of 2022, in connection with the war in Ukraine. For example, on 20 May 2022, the “Feigin Live” YouTube channel owned by the well-known lawyer Max Feigin streamed an interview with political analyst Valery Solovey and occult specialist Andrey Kosmach on the occult practices in the Russian government. The stream reached two million views in six months [10]. Max Feigin



started to stream about magic among Russian elites in May 2020, and a total of ten streams have been recorded so far. The first streams had 300-400,000 views. The number of views of Max Feigin streams about magic increased significantly just before the war in Ukraine, in December 2021 and early February 2022.

In these streams, the interlocutors discussed how Russia’s attack on Ukraine correlated with the faith of the political elite, including President Putin, in magical rituals performed for them by various occult specialists. These rituals illustrate different aspects of the New Age culture, or *occulture* (Partridge 2004, 68), that ranges from the so-called “village magic” to modern shamanism, ufology, and astrology.<sup>5</sup> There are rumors that participants at corporate events organized by Russian state-owned corporations make “flights to Sirius” and communicate with its “lionheads” inhabitants. At the heart of these practices lies the pseudoscientific concept of Robert Temple, which is based on the revised Dogon mythology (Temple 1976). At the same time, Russian elites allegedly participate in “channeling” with the “reptiloids,” the inhabitants of the “planet Nibiru.” It is said that Russian elites invite Peruvian shamans and arrange rituals using Ayahuasca. A few years ago, Viktor Medvedchuk, a pro-Russian Ukrainian politician whose daughter’s godfather is President Putin, allegedly brought a shaman from Peru to Kremlin. This shaman supposedly predicted in a trance that Medvedchuk will be the president of Ukraine, and he told this prediction the Russian president.

These rumors, conversations, and discussions aim to ridicule the political and economic elites and to weaken their political position. Mocking elites in other contexts would mean intrigue and deceit. This is not the case in the context of current situation in Russia because here rumors may actually be based on the elite’s fascination with the occult.

President Putin allegedly became interested in Siberian shamans since the mid-2010s when he met Sergei Shoigu, now Minister of Defense of Russia. Shoigu was born in Tuva. His

father is Tuvan and his mother has Ukrainian roots. Therefore, Shoigu is close to Tuvan shamans. There are also rumors that on the Easter day in 2020, a certain Orthodox Christian elder, called Nikifor, conducted a “magic ritual” in the presence of Putin to ensure his health and well-being and to harm his enemies [11].

In February 2022, some Russian media (“Echo of Moscow,” in particular) reported that a shamanic ritual was held for Putin at his summer residence Bocharov Ruchey near Sochi.

On Sunday, a shamanic ritual was held for him in Bocharov Ruchey. And the shamans promised him, “You will become better than all the rulers of the world.” If you don’t believe it, it doesn’t mean that the president of Russia and his entourage don’t believe it. An eagle was sacrificed! An ordinary eagle, a bird. Clearly, if we are talking about war, some robust and predatory creature is sacrificed. And the eagle was offered in Bocharov Ruchey. In Siberia, a bear was sacrificed (...) Then, they showed him the video of this slaughter and said that everything went well, everything was beautiful, and “You will be granted a great victory.” This inspired him very much, told the people who communicated with him. Extremely! Putin confers great importance to this. He was delighted and told Shoigu that on the spring equinox day, he would go to the taiga to participate in the ritual. There is a place of power. [12]

Another expert echoes Professor Solovey:

Without rituals, he usually does not start any new actions. (...) He even prepared for the pension reform; he consulted with hermits, shamans, and whoever he consulted with... Even the pension reform – he asked if it was possible or not. He was given the go-ahead. And he launched a pension reform. The level of his immersion in this field is very high, very (...) I am an absolute skeptic in this sense, and I know, I have talked to these people [magicians, shamans], I know that they are all charlatans, guaranteed charlatans, guaranteed. Fraudsters,





Fig. 2. Putin presented during a magic ritual. An anonymous internet meme.

the purest frauds, who, let's say, these shamans do the will of Shoigu, they say absolutely the things that Shoigu lays down, everything that he said, everything that was originally planned, they say everything, nothing new, there is not a step in another direction. And indeed, an eagle in Putin's residence and a bear – at least that's what was reported – in Siberia were put to death. Blood was splashed onto the fire, and there, allegedly, someone saw an eagle, either these shamans or Putin – one of them saw an eagle hovering over the ground. And they told him that an eagle soared up – you will rule the world. (...) In general, Putin believes he will be able to rule the world; somehow, he was inspired; you could see this. [13]

Such allegations provoked numerous reactions on social media, including internet memes. (Fig. 2.)

These are all rumors and gossip. There is no single evidence that the Russian government resorts to magical rituals. However, there are some indirect confirmations, mainly of a criminal and scandalous nature. On 2 June 2021, a series of twenty telephone conversations between Valeria Kasamara, vice-rector of the Moscow Higher School of Economics and at that time a candidate for the Moscow State Duma, and fortune-teller Irma from Saratov

were published anonymously on the internet and became widely known. The fortune teller advised Kasamara how to conduct business at the university and communicate correctly with officials of the Presidential Administration [14]. In May 2021, it became known that the daughter of the governor of the Penza region gave a fortune teller and healer 16 million rubles for breaking the spell and patching "holes in the aura" [15]. On 8 May 2022, the top manager of the "Lukoil" oil company, Alexander Subbotin, died in the Moscow region during a shamanic treatment session: "Billionaire Subbotin died after a rite of purification with toad poison" [16].

In the spring of 2022, the autobiographical book *Potriashenie* ("The Shock") was published (Savchenko 2022). Its author, Yevgeny Savchenko was the Governor of the Belgorod region between 1993–2020 and, since September 2022, the Senator of the Russian Federation. Savchenko is also a member of the Supreme Council of the "United Russia" (the governing party). He has an academic degree in Economics and is a Corresponding Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences. In the book, he described that in 2013 he met a woman named Lyubov who claimed that she communicated directly with a god named Monostone and was herself the tenth incarnation of Elisabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. Savchenko wrote that he constantly consulted with Lyubov on "global questions of the universe," communicated with deceased great personalities, including St. Sergius of Radonezh and Soviet singer and actor Vladimir Vysotsky, as well as with God through her. Savchenko claims that the creator and lord of the universe goes by the name Monostone, which means "creator of monads," that is, "initial energy impulses endowed with intelligence." In his book, Savchenko writes that in the place of Earth once existed a planet called Nibiru, and god gave its inhabitants a choice between good and evil. They chose evil, and Monostone blew up Nibiru. In its place, Monostone created the Earth and humans to "repeat the experiment." The "experiment" should end in 2022 with an "epochal event." In anticipation of this event,



Savchenko decided to tell the world about the knowledge he received from the "goddess." The publication of this book caused a great scandal, primarily generated by the reaction of the Orthodox Christian Church, but the scandal did not affect the author's political and scientific positions [17]. There is an internet site called "Monostone," where Savchenko's book, texts of prayers to god Monostone, and other materials are posted [18].

