

# More Russian than Orthodox Christianity: Russian Paganism as Nationalist Politics

Written by Kaarina Aitamurto

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KAARINA AITAMURTO, NOV 8 2015

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The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of various new religious movements, reviving ancient, pre-Christian spiritual traditions. These religions typically reject dogmatism and do not have any commonly acknowledged Holy Scriptures or organisational hierarchies. Consequently, these movements are extremely heterogeneous and any description of the various Pagan religions should be supplemented with numerous reservations. Moreover, contemporary Paganism has developed in varying directions in different geographical areas. Thus, while some small Pagan movements already existed in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, British Wicca is usually considered to be the first contemporary Pagan religion. After the repeal of the English Witchcraft Act in the 1950s, Wicca was introduced to the public by its creator, Gerard Gardner. The first Wiccans were predominantly middle-class people, interested in the occult and politically conservative.[1] However, in the sixties, the religion spread to America and gained significant influences from the counterculture of the time. Even today, Western Pagans generally hold more liberal or even left-wing social values than the average population, and many Pagans are engaged in feminist or ecological social activity.[2] Nevertheless, some Odinist and Asatru groups in Northern America subscribe to racist views.[3]

The collapse of the communist system in Eastern Europe enabled the few small Pagan movements in the region to surface in the public sphere. At the beginning of the 1990s, they gained momentum in virtually all ex-socialist countries. The majority of these groups subscribed to nationalist politics, but naturally the nature of this nationalism varies between countries. Whereas in Central and Eastern Europe native Paganism is often seen as an inherently anti-Soviet and anti-Communist force, Russian Pagans' relationship with their past is more complex. Despite this, Pagans from Slavic countries have cooperated, especially in a yearly assembly, *Veche*, in advocating a pan-Slavic nationalist ideology. However, due to some internal disputes, the activity of the *Veche* has been halted in recent years, and the Ukrainian crisis will undoubtedly further weaken this pan-Slavic solidarity.

### Paganism in Russia

In Russia, many adherents of pre-Christian Slavic spirituality reject the word Paganism. Therefore, the established term for the movement is Rodnoverie, which means 'native faith' (*rodnaya vera*). At present, no Rodnoverie organisation is registered as a religious community. This is partly due to the tightened requirements of current Russian legislation, but many groups do not aspire to such a status because they do not wish to give information about their activity to the authorities. The most radical groups even avoid putting any information about themselves on the internet. In conclusion, it is extremely difficult to estimate the number of small, unofficial Rodnoverie communities. On the basis of the number of members in some internet communities and people attending the largest Rodnoverie festivals, it seems safe to say that there are several tens of thousands of Rodnovers in Russia.<sup>[4]</sup>

Demarcating Rodnoverie as a movement or a religion is extremely difficult. Quarrels are rife among Rodnoveries over

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who can legitimately present themselves as representatives of the religion. For example, syncretic groups are easily accused of representing New Age spirituality. Authors or organisations making wild historical claims are accused of tarnishing the name of Rodnoverie. For a scholar of the topic, one of the biggest challenges in defining Rodnoverie is demarcating it as a religious movement. For example, within skinhead subculture,<sup>[5]</sup> Pagan aesthetics and mythology can be used without any deeper commitment to Paganism as a religious identity.

## Rodnoverie and Politics

Linking religion with political views is not uncommon in contemporary Paganism, which emphasises the immanence of the sacred. For example, Pagans argue that the ideal of the transcendental and the afterlife in Christianity leads to neglect of our environment and a reluctance to confront social injustice. In Russia, nationalism is the most pervasive and prominent feature of Rodnoverie politics, despite the fact that the movement encompasses both extreme left-wing and extreme right-wing groups.

In the 1990s, the social turbulence of the time manifested itself in the radicalism of various small Pagan parties, which was typical of the period. However, Paganism was not accepted within the official ideology of the largest nationalist movements, such as Russian National Unity. Only in the following decade, undoubtedly due to the increase in the number of Pagans, did the programmes of such organisations as the notorious Slavic Union and the Movement Against Illegal Immigration admit Paganism to be 'the second' of the traditional Russian spiritualities.

The biggest Rodnoverie group is Kontsepsiya Obshchestvennoi Bezopasnosti (KOB), though it is somewhat questionable whether the organisation as a whole can be termed Pagan. In its heyday, the organisation claimed to have over 50,000 members, but it seems unlikely that the majority of its activists identified themselves as Pagan by religion. Paganism can be found in the esoteric, even cryptic teachings of the KOB, but religion is not among its main themes. The KOB propagates a far-leftist, anti-Semitic and socially conservative ideology, celebrating Stalin as its main hero.<sup>[6]</sup> With its heavy emphasis on Soviet-style rhetoric, the KOB represents somewhat old-fashioned nationalism, and in the present decade its popularity has begun to decrease.

