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Introduction

The foundations of legitimacy in contemporary Russia. The following paper attempts to understand the political, moral and spiritual framework of the Russian Federation through the philosophy of Ivan A. Ilyin, a figure often quoted by current Russian president Vladimir Putin. Rather than focus on how Putin and his policies draw inspiration from and reflect the early twentieth century political philosopher, the dissertation highlights how Ilyin and his philosophy mirror Putin and his policies and serve as a means of thoroughly understanding the philosophy at the roots of and passing through the veins of the Russian nation and state apparatus. The paper contrasts current events and features of the Russian political project with Ilyin's translated works in order to discover how the Russian state understands and justifies itself, the role of religion, particularly Eastern Orthodox Christianity, in a nominally secular state such as Russia, and the preference for the motherland before all others.

It is no secret that Ilyin is a favorite if not the favorite political philosopher of the Russian president, who declared the man "a true Russian patriot and philosopher" and told a reporter, "You know, I don't want to say that it was only Ivan Ilyin" when asked which thinker was his greatest influence. Furthermore, Putin made for the thinker's remains to be repatriated from Germany to a cemetery in Moscow, personally visiting Ilyin on his consecration in May of 2009.¹ The impact of Orthodoxy on Russia cannot be understated, since the fall of the USSR, the percentage of self-declared Orthodox Christians in Russia had risen from 31% to a staggering 72% recorded in 2008, though only a meager 9% attended religious services at least once a

¹ Harris, Ray. "The Struggle Against Modernity: The Chinese and Russian Retreat to Traditionalism." *Integral World*. Accessed 11 January 2025.

month.² Partly due to liberalizations in freedom of religion, mostly due to the strong association which Orthodoxy holds to Russian culture and resurgent nationalism, many Russian nationals associate with Orthodoxy and a sense of historical-spiritual belonging and servitude without observing the most basic rites and customs of the Russian Orthodox Church, making Russia radically different from Western Republics which base their regimes on a secular basis of individual rights and service of the state to the individual citizen; freedom not just for the individual but “Freedom for Russia.”

In addition, Ilyin toes the line on Russia and the Great Patriotic War. Putin, though decrying Lenin and communism, nonetheless glorifies the Soviet Union’s defense of the motherland in the Second World War by holding annual “Victory Day” parades with soldiers dressed in Soviet uniforms, waving the tricolour and hammer and sickle alike.³ Not shy of authoritarianism but criticizing totalitarianism. Ilyin, like Putin, does not associate with fascist regimes such as Italy and Germany. Quite the contrary, Ilyin made a prediction of increased aggression again from Germany towards the motherland in the future, denouncing others in the White movement who either served as puppets for Germany in its eradication of the Slavic peoples, or those who became pawns of Great Britain and the Allies,⁴ making him the ideal mouthpiece of present-day Russian political academia. Indirectly giving some value to socialism, the twentieth-century thinker recognizes the need for economic “sociality” and spinning the well-known socialist statement, “religion is the opiate of the masses,” on its head with the assertion

² Pew Research Center, "Russians Return to Religion, But Not to Church," February 10, 2014, accessed 15 January 2025.

³ BBC News, "In Pictures: Russian WW2 Victory Day Parade in Moscow," May 9, 2015, accessed January 19, 2025

⁴ Ilyin, *Our Tasks*, 26

that “socialism was made into some kind of surrogate for religion”⁵ in lieu of skepticism and the Enlightenment’s effects on religion.

Throughout his works it is clear that Ilyin’s writings are meant for a Russian audience, which though cultivating certain universally applicable concepts in legal consciousness, freedom and spirituality through their analysis of the Russian reality, speak mostly of Russian concerns and Russian state projects, mirroring Putin’s choice of speaking only Russian and hiring translators in interviews notwithstanding his fluency in English; a leader for Russians and Russians only. In fact, expressing hostility towards international politics which is condemned as having hijacked Russia under the communist international throughout the existence of the Soviet Union. It is no doubt that Putin prefers this philosopher above all others for this particular reason.⁶ The paper outlines Ilyin’s understanding of Russia as a particular society with its own context and traditions differentiating it from the West. Arguing against a philosophy of a Kantian-universal nature, which postulates democracy and liberalism as frameworks whose validity is to be deduced through the logic of liberalism and democracy itself without regard for the socio-economic and phenomenological particularities of Russia, to be applied over Russian society from without, or worse yet from the West, Ilyin stresses an open approach to moral epistemology which acknowledges objective, universal principles, yet derives them from and incorporates them into the given realities of one’s particular country, serving as the “substantiative” rather than “formal” basis to Russian “legal consciousness,” the driver of and project of Russian society.