Some people think that the Russian president's behavior confirms rumors of magic and occult practices among the elite. One stunning example happened on 27 January 2022, on the anniversary of the end of the Leningrad blockade. President Putin arrived at the Piskarevsky memorial cemetery in St. Petersburg, where those who died during the blockade, including his older brother, are buried. The cemetery was closed to other visitors for several hours. Before the president's visit, the snow was specially treated and video cameras were sealed, according to the cemetery staff. Putin was accompanied only by members of the Federal Security Service (FSO) and the soldiers who laid a wreath. Snipers on rooftops protected the president. The main thing that attracted attention was a bunch of flowers. An FSO officer handed the flowers over to Putin. Putin laid the flowers on the grave. A few minutes later, while Putin was following the soldiers carrying the wreath, the FSO officer took the flowers away from the grave. There were suggestions that the officer took the flowers away so that no one could get hold of the flowers and bewitch the president: "I read somewhere that the flowers were taken away so that they would not be used in any ritual, would not fall into the hands of shamans..." [19].

The commentator mentioned shamans for a reason. In Russia, everyone knows Yakut Alexander Gabyshev who calls himself a shaman. In 2019, Alexander Gabyshev walked from Yakutia (Sakha Republic) to Moscow to "drive out demons" from Kremlin. In March 2019, Alexander Gabyshev started his march on foot from Sakha to Moscow (8,000 km), where he planned to perform a ritual

to make Putin resign. He declared that he wished to "drive the evil spirit of Putin from the Kremlin." In September 2019, a group of pro-Putin shamans in the city of Ulan-Ude in Buryatia ("Tengery" group) confronted him, arguing that shamans "do not care about politics, we need harmony, we do not need a bloody war." Several of Gabyshev's followers were arrested in the same city in that month. Police violently broke up a protest against the arrests. Masked police surrounded Gabyshev's camp, arrested him, and took him to an unknown location. Russian media reported that he would be deported back to Yakutsk with charges of forming an extremist organization. On 20 September 2019, the region's health ministry sent Gabyshev to a mental hospital. In December 2019, he was arrested after attempting to start his march again. On 9 January 2021, Gabyshev posted a video on YouTube stating he planned to ride a horse toward Moscow in March. Later that month, 50 police officers broke down his front door and arrested him. Authorities placed him under confinement in a mental hospital on the pretext that he had missed a monthly check-up meeting. In July 2021, the Yakutsk City Court ruled that Gabyshev should be confined indefinitely to a psychiatric hospital for intensive treatment. In March 2022, after another trial, it became known that Gabyshev would be transferred from a prison-type psychiatric clinic in Novosibirsk to a regular psychiatric clinic in Ussuriysk. In early December 2022, Gabyshev's lawyer Alexey Pryanishnikov said that the hospital will not discharge Alexander Gabyshev soon, as the "'treatment' program is designed for three years." According to the lawyer, Gabyshev was in a highly depressed and painful condition, indicating a possible drug overdose [20].

This case had a wide resonance in the Russian society. Many believed maybe less in the shaman's mission and ability to counteract the "magical power" of the Russian leader and more in the fact that the Russian government believed in such mission. People reasoned in the media that this was the only explanation



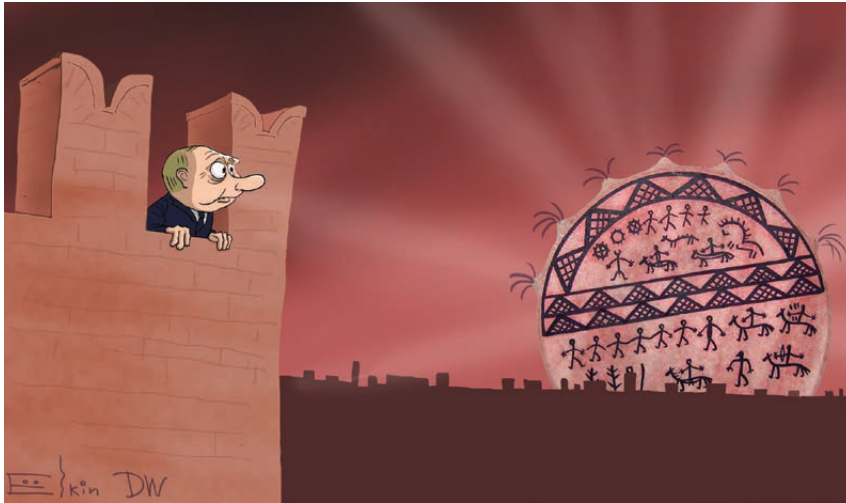


Fig. 3.  
 Putin and the shaman  
 coming from the East.  
 Caricature by Sergey Elkin.



Fig. 4.  
 "The shaman again gathered to march on the Kremlin. Are we calling chemists [a hint at Navalny and "Novichok"] or psychiatrists?"  
 Caricature by Sergey Elkin for Deutsche Welle.

Fig. 5. "Is Putin afraid of the shaman?!" An anonymous internet meme.





Fig. 6. “Get out!” Caricature by Kamil Busykaev.

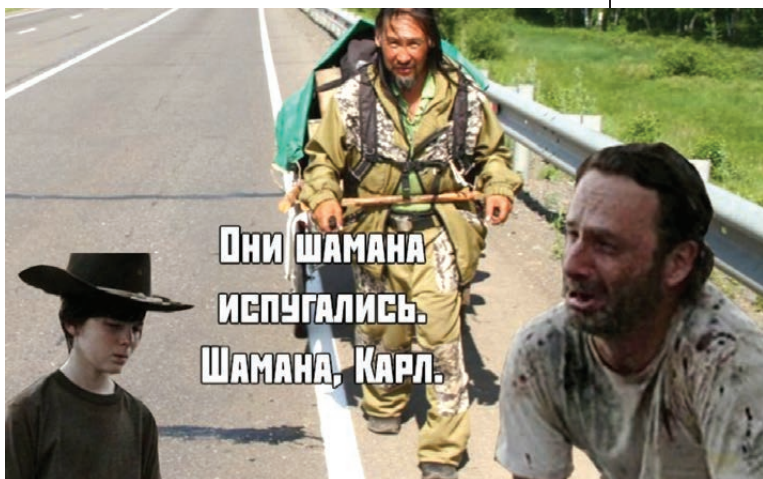


Fig. 7. “They are afraid of the shaman, the shaman, Karl!” An anonymous internet meme.

for Gabyshev’s arrest and the use of punitive psychiatry. (Fig. 3-7)

One of the viewers of Mark Feigin’s “Occult Secrets of the Kremlin” streamed on 22 May 2020 wrote in a comment: “Putin himself is a Sorcerer... while he is stronger than Gabyshev.” Another viewer echoed him: “Think about it, these bastards, instead of dealing with the country, not only steal but also do magic because of idleness” [10].

