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**Edited by**  
**Prof. Brian K. Payne and Prof. Hongyi Wu**

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# Notre Dame Fire Conspiracism as Reflective of Russian Ideological Competition with the West

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**Abstract:** The Notre Dame fire of 15 April 2019 was marked by a surge in online conspiracy theories. These conspiracies were principally spread by the Far-Right but seem to complement articulated Russian geopolitical identity as an “Orthodox Civilization”. An Orthodox (Pravoslavie) national identity has been associated with anti-Western, anti-Muslim, and anti-Catholic sentiment in Russia for most of its history, often reflected in official and semi-official state ideologies and popular narratives. By examining the Notre Dame conspiracies and Russian support of Far-Right political groups (specifically in France) within this context, we can see how they fit into the grander semiotics of post-Soviet online conspiracism which may complement historical ideologies of Russian messianic national identity; and may serve to justify quasi-religious information aggression against a perceived ‘anti-Christian’ West.

**Keywords:** anti-Catholicism, Nostradamus, Notre Dame, Orthodoxy, Pravoslavie, Russian nationalism

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## 1. Introduction

The Notre Dame Cathedral fire of 15 April 2019 can be regarded as one of the great material losses in the history of Western art and architecture. Despite the tragic significance of the fire in a cultural sense, a manifest French national solidarity backed by global moral support – reminiscent of American solidarity in the wake of the 11 September 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks – has resulted in more than \$1 billion (USD) in funding being pledged for a long-term reconstruction effort.

Solidarity was not the only similarity. Both events were marked by a rise in online conspiracism which shared core themes about Muslim terrorism and Nostradamus prophecies. This paper will analyse the Notre Dame conspiracy theories within the context of Russian information warfare activities and anti-Western nationalist ideological perspectives. This may provide attribution by explaining how the narratives relate to the advancement of modern Russian geopolitical goals as well as a historically Orthodox (as opposed to Catholic) national identity.

## 2. Relating Conspiracy Theories about the Notre Dame Fire to Russian Influence Campaigns

Notre Dame fire conspiracies have thematic parallels with 9/11 conspiracism. The most widely reported of these was algorithmically ironic – where a YouTube feature designed to fight fake news associated images of burning Notre Dame with disinformation related to the 9/11 attacks (Paul 2019).

However, the Notre Dame conspiracy narratives *are indeed* semiotically similar to those of 9/11 as they included manifestations of:

1. Blame on ‘anti-Christian’ Islamists (such as Osama Bin Laden had been claimed to be in 2001);
2. Rumors that Nostradamus had foretold the disaster and that it signalled the imminent apocalypse;
3. Familiar anti-Semitic canards and false flag conspiracy theories (Heirrania 2019, Pink 2019).

The conspiratorial themes were not just global ones, but also those specific to French politics. For example, rumours emerged that it was left-wing Yellow Vest protestors who started the fire; or that a false flag was staged by French President Emmanuel Macron so that he could avoid giving a national address on the Yellow Vests (Lytyvnenko & Silverman 2019 (2)).

Even in the case of the positive (fake) claim that Putin had offered to rebuild the Cathedral, which one might reflexively ascribe to a Russian propaganda motivation, a direct attribution to Russia is unlikely to be found (Marchal et. al 2019). The conspiracies were however spread most transparently by Far-Right figures and information outlets that seem to advance the overarching Russian information warfare agenda.

For example, Paul Joseph Watson, a senior figure at Infowars – seems to have been principally responsible for viral and metastasizing rumours that Muslims started the fire by capitalizing on fake and otherwise unsubstantiated (deleted) tweets (Lytvynenko & Silverman 2019).

As far as a Russian relationship, Infowars has been on friendly terms with right-wing Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin in support of objectives apparently aligning the Far-Right with Russian active measures directed against US national security interests (Bertrand 2017). Infowars has reposted more than 1,000 RT articles on the site (Lytvynenko 2017). Furthermore, the Infowars organization was closely associated with criminal prosecutions related to Russian influence in the 2016 US presidential election and for the context in which Infowars stories were retweeted by bots associated with Russia (Jurecic 2019, Stone & Gordon 2017). (This network was also important in generating the “false flag” narrative of 9/11, ‘Seth Rich conspiracy theories’, and reinforcing Syrian Civil War conspiracy theories which have apparently served Russian strategic interests (Hotchkiss 2019).)