⁵ Ilyin, *Our Tasks*, 52

⁶ Ilyin, *Our Tasks*, 37

Akin to Kant, Ilyin understands freedom not in the negative, in the unshackling of the individuals of limitations placed by external actors, but in reason and self-determination, and not purely subjectively, but objectively, of dedication to an objectively righteous and self-fulfilling cause rather than servitude to one's own passions and instincts without self-awareness and self-coercion. Ilyin recognizes the limitations already existing in ourselves as subjects, limited only to our own experiences and never truly able to know for certain the realities of others. How the soul comes to liberate itself from this solipsism, of unshackling from one's own experiences, according to Ilyin, occurs first by recognizing the very negativity of oneself, the nothingness and lack of objectivity, of repentance and rebirth.⁷

Coming from the right Hegelian tradition, for Ilyin moral and legal knowledge is not acquired independent of experience but lived and expressed through it. Like with Hegel, thought and being are intricately connected in the works of the writer, putting the man not just as a philosopher but also as a politician and participant. The abstractions of state, positive law and individuality which in-themselves mean nothing and contradict each other bring to a greater unity which both negates them but preserves them in its negating them, existing through their plurality without fully dissolving them within itself. For Ilyin legal consciousness is cultivated through interaction with other free and creative souls, either through completely internal and free association, or by punitive measures by the state inducing one towards loyalty to their nation and internal submission and rebirth.

1. Between Theology and Legitimacy

⁷ Ilyin, *On Resistance to Evil by Force*, 8

First and foremost, one of the most striking features of Russian politics is the intersection between church and state in a nominally secular republic, with the theocratic and the political deeply intertwined; the existence of an independent Orthodox church, a conservative ulema skeptical of the Islam imported from abroad, and a Lama for Kalmykia. Regarding contemporary events, Patriarch Kiril of the Russian Orthodox Church and the muftis of the Caucasus republics have defended the special military operation in Ukraine, with the former promising dead participants a remission of all sins and the latter martyrdom.⁸ On the other hand, the Lama, appointed by the Dalai Lama as Supreme Lama of Kalmykia and acting as representative of Tibetan Buddhism in Commonwealth (CIS) nations, has been in exile outside of Russia since decrying the Russian operation in Ukraine. Having subsequently been declared a foreign agent by the Russian Federation, another clergyman was elected in his place under pressure Moscow. Despite also being a strong opponent to the conflict, the Dalai Lama approved the election.⁹

Most interesting is the case of Islam, with the Russian ulema closely tied to the Kremlin, serving almost as an institution of the state apparatus. The practice of the Wahhabist sect of Islam, a modernist and strict interpretation of Sharia, is banned at regional levels by the republics of Chechnya, Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria. Similarly, the wearing of the niqab is not allowed in Dagestan,¹⁰ and in Chechnya has been met with public humiliation at the hands of local authorities,¹¹ though the less concealing hijab has been encouraged. After the devastating Chechen Wars and the consequential upsurge in religious fervor among Russian Muslims,

⁸ Sarina Sautieva, "Halal or Haram: The Divide Between Russia's Muslims Over Ukraine," *CEPA*, July 20, 2023, accessed 20 January 2025.

⁹ Velvl Chernin, "Russian Buddhists and the War in Ukraine," *BESA Center*, January 7, 2024, accessed January 15 2025.

¹⁰ Seb Starcevic, "Dagestan Ban Niqab in Response to Deadly Terror Attack - Russia, Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov," *Politico EU*, July 3, 2024, accessed January 15, 2025.