Witchcraft and theft are closely connected cultural concepts in the Russian consciousness (Khristoforova 2010, 208-21). Since the 2010s, it has become common place in the public consciousness that the Russian government is corrupt and a thief. Nowadays, many people say that state power is connected with witchcraft and magic rituals. Some people comment this jokingly and some people take it seriously. In any case, the theme of witchcraft and magic rituals is being discussed in present-day Russian society. These practices are clearly associated with Russia’s political elite. One can see this even in pro-government media, such as the “VKontakte” social network:

Before the New Year holidays, dozens of light figures were installed in Petrovsky Park. There were witches among them, which angered an unknown citizen who complained about this to the Russian President. He was outraged that in

the square, where before the [October 1917] revolution, there was an Orthodox church, and the graves of clergy members and figures of witches are now placed. A citizen, as an Orthodox, believes that such a “neighborhood” infringes on his rights. [20]

This news received twenty-four comments from members of the group “Rough of Pomor: Arkhangelsk Severodvinsk region.” One VKontakte user, Dmitriy Shestakov, commented this news: “Complained about the witches to the main witch ??)))) cool )))) The main witch will send a complaint to the region’s witch)))) coven ))))”.

This comment claims the President is the main witch, the head of the Arkhangelsk city administration is the region’s witch, and the state government is a coven. Dmitriy Shestakov’s statement received forty-seven positive ratings, no negative ones, and four supportive comments [21]. The comment and the reactions to it show that ordinary people share rumors of magical rituals among the elite.

These ideas have real consequences (folklorists call them “ostension”). On 9 April 2023, Mark Yeroshenko, a 20-year-old resident of Slavyansk-on-Kuban who was drafted into the army, refused to give blood for analysis at the military registration and enlistment office. He argued that the officers of the draft board



would use it in satanic rituals. He also called the Russian leadership “satanic.” The military registration officers called the police. The police filed a report on Mark “discrediting” the army. Mark will be put on trial [22].

There are some strange projects that the Russian state funds. Firstly, the creation of a device called a *nooscope*.<sup>6</sup> Arkady Vaino, head of the Presidential Administration of Russia since 2016, is directly related to the creation of this “device” in 2011. Secondly, complexes of pyramid buildings have been erected since 2011 on supposed “places of power,” such as sites of archaeological monuments. This project aims to recreate the heritage of “ancient civilizations,” to create special “energy flows” for health improvement, to harmonize social relations in the region, and to communicate with aliens [23]. The project manager and developer of these buildings is Vladislav Levchugov, a businessman from Tomsk and delegate of the “United Russia” party. He was arrested in 2021 on charges of corruption and illegal arms trafficking. Some political commentators make a connection between the pyramid project and the arrest. Thirdly, the search for Shambhala and the “entrance to Asgard” took place in the 2010s, first in the Altai region and then in the North Caucasus [24]. Fourthly, the Orthodox Church of the Armed Forces of Russia in Kubinka near Moscow earned the public reputation of a “temple of Satan” because of its design and the relics located there (in particular, the military cap and costume of Adolf Hitler). The church was opened in 2020, and the rector is Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia [25].<sup>7</sup> Finally, I will mention the so-called “Concept of Public Safety” (KOB, or “Dead Water”), a pseudoscientific mystical doctrine and a new religious movement of occult and conspiracy orientation [26]. This religious movement originated in Russia in the 1990s and is widespread among the FSB, SVR, and the police. According to the expert Andrey Soldatov from Agentura.ru,<sup>8</sup> in recent years the KOB movement has spread widely in the occupied Ukrainian territories, the so-called Donetsk and Lugansk republics [27]. The concept with the same name (“Concept

of Public Safety”) was approved by President Putin in 2013 as an ideological program for the development of the country [28]. Members of the KOB claim that this ideological program is their doctrine [29].

During the war in Ukraine in 2022, the Russian authorities began to talk openly about magical and parapsychological attacks on Russia conducted by Western countries. Such “attacks” happened some time before in the opposite directions. For example, the general of the Federal Security Service of Russia (FSO) Boris Ratnikov declared in 2006 in an interview in “Rossiyskaya Gazeta” that in 1999 the KGB used a special psychotronic equipment to “read the thoughts” of US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Telepathically, Albright’s thoughts revealed a “pathological hatred of the Slavs” and anger that “Russia has the largest mineral reserves in the world.” Albright allegedly “considered the Kosovo war only the first step towards establishing control over Russia” [30].

In 2019, the Russian Technological University from Moscow introduced a training test on the “Dulles plan,” “psi-influence,” “racial weapons,” NLP, HAARP, and other conspiracy theories. Students should learn these topics in the course “National Information Security System” designed by Vitaly Grigoriev, a former teacher at the KGB Higher School [31].

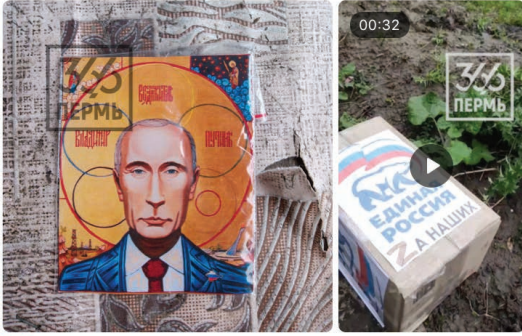
On 25 March 2022, the adviser to the Russian Minister of Defense, Andrei Ilnitsky, developed the ideas of Vladimir Putin and Sergei Shoigu about a “hybrid” and “information war.” He made an official statement that the West led by the United States had started a “mental war” against Russia. According to Ilnitsky, this war aims to,

destroy the self-consciousness, change the mental, civilizational basis of the enemy’s society. (...) The evolution of consciousness cannot be reversed, especially since the consequences of this “mental” war do not manifest themselves immediately but only after at least a generation when it will be impossible to do anything. [32]

On 19 November 2022, an investigative article was published by “The Insider.”<sup>9</sup> It



**366 ПЕРМЬ** **Пермь 36,6 ПРОТИВ ВОЙНЫ**



**Мобилизованным прислали иконки с Путиным**

Такие подарки на Пасху им сделала «Единая Россия». О случившемся нам рассказал один из пермских мобилизованных. Сейчас он находится на запорожском направлении.