From the outset, anti-Semitism was one of the determining characteristics of the nationalism of Rodnoverie. In *Desionizatsiya* (1979), the first Pagan publication in the Soviet Union, its author Valerii Emelyanov argued that Russians should turn to their native faith because it was a more efficient means of combating 'Zionism' than was Christianity, which is based on Judaism. Yemelyanov insisted that Jews were leading a global conspiracy against other peoples, especially Aryans. The flagrantly anti-Semitic claims of Yemelyanov have since been repeated in various Rodnoverie publications, which also draw material from the anti-Semitic literature of the beginning of the twentieth century and from Nazi Germany. Rodnoverie groups have often been accused of holding Nazi sympathies, and indeed some authors admit their admiration of Hitler and the Third Reich. However, others deny these accusations, even though their ideology has some similarity with German National Socialism. One of the most revealing cases, perhaps, is that of one of the pioneers of the Rodnoverie movement, Viktor Bezverkhy, who was prosecuted for selling *Mein Kampf* at the beginning of the 1990s. Startlingly, he was found not guilty, since he explained that his publishing business had commercial rather than political aims and that *Mein Kampf* was to begin a series of publications written by the 'enemies of Russia', which would include, for example, writings by Trotsky.<sup>[7]</sup> Lately the Russian judiciary has adopted a stricter line, and in 2009 a Rodnoverie organisation, the Church of Ynglings, was banned because extremism and using the swastika were central tenets of the religion. Nowadays, the majority of Rodnoverie groups use an eight-pointed form of the swastika called the *kolovorot*, undoubtedly partly motivated by the wish to avoid prosecution. However, it should be noted that most Rodnoverie organisations genuinely denounce Nazism, and especially Nazi Germany, for its part in the death of so many Russians.

A decisive factor in the growth of the Rodnoverie movement was its connection to the martial arts scene. At the beginning of the 1990s, the Pagan writer Aleksander Belov introduced a new martial art, 'Slavyano-Goritskaya Borba', which he claimed was based on a unique Russian tradition. Like Yemelyanov, Belov argued that Paganism was the 'religion of the warrior', in contrast to Christianity, which preaches humility and submission. Within sport clubs practising Slavyano-Goritskaya Borba, Paganism effectively spread among the Russian youth and also gained a foothold among skinhead groups.

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The size of the radical fringe of Rodnoverie is difficult to estimate because these groups seldom openly display their activity. Some Rodnovers have committed such crimes as attacks on Orthodox churches, synagogues and mosques or violent racist assaults on people of 'non-Slavic appearance'. Perhaps the most repugnant case was revealed in 2009, when a group of three 17- and 18-year-olds, who identified themselves as Rodnovers, were arrested for 12 racist murders and two attempted bomb attacks in Moscow.<sup>[8]</sup> Although these are individual cases and it seems safe to say that the majority of Rodnovers do not approve of them, they cannot be dismissed as a phenomenon separate from the movement. Even though most prominent Rodnoverie leaders do not openly encourage violence, it is tacitly endorsed by their Manichean worldview and demonisation of the 'other'. Revealingly, while very few Western Pagans support the notorious Norwegian metal musician and neo-Nazi Varg Vikernes or even acknowledge him to be a true Pagan, his translated writings are hugely popular among Rodnovers in Russia. Like Vikernes, younger Rodnovers tend to be less obsessed with anti-Semitic ideology but instead engage in anti-migrant and anti-Islamic activities. Moreover, they do not necessarily see the West as Russia's enemy, as many older Rodnovers do; rather, it is viewed as an ally in the fight by the 'white race' against other peoples.[9]

In the middle of the 2000s, new anti-extremist laws were introduced in Russia, and since then the surveillance and prosecution of ultra-nationalism has intensified. Consequently, some Rodnoverie organisations and especially publications have been banned. Furthermore, mainstream Rodnoverie communities have begun to censor their public statements in order to avoid accusations of extremism—but of course this does prevent many of their members from subscribing to racist values. However, the mainstream of the Rodnoverie movement seems to be gradually moving further away from ultra-nationalist politics. As the movement has matured and the focus has shifted more to gaining an established position as a religion, ritual practices and theology have gained significance. At the moment, one of the biggest Rodnoverie organisations is Rodolyubie, which is known for its elaborate rituals and the numerous publications of its charismatic leader, Veleslac (Il'ya Cherkasov). Significantly, his books contain much less nationalist propaganda than mystical reflection and discussion of the Slavic spiritual tradition.