Another widely reported conspiracy theory came from the network of RT and Infowars-linked personality Maram Susli (known as Syrian Girl or Partisangirl); who suggested that Macron may have set the fire in order to avoid giving a national address on the Yellow Vest situation in France (eg. a false flag) (Lytvynenko & Silverman 2019 (2)). Soon, RT would be quoting tweets from Susli and Macron’s former political opponent (and Kremlin financing recipient) Marine LePen – who, in the guise of traditionalists decried Macron’s supposed planned modern reconstruction of Notre Dame (RT 2019).

Consistent with conspiratorial themes around the Notre Dame fire, forensic analyses of computational propaganda found that Emmanuel Macron was a common target of online trolling associated with Russia, representing a collaboration between Kremlin and Far-Right influencers (Nimmo & Francois 2018, Vilmer 2019). Perhaps not surprisingly, Russian trolls and bots are also being investigated for agitation of the left-wing Yellow Vest movement (Matlack & Williams 2018).

### **3. Nostradamus Prophecy as Synergizing with Russian Information Warfare**

It should be noted that the term Nostradamus has significance to the Notre Dame fire simply because Nostradamus is a Latinization of the family name Nostredame, derived itself from Notre Dame (Our Lady). However, this does not seem to have been a factor in the term spiking in interest in April 2019 (Figure 1).

Nostradamus prophecies can be seen as similar to right-wing conspiracy theories when considered as *popular eschatology* (Fenster 2008). They also have a long history of use in war time influence operations for disinformation purposes (Wilson 2007).

Ideological figures in Russia associated with cultural warfare like Alexander Dugin have used the prophecies of Nostradamus to justify Putin’s rise to power in what can be seen as alignment with sectarian Russian Orthodox mythological beliefs. This was also contemporaneous to apparent efforts of Russian security services to potentially frame Chechens for the 1999 Moscow apartment bombings which are widely seen to have been carried out by the FSB; bringing Putin to power and justifying the Second Chechen War (1999–2009) (Hotchkiss 2019).

Since Nostradamus became the #1 search of 2001 as a result of an online hoax, other large spikes in Nostradamus interest on Google Trends have occurred during periods of unambiguous Russian geopolitical activity which may signal continued use as an information weapon. Examples of these spikes have occurred 1.) following the 9/11 attacks, 2.) following the 10 April 2010 crash of the Polish executive government in Smolensk Russia, 3.) during the late February, early March 2014 invasion of Eastern Ukraine and the Crimea, and 4.) following the November 2016 US presidential election.

Other plausible examples of spikes in Nostradamus interest pertinent to France exist in the case of the Hungary spike during the 2015 Syrian migrant crisis (driven by Russian policy in Syria and reflected in the politics of the National Front), as well as a large increase in global Nostradamus interest following the November 2015 ISIS attacks (Hotchkiss 2019).