☺ Нам типы привозят волонтерку, а мы им скидываем видос, что получили, всё понравилось. Но в этот раз что-то пошло не так. Мы думали, прислали нам, не забывают, праздник всё-таки скоро, а оказалось, что всё-таки не в празднике дело. Каким бы патриотом своей родины я не был, но это уже полнейший п\*здец, — говорит мужчина.

🕒 Недавно мы писали, что мобилизованным раздали «свечи защиты», которые нужно зажигать в бою. Тогда, якобы, ни одна пуля будет не страшна.

Fig. 8. “The mobilized were sent icons with Putin on them.” The “United Russia” party sent parcels with the inscription “United Russia. For ours” to support Russian soldiers on the Ukrainian front. In the parcel was an icon “Vladimir Putin Almighty.” Photo from April 17, 2023, <https://t.me/perm36>.



Fig. 9. “Candle of Protection. The grace of heart at war, deign to leave here. Cast out evil spirits, having goals in mind. Light the candle in battle, knowing no fear and bullets no danger. We do not abandon our own, for strength is in the truth” (the text in Russian is somewhat illiterate). It was sent to support Russian soldiers on the Ukrainian front. Photo from April 29, 2023, <https://t.me/perm36>.

claimed that the Federal Security Service of the President of Russia is preparing employees for a “massive ideological attack” in which the enemy “will use the media, social networks, religious organizations, hypnosis, psi-generators, and much more.” Among the retaliatory measures, the Russian generals planed a counter-influence campaign that includes weekly political exercises, a collective trip to an Orthodox church, and identifying FSO officers with unstable psyches and bad reactions. The Deputy Director of the FSO, General Alexander Komov, was responsible for implementing the plan. The source of “The Insider” in the Kremlin’s security said that Komov, the “Stargazer General,” leads a group of freelance advisers, including astrologers, black magicians, and psychics [33].

The comments generated by the publication of this investigation are interesting: “Since they use black magic, which convinced them of its effectiveness, they are now afraid that someone

will use it against them”; “So to hold on to power for twenty years, using the services of magic, how not to believe?!”; “And what is there to be surprised if even [shaman] Gabyshev was withheld” [33].

While commentators discuss rituals of “black magic” of the Russian elites and authorities, the authorities themselves openly give examples of “white” magic. Thus, the parcels sent to the Ukrainian front by the “United Russia” party contain items such as an “icon of Putin” (fig. 8)<sup>10</sup> and a “protection candle” (fig. 9).<sup>11</sup> This icon is not recognized by the Orthodox Church and can only be seen as a magical artifact, an element of “Orthodox magism” and propaganda.

At the same time, the Russian media reports that the enemy is resorting to rituals of black magic. On 4 May 2022, the federal Russian media RIA “Novosti” announced that “Signs of black magic were found in the headquarters of the Ukrainian military.” These “signs” were



a drawing on one of the headquarters' walls called the "Satanic seal" by journalists and blood stains on paper documents [34].

In these cases, the "witch hunt" conducted by the current Russian authorities can be seen as a psychological projection or an indirect confirmation of magical beliefs among the Russian elite. At the same time, blaming the enemy for witchcraft is one of the strategies of political propaganda aimed to trigger a specific reaction among the Russian audience – to hatred and loathing towards the enemy. In recent months, Russian television broadcasts about magic and occult practices have been linked directly to the war in Ukraine.

On 21 and 28 May 2022, the TV channel Russia-1 aired two episodes of the talk show "In actual fact." The episodes were called "22.2.22: What else did Vanga predict" and "A new prediction of Vanga was found." The host and invited "experts," such as psychics, magicians, and fortune tellers discussed the prophecies of the Bulgarian clairvoyant Vangelia Gushterova about Russia and its "great mission" [35]. On 4 June 2022, Russia-1 broadcasted the episode "Vanga's prediction from a forgotten cassette." Journalist Sergey Kostornoy, who is closely familiar with Vanga, brought a videotape in the studio, which he argued he had found a few days before. The videotape featured an interview with Vanga from 1995 about the "year of five twos," that is, 2022 [36]. It is interesting to mention that two years ago the Russian media, and the journalist Kostornoy considered that the "year of five twos" was 2020, and Vanga's prophecies were related to the covid epidemic [37].

In June 2022, Ivan Fomin, an 86-year-old resident of the Voronezh region appeared on the NTV TV channel. He declared himself a psychic who worked for the KGB during the Soviet period. Fomin was introduced on TV as "our grandfather Vanga." He talked about the secret laboratory of the KGB that studies paranormal abilities, the "combat psychics" of the Soviet Union, his successful prophecies of the time, and made predictions about the war in Ukraine. According to him, Ukraine would

capitulate on 17 September 2022 [38]. In his second appearance on NTV on 11 September 2022, Fomin said that 17 September would only be a "turning point" and pushed the date of Ukraine's capitulation to 17 March 2023 [39].

On 24 November 2022, the TV channel Russia-1 aired the talk-show "Malakhov" with invited astrologers, numerologists, and tarot fortune-tellers. The guests agreed that Russia would win the war soon, Ukraine would disappear as a state, and Vladimir Zelensky would be its last president [40]. "The Future of the World. Astrological forecast. What awaits us all?" broadcasted on 27 November 2022 by Yulia Menshova, a well-known Russian artist who supports Putin, on her YouTube channel had a similar outcome [41].

In December 2022, the talk show "Let them talk" aired on the Russia-1 TV channel developed the topic of magic and the paranormal. On 6 December, psychics and fortune-tellers discussed the coming year and the next decade in the episode "Week of Forecasts and Sensations" [42]. On 7 December, the episode "Secret Materials: Psychics in the service of the USSR" was released [43]. On 13 December, several "experts" discussed their contacts with extraterrestrials in the episode "Secret Signs of extraterrestrial civilizations" [44].

On 21 December, the talk show "Malakhov" invited "Chechen soothsayer" Aizen, whose birth "predicted Nostradamus himself." Aizen declared that "Russia is the Messiah" and it would save not only herself "but the whole world from bourgeois fascism." He also said that Lenin and Stalin would rise again and restore socialism. According to him, this is written in the Bible. Finally, he spoke about the aliens: they exist, they come to Earth, they work, and they are "busy with their business – improving the world" [45].