## Conclusions

Though contemporary Eastern European Pagan religions more often subscribe to nationalism and racism than their liberally oriented Western counterparts, this division is somewhat simplistic. There are ultra-nationalist communities in the West and liberal groups in the East, and most importantly, many groups create original combinations of these ideologies. Moreover, despite dramatic differences in the political views of various forms of Paganism, they also share many common features—for instance, their emphasis on freedom of thought and individual responsibility. Moreover, Pagan rituals aim to reconnect the participants not only with the divine but also with nature. Paganism sees nature as sacred, and, consequently, green thinking is associated with Pagan religiosity in both the West and East. Naturally, ecological convictions can be combined both with liberal social views or ultra-conservatism and anti-modernism. Nature can be seen as a reality that unities all human kind, but it can also be understood in the nationalist framework, similar to the German ideology of *blut und boden* (blood and soil).[10]

According to Ronald Inglehart, social instability increases conservative values [11], and indeed East European Paganism reflects the post-socialist rise of conservatism and nationalism in the region. The economic and social stabilisation of Russia seems to have led to less politicised and radical forms of Rodnoverie. Instead of wishing to find a spiritual basis for their nationalist political convictions, today more often people who convert to Rodnoverie are interested in Paganism as a Green religion or fascinated by its aesthetically lavish rituals, which provide strong emotional experiences and an opportunity to express one's creativity. Yet it is difficult to predict the direction in which Rodnoverie will develop. As an anti-dogmatic religion, it will undoubtedly remain a heterogeneous movement that also encompasses radical forms.

Though the movement is marginal, it continues to grow rapidly—and more importantly it has a wider influence within such youth subcultures as heavy metal music fans, live role-players, fantasy fiction aficionados and martial arts practitioners. Thus, given its intimate connections with these groups, Rodnoverie reflects the values and concerns of Russian youth. Its role in Russian nationalism has followed the wider changes that have occurred in recent decades. First, instead of anti-Westernism and anti-Semitism, a hatred of migrants and Islam has begun to typify ultra-nationalist rhetoric. Secondly, the nationalist movement has become increasingly alienated from the state. Among ultra-

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nationalists, the Russian state is seen as an enemy due to its anti-extremist measures. Less radical nationalist opposition is also disillusioned by the hypocrisy and undemocratic nature of state patriotism. For the Pagan nationalist, the strong alliance between the state and the Russian Orthodox Church seem exclusive and discriminatory. In this respect, the Rodnoverie movement illustrates the versatility of nationalism in contemporary Russia and the difficulty of constructing clear national identities in modern societies, where people have more choices and more overlapping identities, many of which transcend national boundaries.

## Notes

- [1] Vivianne Crowley, 'Wicca as Nature Religion', *Nature Religion Today: Paganism in the Modern World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 174.
- [2] Helen Berger, Evan Leach, and Leigh S. Shaffer, *Voices from the Pagan Census: A National Survey of Witches and Neo-Pagans in the United States* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 55-88.
- [3] Mattias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003).
- [4] In comparison, there are over one million Pagans in the United States and over 70,000 in England. 'How many Pagans are there?', *Patheos*. (Aug. 14, 2014); 'Release: 2011 Census, Key Statistics for Local Authorities in England and Wales', Office for National Statistics. (Aug. 4, 2014)
- [5] Hilary Pilkington and Anton Popov, 'Understanding Neo-paganism in Russia: Religion? Ideology? Philosophy? Fantasy?', *Subcultures and New Religious Movements in Russia and East-Central Europe* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009).
- [6] Serguei Oushakine, *Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).
- [7] Aleksei Gaidukov, 'Sovremennoe slavyanskoe (russkoe) yazychestvo v Peterburge: Konfessional'naya dinamika za desyatilie', *Religioznaya situatsiya na severo-zpade Rossii i v stranakh Baltii* (St. Petersburg: Svetoch, 2005), pp. 42-44.
- [8] Kaarina Aitamurto, 'Modern Pagan Warriors: Violence and Justice in Russian Rodnoverie' *Violence and New Religious Movements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 235. For a comprehensive account of some other racist crimes committed by Rodnovers, see Victor Shnirelman 'Russian Neopaganism: from Ethnic Religion to Racial Violence', *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (Durham: Acumen, 2013), pp. 62 – 76.
- [9] See also Marlene Laruelle, 'The Ideological Shift On The Russian Radical Right: From Demonizing The West To Fear Of Migrants', *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 57 (No. 6. 2010).
- [10] Adrian Ivakhiv, 'Nature and Ethnicity in East European Paganism: An Environmental Ethic of the Religious Right?' *The Pomegranate*. Vol. 7 (No. 2. 2005).
- [11] Ronald Inglehart and Wayne E. Baker, 'Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values', *American Sociological Review*, Vol 65 (No. 1, 2000), 41.

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## About the author:

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**Kaarina Aitamurto** received her doctoral degree from the University of Helsinki. Her dissertation analysed Russian contemporary Paganism and nationalism. In her post-doctoral studies she has also focused on populism and hate speech in Europe and Muslim minorities in ethnically Russian areas. She has a postdoctoral researcher position at the Aleksanteri Institute and is a member of the Finnish Centre of Excellence in Russian Studies—Choices of Russian Modernization, funded by the Academy of Finland. She is the editor of *Modern Pagan and Native Faiths in Central and Eastern Europe* and a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Religion and Violence*.