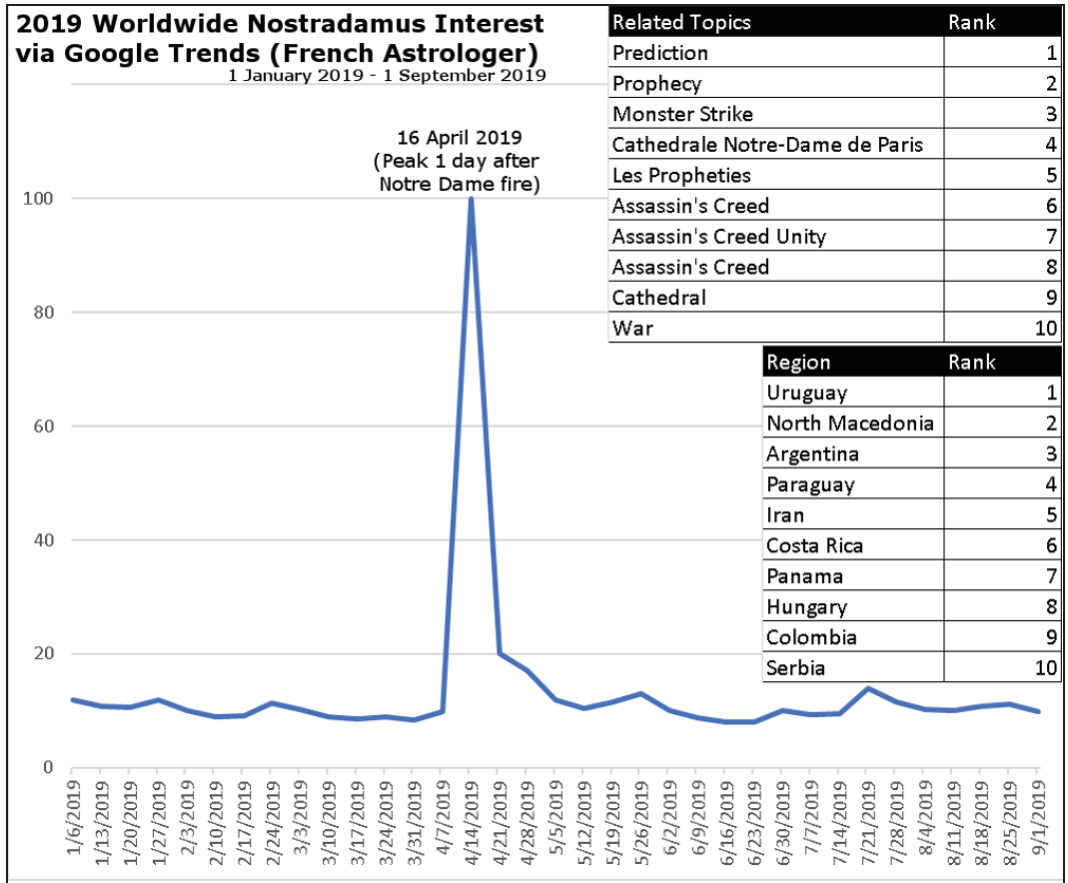


Figure 1: 1 January - 1 September 2019 Google Trends for Search Term Nostradamus (Source, Google Trends 5-day average)

According to associated search topics and queries, Nostradamus interest (as in America in 2001 or broadly in 2015) often corresponds to apocalyptic fears of an 'Islamic antichrist' and therefore presumably reflects anti-Muslim sentiments. Here, right wing conspiracy theories ascribing criminal blame to Muslims for starting the Notre Dame fire may be seen as similar to Nostradamus prophecy in how they sustain divisive feelings in society which might be reflective of Kremlin efforts to disrupt Western polities. However, considering that Russian efforts seem to be driving the migration which the Far-Right decries as well (Higgins 2016); one may wonder to what extent the overarching Russian strategic objective is actually wholly in line with that of the Far-Right.

Muslims and Western governments are not the only potential targets of Nostradamus prophecies applied as a theoretical information warfare tactic. The Google Trends spikes (such as on 15 April 2019) can correspond to specifically Catholic or Papal issues. For example, one of the largest spikes in Nostradamus interest occurred in primarily Catholic countries following the April 2005 death of Pope John Paul II. Similarly, another of the largest historical global spikes occurred in March 2013 after Pope Benedict XVI stepped down, fueling apocalyptic fears. (Notably RT does seem to serve Nostradamus prophecies to Spanish speaking Catholic countries such as those which spiked most in 2005 and 2013.)

The April 2019 spike in interest seems to have been driven by two main 'viral' Nostradamus themes. First, a false quote of Nostradamus on social media: "*When the great cathedral glows red, so will begin the descent of man – Michel de Nostradame (Nostradamus)*" (Evon 2019). The origin of the viral quote is difficult to establish. Variants of it evolved on anonymous websites like 4Chan over the coming days.

The second example which seems to have caught public attention was in the reporting of Vogue Australia astrologist Jessica Adams, who claimed that Emmanuel Macron's use of the term 'emotion' had been used by Nostradamus (and that it was more than coincidence). She also expressed apparent sympathy for Julian Assange – comparing him to the Salvador Mundi image of Jesus (a painting once owned by Russian Oligarch

Dmitry Rybolovlev that is subject of numerous conspiracy theories), and expressed that the fire represented some kind of divine judgement against the Catholic Church for sex abuse (Adams 2019, Evon 2019).