The number of such shows has been growing since the summer of 2022, as the panic in the elites and disquiet in the Russian society increased due to military failures and economic difficulties. On 9 December 2022, "Current time" TV aired a significant report called "Psychics and sorcerers in the service of



Russian propaganda.”<sup>12</sup> The report mentioned many recent TV shows and publications in different media outlets on magic, witchcraft, occult practices, and paranormal activities in connection with the war in Ukraine [46].

Why did the government choose a propaganda agenda based on witchcraft and magic? First, it is important to note that over the past twenty years, Russian TV viewers have become accustomed to the broadcast of occult subjects. Besides some shows on the federal channels, there are TV channels specialized in mysticism, occultism, ufology, alternative history, and conspiracy theories, such as TV-3 and REN-TV. The latter belongs to the National Media Group holding, whose chairman of the board of directors is Alina Kabayeva, rumored to be the wife of the Russian president. This holding is also associated with the name of Yuri Kovalchuk, who is part of Vladimir Putin’s inner circle. In the last two decades, Russian television and the press have massively promoted conspiracy, pseudoscientific, and occult ideas. This occult culture is now becoming a “new religion” in Russian society and is combined with traditional religious confessions.<sup>13</sup> Official propaganda exploits the Russian public appetite for occult services. This is especially true for television viewers.<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, Russian TV has seen a drop in ratings for news programs and political talk shows that started in the summer of 2022. People have grown tired of these shows, and they miss entertainment content. Since the spring of 2022, many entertainment programs have been removed from Russian TV broadcasting. In this context, the authors of the investigation in “The Insider” believe the “task from FSB” is obvious in the case of federal TV channels [49]. Talk shows that used to focus on various family stories and criminal conflicts now feature magicians, psychics, astrologers, and Tarot card readers. Every TV channel has broadcasted new talk shows featuring a handful of personalities. Magicians and fortune tellers arrive to the same conclusions as the experts on the political talk-shows: “Russia’s mission,” “Putin is the Messiah,” “the West is

Satan,” “Russia will save the world,” “Russia will win and succeed economically,” “Ukraine as a country will soon be gone,” “the American continent will crack and sink because of the Yellowstone volcano explosion,” or “the US started a war with Russia to take over Siberia and move there from the coming cataclysm.” These programs have high audience ratings. As Ekaterina Maksimova wrote,

Following the outbreak of a full-scale war in Ukraine, Russians exhibited a heightened interest in news and political shows. However, after a year, viewership ratings returned to their previous levels. Exhausted by the uncertainty, audiences shifted their attention to programs that explore the supernatural. An increasing number of Russians are now tuning in to watch series about fortune-tellers and talk shows featuring “patriotic psychics” who prophesy about Russia’s glorious future (naturally, on state television). The promotion of supernatural subjects seems to have received official encouragement, with Z-psychics becoming an integral part of Kremlin propaganda. [49]

The television audience is primarily middle-aged and elderly, but what happens to young people? At the beginning of 2022, the Russian media published a tide of news about the growth of esoteric interests among Russian youth [50]. Previously, this age group has been less open to magic beliefs. At the beginning of 2023, this interest became more significant. Between January and March 2023, attendance at training courses in esoteric magic, astrology, and Tarot divination increased nineteen-fold compared with 2022. “Schools of magic” teach a variety of things, including healing, necromancy, magic money, predictions of the future, divination using Tarot cards and Scandinavian runes, astrology and numerology, magic fulfillment of desires, conscious dreaming, and restoration of the memory of past lives. Several online schools of magic surveyed had 312 visits between January-March 2022 and 5,962 visits for the same period in 2023. In early 2023, online traffic related to “schools of magic” sites was



twenty-four-times higher than one year before. "Marketplaces reported a high increase in the demand for esoteric products, especially Tarot cards (105% increase) and amulets and bracelets to protect against the evil eye (95% increase) [51].

The growth of demand for magic and esotericism among Russian youth is connected especially with a relatively high level of stress and a desire to decrease uncertainty. Then, there is the commercial aspect: people see a certain demand for magic services and want to acquire the required expertise to monetize it. Young people might endure economic difficulties more easily if they master "magical" skills.

"Those at the bottom look at those at the top and copy their behavior patterns," professor Valery Solovey said in an interview. He continued: *My zhivem v strane pobedivshego Kafki* ["We live in the country of the victorious Kafka," i.e., in the country of the absurd]. He was referring to a famous phrase during Soviet times: *My zhivem v strane pobedivshego sotsializma* ["We live in a country of victorious socialism"] [52]. Why does this happen? Professor Solovey offers an explanation:

Solid is for solid gentlemen, and society is given a surrogate in the form of REN-TV, various Vanga-predictions that they, or rather their propaganda, produces. They [the elites] have morally corrupted the society. They destroyed intelligence. This has been part of a conscious strategy since the early 2000s. What they did because of propaganda, in a broad sense, political propaganda – they discouraged people from hunting for rational thinking, pursuing knowledge, and the other way around [they] instilled a hunt for the wildest miracle (...) to all these amulets, talismans, red threads. As a result, we live in a country that, in the total sense of the word, is experiencing the twilight of consciousness, this twilight state of mind. But what is very important is that the elite and the lower classes of society are isomorphic; it is twilight at the top and twilight at the bottom. This is very important to understand. And in the end, when society

rises, nothing will restrain it because all moral and ethical restrictions have been destroyed by the elite itself, demonstrating wild patterns not only of consumption, wild patterns of behavior, and the absence of any morality. The illusion of conscience has long been crossed out there; there is even no ethics anymore. This is very important to understand. We are just at the wreckage now in Russia. We are sitting by the fire in which the foundations of European civilization are burning. [53]

An Internet user commented on another YouTube stream dedicated to occultism in present-day Russia:

An analogy with the last years of the Russian Empire involuntarily comes to mind. The same degeneration of the elite, fascination with devilry and the occult. And the same fatigue from the war, besides, the coronavirus has greatly accelerated and lightened all the processes of rotting and disintegration of the system. [10]

Speaking of historical analogies, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century resembles the current period in some respects. Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra were greatly concerned about the health of their son and heir, Alexei who was ill with hemophilia. All sorts of healers and mystics turned up at the royal throne. Among them was Grigory Rasputin, who played a fatal role in the fate of the monarchy. Tibetan medicine was a trend in St. Petersburg at that time. Spiritism and other occult practices were widespread among aristocracy.

The reign of Ivan the Terrible at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century represents another interesting analogy. Toward the end of his life, at forty-five years old, Ivan the Terrible became interested in astrology and witchcraft. These activities were forbidden in Russia at the time. In 1575, Ivan the Terrible declared Simeon Bekbulatovich, Khan of Kasimov, the "great prince of all Russia" and declared himself a subordinate, "the appanage prince of Moscow." "The Piskarevsky Chronicler" accounts that rumors were circulating in



Moscow that the sorcerers had told Ivan the Terrible that the tsar would die that year. Therefore, the tsar appointed a fictitious tsar for one year. However, the prediction did not come true, so a year later Ivan reclaimed his title and rewarded Simeon generously (Floria 1999, 315). The English diplomat Jerome Horsey, close to the tsar’s court, wrote in his notes that in the early 1570s Ivan the Terrible had a doctor, Bomelius, who drew up horoscopes and made astrological forecasts for the tsar. Horsey called Bomelius a “living sorcerer” and a “magician.” In the late 1570s, Prince Andrey Kurbsky wrote Ivan the Terrible: “They tell us that you gather sorcerers and magicians from various lands and ask them about lucky days” (Floria 1999, 316). In the 1580s, according to Horsey’s records, Moscow was home to “a multitude of sorcerers and magicians.” They were brought from the north of Lapland by order of the tsar to foretell his future. In 1584 they predicted that he would die on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March. The tsar “was furious” and promised that he would burn all sorcerers on that day. However, on 18<sup>th</sup> of March Ivan the Terrible died (Floria 1999, 387).

In today’s Russia, magic is not legally prohibited as it was during the time of Ivan the Terrible, although attempts to do so have been made repeatedly. In June 2016, the State Duma Delegate Vitaly Milonov proposed banning TV broadcasts with mystical and occult content. In his opinion, they contributed to the emergence of sectarian movements in the country and stimulated the growth of extremist sentiments in society [54]. In 2017, as many as three draft laws to prohibit the practice of folk medicine and magic were proposed for consideration in the State Duma. In February 2017, State Duma Delegate Vladimir Petrov proposed a bill regulating the activities of witches and sorcerers. In his opinion, people with superpowers should license their actions and be responsible for their quality. Therefore, it was necessary to make appropriate amendments to the law regarding consumer protection [55]. In May 2017, Delegate Milonov proposed to introduce criminal liability for witches and magicians [56]. In December 2017, Delegate Sergei Vostretsov

proposed to supplement the Criminal Code with Article 159.7 describing witchcraft and magical activities and as well as to amend articles 159 “Fraud,” 163 “Extortion,” and 210 “Organization of a criminal community” [57]. The State Duma did not adopt these bills.

On 2 December 2022, the Head of the State Duma Committee of Family Affairs, Nina Ostanina, announced that she would prepare a bill on criminal liability for sorcerers, healers, and magicians. This bill was supposed to be different from the bills that were proposed before. According to Ostanina, Russians trust “magicians” and “sorcerers,” among other scammers. She added that “fortune-tellers” and “healers” can still be found on some TV channels. To improve the situation in this area, she argued it was necessary to: first, adopt a bill on psychological activity and give people the opportunity to seek psychological help, and then toughen the punishment for fraud [58].

In contemporary Russia, the law “On Health Protection” gives citizens the right to practice folk medicine if they have a permit issued by a regional executive authority in the field of health protection. At the same time, the law states that “the provision of services of an occult and magical nature, as well as the performance of religious rites, does not apply to folk medicine.”<sup>15</sup> Mass healing sessions, including those using mass media outlets, were prohibited in 1993.<sup>16</sup>

Some rituals can be regarded as fraud and an “insult to believers,” and therefore convicted under the relevant articles of the Russian Criminal Code. Such a conviction was pronounced against Anton Simakov, the “master of voodoo magic.” In the fall of 2014, he held a public sacrifice ceremony, he beheaded a rooster, and sprinkled his blood on *pokrov* – a piece of cloth used in Orthodox worship. Simakov argued the ceremony’s purpose was “the destruction of Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko.” A criminal case was initiated against him under Article 148 of Part 1 of the Criminal Code of Russia “Public actions expressing obvious disrespect for society, aimed at insulting the religious feelings of believers.” Later, after a



psychological-psychiatric and linguistic-cultural examination, Simakov was sent to a psychiatric hospital for treatment [59]. Some types of magic are prohibited, namely, those which do not aim to support the state and the head of the state, the stability of the society, and those that offend “traditional spiritual values.” This suggests that, if Simakov had not used an attribute of Orthodox worship in the “voodoo ritual,” the chances are he would not have been prosecuted.

As the events of recent years show, individuals and groups loyal to the Russian government can openly conduct magical rituals. Even shamans, despite the persecution of Alexander Gabyshev, are allowed to perform public rituals if their aim is to support the state and the president. One stunning ritual was held in February 2019, shortly after the “circle of power” conducted by Alyona Polyn. The shamanic organization “Khuhe Munkhe Tengeri” from Angarsk, Irkutsk region, performed a ritual sacrifice of five camels “for the benefit of the Russian state” [60].

During the wildfires in Yakutia in June 2021, the Prime Minister of Yakutia Republic stated that it was necessary to turn to traditional folk practices to overcome the drought. He invited shamans to bring rain. According to ethnologist Lyudmila Egorova, shamans hoped to restore harmony in nature:

People believe in it, and it works. These rituals are designed to harmonize the energy of nature and fight fires. Now forest fires are raging in the republic, and rituals were performed in several districts by different shamans. [61]

In this context, it was to be expected that shamans would appear in the Russian media in relation to the war with Ukraine.

On the page of the Supreme shaman’s office on the “VKontakte” social network, a statement by the supreme shaman of Russia, Kara-ool Dopchun-ool showed gratitude for the ritual performed in support of Russian servicemen. “I wish all shamans of Russia happiness

and success in further strengthening our motherland and supporting our warriors,” the statement reads. The Supreme shaman noted that the rites were performed so the warriors would be “invulnerable to bullets and danger.” The joint shamanic ritual “in defense of our land, our people, our Fatherland, to raise and strengthen the spirit of our soldiers, to achieve victory over all the enemies of the Great Bright Russia” was held at the call of the Supreme shaman’s office on 9 October at 9 am Moscow time. Shamans from Vladivostok to St. Petersburg and Sochi participated in it,” writes *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, one of the central Russian mainstream media. [62]

On 25 October 2022, shamans from the Irkutsk region visited the mobilized Irkutsk soldiers at the landfill near Kemerovo. Shamans brought protective amulets, *toli*, to the military and held a “prayer service.” Together with the shamans, the soldiers were visited by the Mayor of the Ekhirit-Bulagatsky district of the Irkutsk region, Gennady Osodoev [63]. In early December 2022, Buryat shamanic organizations sent three “yurts of Huns warriors to help participants in a special military operation in Ukraine,” as part of a larger humanitarian mission [64]. Shamanic rituals are supposed to be performed in these yurts to “protect against HIMARS missiles” and to “purify” Russian soldiers. The chairman of the Russian “Huns Fund” Oleg Bulutov, commented this event:

Why yurts? When the ritual is performed, the Huns warriors come there... Here, let’s say HIMARS; we call them “Chimeras.” If the “Chimera” goes, the Huns warriors who were sleeping wake up. They need a place, yurts, they see their house, all sorts of paraphernalia, and help our fighters (...) Why do shamanic centers go there? When people stop fighting, where there are many dead and so on, they take a lot of negativity into themselves. The deceased, whom they see, can sit on them, and the soul can cling directly. Here is a soldier leaving the front line, returning home on leave, and dragging the deceased’s soul





with him. Going to their families, this soul can sit on anyone – on a child, on a wife. Then problems begin in the family and so on... They [shamans] go there to meet the fighters on the spot and clean them there directly. [65]

To conclude, in present-day Russia witchcraft and magic are not forbidden. Only “wrong” rituals that target the state and its leader are banned. This is similar with what used to happen in pre-industrial societies: magical practices are permissible if they are aimed at the well-being of the community (Lévi-Strauss 1958, 183–203). Similar practices took place in other political contexts throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from the dictatorship of Francois Duvalier in Haiti to Nazi Germany (Davis 1985; Goodrick-Clark 1985; Black 2015; Kurlander 2017).

Writing about the occult practices in Nazi Germany, Eric Kurlander (2017) argues that in the absence of the widespread belief in magic of ordinary Germans and the mass rejection of critical thinking, the Third Reich would not have been possible with such ease. I suggest that like in the post-WWI Germany, in post-Soviet Russia occult ideas became closely related to popular resentments and values of “blood and soil.” In Russia, such values are officially called “traditional moral values” and “spiritual bonds.”

In the 1930s Germany, Himmler tried to create a cult of revered ancestors, called “earthly immortality,” which he equated with the perpetuation of the German people. Since the beginning of the 2010s, Russian authorities have been promoting a cult of victory in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945, which lead to the movement called “Immortal Regiment” that aimed to preserve the memory of fallen ancestors-heroes. One of the slogans of this cult is: “We can repeat it.” It refers to the campaign to fight Nazism. For ten years, this Cult of Victory shaped the public sentiments in Russian society. It has been argued that the Russian state needed this turn in public perception to invade Ukraine in 2022. More than half of the Russian population currently believes that Russia is waging a righteous war against Nazism. Just like

in 1930s Germany, in present-day Russia the fight against occultists and psychics is declared, but such practices are allowed when they aim to support the state and the state leadership. I suggest that, relying on the experience of German propaganda, Russian political strategists are implementing the principle “If you repeat a lie a thousand times, then people will start believing it.” Eric Kurlander uses the term “supernatural imaginary” for the mystical, religious, and quasi-scientific ideas, discourses, and practices in the Third Reich (Kurlander 2017). This concept implies the penetration of mythological ideas into the “social imagination,” thanks to which people find themselves in a space inhabited by ghosts and demons. The “supernatural imaginary” transforms a German partisan into a werewolf defending his native land from strangers and a Jew or a Slav into a blood-drinking vampire. Russian propaganda uses the same strategy, glorifying its soldiers and demonizing the enemy.



In conclusion, we will explore the conviction the supposed witch and her daughter received in 2013 in the case that opened this paper. In this case we can identify a combination of the two types of witchcraft discussed, the “basic rural” and “new urban” witchcraft.

In the village, the woman was suspected of witchcraft before the “attack” on her neighbor. She used cards to tell fellow villagers their fortunes and she used to boast of her magical power. There were rumors that she bewitched the husband of one woman in the village. Her daughter allegedly spread rumors that her mother was a witch, had a magical gift, and could cast spells. It was the villagers who made these claims. The accused denied that she ever demonstrated “magical power.” However, in rural communities stories told by the alleged victims of witchcraft are enough for someone to be considered a witch. Then, “witchcraft narratives” are built around them. The story would have never received such public attention if the investigation did not use the witchcraft narrative in official documents.



The statement of a member of the investigative committee read:

The accused I.L. and her daughter attempted to kill M.L. to preserve her gift as a witch, to improve their lives, and assure that her daughter would acquire the gift of a witch. The actions of the accused were qualified as attempted ritual murder by a group of persons by prior agreement, which is punished with up to 20 years in prison. [66]

An important point is that in Russia it is impossible to punish someone for witchcraft. There has not been one article in the Criminal Code incriminating witchcraft in the last 250 years. However, witchcraft is mentioned in the criminal case presented above. The punishment was very severe, given the fact the crime was not proven, the harm was not recorded, and the accused did not admit their guilt. Apparently, the investigators, like the fellow villagers of the accused, believed in witchcraft. Beliefs in witchcraft and magic in present-day Russia “infect” not only ordinary people but also the governments, other officials, businessmen, and the police. These beliefs are typical in rural or small urban communities. However, in recent years they have not been spreading from the bottom to the top, but rather from the top to bottom, that is from elites to common people, by means of the official media, TV shows, and rumors.

In November 2022, Boris Gershman published an article investigating contemporary witchcraft beliefs and their correlates. He showed that witchcraft beliefs correlate positively with conformist culture and in-group bias. Such beliefs are more widespread in countries with weak institutions, disrupted social relations, high anxiety levels, pessimistic worldviews, and a lack of entrepreneurial culture and innovative activity. At the same time, Gershman (2022) believes that witchcraft beliefs are less widespread among the more educated and economically secure groups of the population. Evidence from Russia confirms these conclusions only partially. In Russia, disrupted

social relations, high anxiety levels, pessimistic worldviews, the lack of entrepreneurial culture and innovative activities can be clearly seen. However, the institutions are strong, and there is no correlation between witchcraft beliefs and lower levels of education and economic security.

I suggest the Russian case is somewhat different from Gershman’s conclusions because the author studied the grassroots beliefs in witchcraft and the evil eye rather than the “official” witchcraft narrative and its influence on the social imagination. In today’s Russia, we find that grassroots “basic” witchcraft beliefs are less visible than the narrative about the occult promoted by state propaganda and media and rumors of witchcraft among the elite. However, Gershman’s data forecasts the development of magic and witchcraft beliefs in Russia through the weakening of state institutions, the general decrease in people’s welfare, and the decrease in the level of education and medicine. These processes have been taking place since 2002. I suggest this situation will undoubtedly give a new impetus to magical beliefs and practice.