In this case, it would be imprudent to say that Ms. Adams is a Kremlin asset for merely expressing her political positions as prophecies; but she may be seen to possess positions which might be 'politically correct' in the pro-conspiracy culture of Russian information warfare. As opposed to Far-Right figures who more transparently started the conspiracies, figures like Russell Brand (who is seen to be apparently 'politically correct' in the Kremlin narrative (Foster 2016)) - or theoretically Jessica Adams - did not necessarily spread conspiracies so much as interpret the fire through a lens which channeled their apocalyptic significance for Western society (Brand 2019).

In fairness, not all of the related search interest which links Notre Dame to Nostradamus in 2019 seems due to popular eschatology. For example, the November 2014 videogame 'Assassin's Creed Unity' appears as an associated topic. The game is set in revolutionary-era France and features 'Nostradamus enigmas' as puzzle elements. (The top 10 queries and topics for the 10 April 2019 to 20 April 2019 period are not reflective of the game.)

#### **4. North Macedonia Nostradamus Hoax**

To offer a more direct example of how Nostradamus conspiracy theories may promote sentiments which undermine Catholicism by directly targeting popes in alignment with an Orthodox Christian worldview; it can be noted that despite being #2 ranked for Nostradamus interest in the first 9 months of 2019, in North Macedonia, Nostradamus interest did not peak at the same time as the Notre Dame fire. Instead, interest peaked in early May 2019 which corresponded to a visit of Pope Francis to the nominally Eastern Orthodox country. Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty covered the Papal visit to the region, noting the strong dissatisfaction of some Orthodox faithful (RFERL 2019).

It seems North Macedonian Nostradamus interest went viral resulting from a hoax prophecy circulated on the internet which read (translation) "*Roman high priest, be aware not to get close to the town being rinsed by two rivers, because you will spit blood in the month when the roses are blooming*". The narrative was heavily integrated with themes about ISIS. North Macedonian fact checkers debunked it quickly as disinformation and it was found to have originated with a Serbian news outlet associated with Russian disinformation called webtribune.rs (F2N2 2019 , Petreski 2015 ).

#### **5. Russian Anti-Western and Anti-Catholic Sentiment as "Right Belief"**

Although Christianity first came to Kievan Rus in 988 when Vladimir the Great of Kyiv was baptized at Chersonesos (Crimea) - prior to the enduring Great Schism of 1054, the nation has been characteristically opposed to Catholicism. What has been called an "*indissoluble link between anti-Catholic feeling and loyalty to the state system*" and opposition to "papism" has generally ceased only during periods of "*accelerated modernization and abatement of autocracy*" (Filotov & Vorontsova 2009).

Despite the apparent thawing of relations between the Russian Orthodox and Catholic Churches since 2016 and condolences extended by Russian Church and public officials regarding the Notre Dame fire, the arguable restoration of an autocratic system in modern Russia and conspiracies promoted by the Church linked to beliefs in "Orthodox Civilization" may contribute to an information environment hostile to Catholicism.

The iterative trend in Russia's anti-Catholic national sentiment can be analyzed as the result of three interacting factors that loosely align with the official imperial ideology of Russian emperor Tsar Nicholas I (1796–1855): *Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality* (Pravoslavie, Samoderzhavie, and Narodnost).

1. The development of messianic and popular eschatological narratives from within the Church itself (such as Third Rome) which reinforce anti-Western thinking. In addition, pravoslavie literally means "right belief" which is to be contrasted with a popular conception that "wrong belief" (ne-pravoslavie) at least in a Christian sense, is equivalent to Catholicism and other Western spiritual practices (Orthodoxy);
2. The historical aspirations and political reforms made by the tsars to strengthen their power as head of Church and State, specifically in a way reinforcing their genealogical justifications to be heirs to the historical Eastern Roman Empire. This may have made the Pope a perceived competitor or pretender

to the tsars' power in alignment with a belief that Eastern faith was right belief and Western faith was wrong belief (Autocracy);

3. In an alignment with inspiration from messianic narratives of a "Holy Rus" spread by the Russian Orthodox Church and tsars; the recurrent commemoration of perceived historical trespasses by Catholicism on Russian territory (such as the propaganda value of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Battle on the Ice in the Stalinist era) may manifest in popular xenophobic hostility to Catholics as perceived enemies of the nation (Nationality).