In 2020, Monika Black published her book *A Demon-Haunted Land: Witches, Wonder-Doctors, and the Ghosts of the Past in Post-WWII Germany*, where she explored the rise of beliefs in magic, witchcraft, occult practices, and demons in post-Nazi Germany. One of her theses is that the increase in magic beliefs was a manifestation of the unconscious repentance of the German people, which was not reflected in the early postwar years. In 2021, Monica Black’s book was translated in Russian. The Russian opposition media promoted the idea, which pleased many people, that today’s enthusiasm for magic among Russians indicates an involuntary repentance in connection with the war in Ukraine (see for example [49]). However, this seems to be a false analogy. Bruno Groening, the hero of Monica Black’s book, can be compared with Kashpirovsky and Chumak, the first magicians of the collapsed Soviet empire. Undoubtedly, there will be repentance and disillusionment in Russia in the future which will bring new sorcerers and miracle salespeople, but that might be another story.



To conclude, the article examined contemporary Russian media discourse in connection with magic and witchcraft beliefs. The article reports the following facts and tendencies:

(1) The Russian media contain many references to magical rituals, people's interest in magic and witchcraft, esotericism, and occultism.

(2) Russian public media and social networks discuss magic and witchcraft among celebrities and elites.

(3) In a situation of political instability, the magical narrative is incorporated into the official propaganda, where it is contaminated with other conspiracy theories to create a negative image of the enemy and form moral

panics around the "Global West," on the one hand, and to create a positive image of Russia, its power, and its future, on the other hand.

(4) The state media promotes this magical narrative into society, where it is contaminated with the grassroots witchcraft narrative.

(5) The result is grassroots denunciations, accusations, and new rumors of magic and witchcraft among political and economic elites. Opposition media and bloggers actively discuss these rumors and see the "magic of the elites" as yet another manifestation of their political and cognitive failure, which turns the "magic narrative" against the elites themselves.



## NOTES

1. This phrase, which you can often hear in Russia today, contains allusions to several Russian phraseological units. Firstly, the official slogan of the Soviet era was "USSR is the country of victorious socialism" (Stalin's Constitution of the USSR, 1936). Secondly, the phrase "We were born to make Kafka come true" is an ironic paraphrase of the words of a Soviet song, "We were born to make a fairy tale [skazka] come true" ("March of Aviators" 1923). The paraphrase is said to have been improvised in 1964 by the Soviet artist and writer Vagrich Bakhchanyan. In addition to symmetry (skazka / Kafka), mentions of the Czech writer refer here to such themes of his work as absurdity, existential anxiety, the clash of a person with surrealistic difficulties, and incomprehensible forces. The same motives one can find in stories about witchcraft.

2. I am grateful to the editors and two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments. Many thanks to Alexandra Arkhipova for her research assistance and to Tünde Komáromi for her genuine support.

3. The media sources are mentioned in square brackets. For more details, see the list of the media sources.

4. Moscow and Moscow region (1995-currently), Perm region, and the Udmurt Republic (1998-2018), the Altai Republic (2001), Kaluga region (2003), Arkhangelsk region (2018), and Kostroma region (2019).

5. I suggest that New Age occulture absorbs all kinds of magic present in the society.

6. A *nooscope* is a hypothetical device, allegedly created and patented in 2011, which allows the study of the collective consciousness, receives and registers changes in the biosphere and human activity, and manages the state of the future (Vaino 2012). Most scientists who commented on the *nooscope* believe this device has nothing to do with science and consider this concept a forgery.

7. "The temple of Satan" is a metaphor, but one must consider that in the public opinion there is an accusation that the Russian

Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate has abandoned God's commandments because it supported the war in Ukraine. Consequently, God's grace has departed from the Russian "Kirill's" church, and those who support Putin and the war serve Satan. There are several accusations regarding Putin – that he serves Satan or himself is Satan or the Antichrist.

8. Agentura.ru is a Russian website founded in 2000 as an online community of journalists who cover terrorism and intelligence agencies. From 2000 to 2006, the website was supported by ISP Relcom, and since 2006 Agentura.ru has been a voluntary project. Its editor is Andrei Soldatov. Agentura.ru is considered a respected source of information regarding Russia's secret services.

9. "The Insider" is an international online media specializing in investigative journalism. It was founded in 2013 by Russian journalist Roman Dobrokhoto.

10. The parcel with gifts for Orthodox Easter (16 April 2023) contained cereals, canned food, a bottle of holy water, and an icon of Putin with a note reading "For prayer." On 17 April 2023, recruits from the Perm region shared videos and photos on the chatbot channel "Perm 36.6" on the social network Telegram. They added a message reading: "Anyway, we get a volunteer, and we send them a video saying that we all liked it and that kind of shit. But this time, something went wrong. We thought they did not forget about the holiday, but it turned out that it was not about a holiday after all. As patriotic as I am about my homeland, this is a complete fuck-up" (<https://t.me/perm36>).

11. One recruit in the Perm region shared the photo of the candle on the chatbot channel "Perm 36.6" on the social network Telegram on 29 March 2023. He accompanied the photo with this message: "This is fucked up. I am more and more amazed by such pranks. Everyone in the company got such candles. What kind of moron would light them in combat, this protection candle? They don't give out new uniforms or boots, but they hand out a candle" (<https://t.me/perm36>).



12. "Current time" TV (in Russian *Nastoyashcheye Vremya*) is a Russian-language television channel with an editorial office in Prague, created by the US organizations "Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty" and "Voice of America."

13. According to the Levada Center survey (January 2020), 65% of respondents identified themselves as Orthodox and 7% as Muslim. Other confessions received less than 1%. 18% responded they had no religion, and 7% described themselves as atheists. However, 41% of those who declared themselves Orthodox, 68% of Muslims, 4% of atheists, and 15% of those who had no religion agreed with the statement, "I know God exists, and I have no doubt about it." In contrast, 13% of those who described themselves as Orthodox, 1% of Muslims, 23% of atheists, and 16% of those who do not

adhere to any religion agreed with the statement "I do not believe in God, but I do believe in some higher power" [47].

14. According to VCIOM data from 3 March 2021, only 28% of Russians do not watch television, 53% use both television and the Internet for information, and 17% of Russians watch only TV. Among people over 60, this latter category reaches 45% [48].

15. Article 59 "Folk Medicine" of the Federal Law "On the Basics of protecting the Health of Citizens in the Russian Federation" dated 21.11.2011 N 323-FZ.

16. Article 57 "The right to practice folk medicine (healing)" of the Fundamentals of the Legislation of the Russian Federation on the Protection of Citizens' Health of 22 July 1993.



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