After the Christianization of Kievan Rus, one of the next significant historical events in Russia was the 1242 defeat of the Teutonic Knights at the Battle on the Ice by Prince Alexander Nevsky. The Catholic, Teutonic Knights from Livonia were engaged in a Northern Crusade against Eastern Orthodox Christians in Slavic lands; their defeat represented a significant victory for Orthodox peoples. The motif of the Battle on the Ice against the Teutonic Knights resounded as a propaganda theme during the Stalinist Era (for example where Sergei Eisenstein's film *'Alexander Nevsky'* symbolically equated the Teutonic Knights with Nazis) (von Tunzelmann 2009). Today, the government still encourages the observance of the Battle on the Ice for patriotic purposes (Laruelle 2009).

During the reign of Grand Prince of Moscow, Ivan III (1440–1505) and his grandson Tsar Ivan IV (1530–1584), the popular mythology of *'Moscow, The Third Rome'* seems to have been a fertile ground for the integration of early ideas about what would become formalized later as Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality. Following the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, the Russian Christians apocalyptically saw Moscow as the third and final seat of Christianity. In the minds of these early ideologists, the First Rome was Catholic Rome – Rome itself (which had fallen to apostasy) – the Second Rome was Constantinople (which had fallen to the Turks) – and the Third Rome was Moscow (never to fall or be supplanted by a 'Fourth Rome'). Highlighting the clear Roman imperial ambition in alignment with this notion, Ivan III also began to call himself Tsar (Czar) which was Slavonic for Caesar (and was the translation of 'King', 'Emperor', etc. in the Russian bible) (Uspenskij & Zhivov 2012).

Ivan IV (The Terrible) - further formalized the notion of Third Rome and was the first leader crowned *'Tsar of all the Russias'*. Ivan IV's coronation in 1547 placed symbolic and mythological significance on his role at the head of an Orthodox Christian nation. Despite the controversial legitimacy of his claim, there was a clear attempt to put emphasis on his Byzantine lineage from which he could claim to be heir to the Eastern Roman Empire as well as to be the protector of all Orthodoxy (if not Christianity) seemingly supported by the Third Rome doctrine (Uspenskij & Zhivov 2012).

Allegorically, the harsh leadership style of Ivan IV associated with samoderzhavie was affirmed in contemporary forms of propaganda derivative from one of Russia's first belletristic text[s]: *"The Tale of Dracula"*, in which Dracula (Vlad Tepes) had originally punished Turks by nailing their caps to their heads for failing to remove them in his presence. Instead in this case, the legendary punishment was doled out in popular stories by Ivan to French Catholics or Jews instead of Turks (Perrie 2002). It should be noted here that despite the apparent popularity of *The Tale of Dracula* and the Dracula character as a potential model for autocratic power in Russia – the Russian monk who transcribed the earliest available copy seems to have lamented Dracula's having "forsook the light" of Orthodoxy for the "darkness" of Catholicism (McNally and Florescu 1994).

As reflected in the Dracula stories and adaptations to Ivan IV, it seems evident that 16<sup>th</sup> century Russians were hostile to Catholicism. Antonio Possevino (the first Italian Jesuit and Catholic priest to visit Russia) remarked in 1582 that *"The Muscovites dislike the Latins so much that if they wish evil to somebody they say 'May they make a Latin of you'"*. Despite Possevino's intercession to help bring about an armistice in the Livonian War on behalf of Pope Gregory XIII (as requested by Ivan IV), Possevino found that the Tsar was strongly resistant to conversion and reconciliation with Catholicism, claiming he already had the true faith and that the Pope was not a shepherd, but rather a "wolf" (Dunn 2017).

In addition to institution of Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality as a state ideology, Nicholas I initiated the Crimean War (1853–1856) on a narrative regarding the rights of the tsars as Orthodox leaders to protect (Orthodox) Christians in Palestine. In this sense, it is clear the Tsar saw himself in competition with Catholicism and the Pope, precipitating a war.



During the reign of Alexander II, the conservative author Fedor Dostoevsky, who was influential on the development of the popular nationalist *pochvennichestvo* ("soil") ideology (which became characterized by anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic sentiments) wrote in his novel *The Idiot* (1869) that "*Catholicism is a through-and-through unchristian faith... worse than atheism... It presents a distorted Christ... an Antichrist!... Roman Catholicism is not even a faith, but simply a continuation of the Western Roman Empire... and everything about Catholicism is subordinate to this idea... and is that not in the spirit of the Antichrist?*" Dostoevsky's character also states that socialism (of the French sort) "too is a by-product of Catholicism". Such a view seems representative of Dostoevsky's real perspectives (Moss 2017).

In the communist era (1917–1991), Russian authorities seized Catholic property and most Catholics fled the country. Of course, the Soviet system was ostensibly godless but it was indeed based on longstanding Russian messianic ideas as reflected in popular philosophy and Orthodoxy. Russian Orthodoxy was allowed to persist (under restrictions) highlighting its status as a state religion, and Stalin had resurrected the Church (after Lenin's death) with the "*church proclaiming that Moscow was the Third Rome and Stalin was chosen by God*" (Duncan 2000).

During the Soviet era, various popes were the targets of known or suspected KGB operations. For example, the defamation of Pope Pius XII as "Hitler's Pope" was the result of a definitive multi-media Russian disinformation campaign involving numerous agents of influence. The Orthodox Church was also associated with KGB influence into the World Council of Churches (Pacepa & Rychlak 2013).

Today's Russian Orthodox Church officially denounces nationalism but seems to have no prohibition against popular eschatology. It is notable that the tsarist-era Okhrana forgery the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was to be found on sale in many churches in the early 2000s, and senior church leaders have repeatedly encouraged speculation about the relation between the Antichrist and western technology such as bar codes and cell phones (Verkhovsky 2002 ,Clark & Bell 2019).

Additionally, senior figures connected to both the Putin government and the legacy of the anti-Semitic nationalist Metropolitan Ioann (Snychev) of St. Petersburg (See Putin's rumoured confessor Patriarch Tikhon (Shevkunov)) – have given legitimacy to ritual murder investigations of emperor Nicholas II at the hands of Jews (Luhn 2017). Tikhon, who is responsible for some of the largest publishing houses associated with the Church and is the editor of the pravoslavie.ru website, was quoted on matters of reconciliation saying "*Catholics are not even a church and as a result not even Christian*" (Erasmus 2016).

Clearly, while denouncing nationalism, the Church does promote ideas of "Orthodox Civilization" at the highest level and may contribute to militaristic "Political Orthodoxy" which may begin to approach the level of state ideology (Knorre 2016).

While it may be difficult to find any sort of overt anti-religious sentiment directly promoted by the Putin government, it may be noted that the Russian site expert.ru "*has become a kind of barometer of the ideas of the [Russian] ruling classes, as well as the intellectuals that support them*" and it is suggested that Expert has propaganda value for building a "consensus version" of Russian history (Linan 2010). Specifically, Expert is said to be close to the Putin government, Russian intelligence, and Julian Assange (its Russkiy Reporter outlet helped Wikileaks film "*Mediastan*") (Fitzpatrick 2016).

When Pope Benedict XVI stepped down in February 2013, Expert and Russkiy Reporter linked it to financial conspiracies, the "*global crisis of European civilization*", and "*the [great] difference between Western and non-Western agendas*" (Kartsev 2013). Were such a view to be representative of the Russian elite sentiment of today, it may demonstrate how a classical pro-Eastern worldview intersects with modern geopolitics.

Indeed, in the Putin era, Catholicism still finds a hard route to cultural acceptance and the return of confiscated property in Russia, seemingly driven by an alliance between the church, state, and nationalist elements. As recently as 2002, many Catholic clergy were removed from the country and Catholics in Russia have found themselves the target of Russian nationalist attacks (Laruelle 2009).

According to Verkhovsky (2004), the behavior of such Orthodox nationalists themselves may be rooted in perceptions of a Holy Russia under siege by a West which is led by the biblical Antichrist (and perhaps as

supported by official church teaching). Despite a long history of Russian Orthodox nationalist ideologies being associated with similarly hostile feelings to Muslims (as Catholics) in Russia (Kopanski 1998); subsequent to the initiation of the Second Chechen War, modern Russian nationalist attitudes demonstrated shifting perspectives on Islam, seeing it as a mediating instrument to be wielded by both sides in the clash of Eastern and Western civilizations (Figure 2) (Verkhovsky 2004). It may be a model to explain the strategic behavior of conspiracy theories and “active measures” since 9/11 and as discussed in this paper.

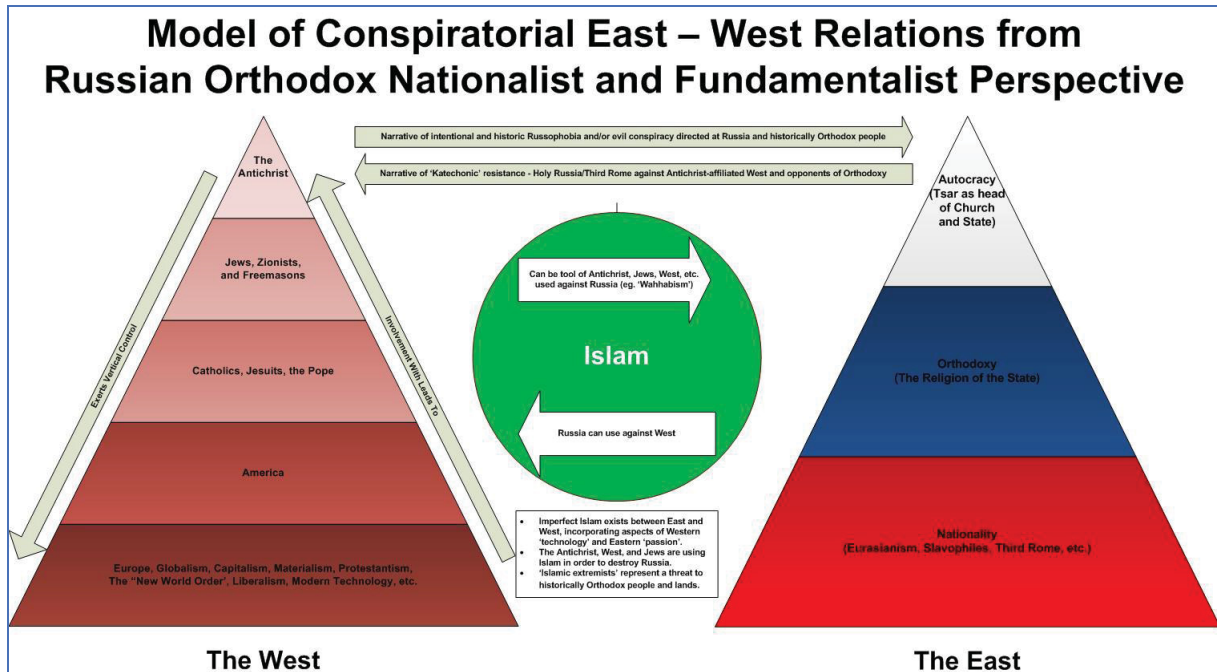


Figure 2: A Model of conspiratorial East - West Relations based on Verkhovsky's (2002, 2004) descriptions.

## 6. Conclusion

Russian historian Pavel Milyukov once said that fin de siècle Russian anti-Semitism was “a response to the need for new means of influencing the masses” by the tsarist authorities. Perhaps the spawning of Muslim migration into Europe and the cultivation of anti-Muslim sentiment in Far-Right groups is a modern analogue as reflected in the Notre Dame conspiracies and French politics. It is notable that many of the Notre Dame conspiracy theories specifically amplify themes related to the anti-migrant National Front (National Rally) campaign for the 2017 French Presidential election - which was sponsored by Kremlin financing and was sympathetic to Kremlin positions. This seems to highlight a strong collaboration between the Far-Right and Russian strategy.

However, when seeking an explanation for why Russia may utilize conspiracy theories like Nostradamus in information warfare activities, amplifying Islamophobia may be only part of the value. Large spikes in Nostradamus interest related to apocalyptic and conspiratorial thinking were observed in many Catholic countries during the papal transitions in 2005 and 2013. Although a direct attribution to Russia may not be apparent, the historical record shows that Russia has exhibited long-standing cultural hostility towards Catholicism and may view Russian Orthodoxy (and the role of the tsars) as in direct competition with Catholicism and the popes - which Orthodox nationalists seem to historically associate with the West and Antichrist.

It may be pertinent to consider that Russia may view Catholicism in a similar way to the West at large – and may deploy conspiracy theories against it as an information weapon or (narratively) attack symbols associated with Catholicism in order to boost Russian nationalist pride or ideas of Orthodox Civilization.

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