¹¹ OC-Media, "Chechen Women Scolded and Forced to Remove Niqabs on State TV," December 2, 2020, accessed January 15, 2025.

particularly in the Caucasus where the insurrections occurred, foreign creeds, rather than the involved clergy or the religion as a whole, were held responsible for the atrocities and labeled dangerous to Russia and also Islam, pitting the Russian state not only as a defender of its own territorial integrity but also of the true religion of Islam. Russia, having already shared an extensive history with Muslim populations well within its borders, took advantage of sectarianism among the Chechen rebels and placed one of their own as leader of the loyalists, Akhmad Kadyrov, the chief cleric skeptical of foreign volunteers for the Chechen cause and their beliefs from abroad. Though far from moderate, Chechen leadership has decried foreign Islam, emphasizing the role of ethnic traditions and opposing the lack thereof in Salafism and its association with terrorism. In addition, the Russian state has tasked the Islamic institutions in Russia with assimilating the large influx of foreign Muslim migrants into the Russian flavor of the religion.¹² In Putin's own words, "it is important to educate Muslim youth in traditional Islamic values and prevent attempts to impose on us world outlooks that are alien to us and have nothing to do with genuine Islam."¹³

1.1. Traditional or New Religions?

Similarly to the precedent Russian Empire, the Third Rome, maintainer of the legacy of Rome, modern Russia posits itself as the defender of traditional values and traditional religions. In the cases of the two Abrahamic religions, Christianity and Islam, a strong emphasis on their national character as opposed to their abstract universality is made, and the incompatibility of such with a Russian identity and polity. However, new, proselytizing religions such as Mormonism and

¹²Alexey Malashenko, "Islam in Russia," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 23, 2014, accessed January 21, 2025.

¹³ Russia Muftis Council, "President Putin: Traditional Islam is an integral part of Russia's spiritual life," *Muslim.ru*, accessed January 15, 2025.

Jehovah's Witnesses, have been either outright banned by the state or had their missionary activities severely curtailed by the “Yarovaya Law,” a passed bill which restricts missionary activity to houses of worship of registered religious organizations. In agreement, Ivan A. Ilyin, though a twentieth-century monarchist reactionary and critic of the enlightenment, acknowledged some form of freedom of religion, or at the very least freedom of conscience, akin to the bill forwarded by State Duma member Irina Yarovaya; in his own words “a monarchical state is called upon to be tolerant of other faiths and can make exceptions from this only for perverted and disloyally aggressive faiths.”¹⁴ Putin, not only tolerating the other faiths of the mir, but protecting and maintaining them as they are currently, keeping out new and exotic belief systems, fits Ilyin’s profile to a tee. Ilyin lays it out best when he states:

The Emperor’s attitude towards confessions is even deeper and more subtle. It is natural for a sovereign to have, in addition to his royal patriotism, two sources of inspiration - religious faith and popular love. Faith will probably lead him to a well-known, nationally recognized confession and to the corresponding church in which he was born and spiritually nurtured. But this does not mean that he can and should drown the power of his royal judgment in the opinions of the clergy of his day: neither secular power should encroach on the church and church affairs, nor the clergy should encroach on the power of the Sovereign, on its subordination and absorption. Mutual advice and mutual support here form the limit of joint freedom.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ilyin, *Our Tasks*, 662

¹⁵ Ilyin, *Our Tasks*, 652

Just as Putin is not a representative of the church, he nonetheless professes its faith, and though he sees himself also a servant of God, he also acknowledges his role to the country and the distinction between secular power and church power, with neither smothering the other. Ilyin, a proponent of distinction between spiritual and secular authority, nonetheless argues that the state must not separate its citizens' legal consciousness from religion, whether that be Christian or "also any other," critiquing communist and Western liberal democratic states for having "sterilized"¹⁶ legal consciousness by removing the supra-sensory from its equation. Putin's doctrine can be understood through this lens: that outside of any support they may provide, the institutions of religion are to be separated from the state, but religious sentiment itself is to be allowed and even encouraged for the cultivation of a national-patriotic consciousness among the people. This can be seen in the Muslim republics of the Caucasus, which are experiencing a religious revival encouraged by their respective governments.¹⁷

1.2. Symphonia, Temporal and Spiritual Authority in the Past and Present Worlds

Church and state relations in the Orthodox world have always been quite distinct from those of the Western world. Beginning with the first Orthodox patriarchate in Constantinople and other parts of the Byzantine Empire, the ideology of *symphonia* arose, wherein the church and state would act in symphony for the benefit of the polity. Referring to such an ideology in the context of the modern secular Russian state and the role of spiritual authority in the polity, the contemporary Russian Orthodox Church published a document they titled their "Social Doctrine," in which they declare:

No matter what researchers have said about church-state relations in Byzantium and the Rus, at her very heart the church has remained free, irrespective of the external political

¹⁶ Ilyin, *Our Tasks*, 631

¹⁷ Alexey Malashenko, "Islam in Russia," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 23, 2014, accessed January 21, 2025.

circumstance. Today the Church and state in Russia, as well as in some countries in the post-Soviet expanse, are able to speak with a single voice and express a united position. The principle of mutual non-interference of Church and state in the internal affairs of each other must be preserved and is being preserved.¹⁸

In order to give the appearance of a stable and efficient practice which stood the width of time, in such an article, the group attempts to establish a long, continuous history of unchanging church and state relations, using the term *symphonia* to describe relations between secular and spiritual power spanning from the Eastern Roman Empire all the way to the modern day Russian Republic. According to the author of the article, the term *symphonia* lacks a clear meaning, being described at times as the church giving moral character to and legitimizing the state while the state takes it upon itself to protect the church as if it were a vital organ to the polity, and at others as the church and state functioning in symphony with each other with a centralized authority figure as its conductor. Neither of the two conceptions can be said to exist in the framework of the modern secular Russian state, wherein church and state powers are not only distinguished but also separated, and neither does the state involve itself in the debates within the church nor does the church in the workings of the state.

In *Our Tasks*, philosopher Ivan A. Ilyin supports the distinction between priestly and state authority, mentioning the English monarchy's approach as an example not to be followed. The thinker notes that the monarch being the leader of the national church could lead strange situations such as that of King James II, a Catholic who as King of England also found himself as head of the Protestant Anglican Church. Ilyin also repudiates the harsh repressions of Catholics by the other English monarchs, and likewise the repression of Protestants by Holy

¹⁸ Mikhail Antonov, *Church-State Symphonia: Its Historical Development and Its Applications by the Russian Orthodox Church*, Cambridge University Press, 2020, 476-477

Roman Emperor Charles V, who in his eyes made religion synonymous with state loyalties, two domains of life which Ilyin would rather keep apart; only “perverted” and “disloyal” religions which pose a direct threat to the state should be handled by the state.¹⁹

In medieval philosophy, the concept of symphonia was understood primarily in two ways, either through the Christian doctrine of consubstantiality, or such a doctrine merged with Neoplatonic ideals. In the former, the polity was understood as having both a divine and earthly natures, akin to Christ, where the state served as the body, and the church as the soul, neither inseparable from the other, with the spiritual nature giving universal and moral doctrines, and the earthly body putting them into practice in the particular and unique conditions the empire found itself in. In the latter Neoplatonic understanding, such a unity was directed by a higher unity, at the time the emperor, who stood above both the church and the state as an almost God-like figure. In both interpretations there remains a unity between church and state, notwithstanding their being distinguished. Under the first doctrine, religion must serve a role in the state, cannot be removed from it as the soul cannot be removed from a person, needed to give life and a ground to the decisions of the states. In the latter, the church is subordinate to the state and ultimately to the emperor, who presides outside of and directing both. Unlike modern secular democracies such as Russia, the state envisioned in symphonia bases itself around the idea of state and church as like soul and body, differentiated but inseparable as one cannot live without the other, not one existing above or before the other. In line with this historical concept, Ilyin states that a tsar must have:

In addition to his royal patriotism, two sources of inspiration - religious faith and popular love. Faith will probably lead him to a well-known, nationally recognized confession and to the corresponding church in which he was born and spiritually nurtured. But this does

¹⁹ Ilyin, *Our Tasks*, 662

not mean that he can and should drown the power of his royal judgment in the opinions of the clergy of his day: neither secular power should encroach on the church and church affairs, nor the clergy should encroach on the power of the Sovereign, on its subordination and absorption. Mutual advice and mutual support here form the limit of joint freedom. This was the ancient Orthodox tradition in Rus'.²⁰

According to Russian academic Mikhail Antonov, professor in the Department of Theory and History of Law and State, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Saint Petersburg, Orthodoxy Christianity in Russia originally served the purpose of introducing hierarchy and centralization to the nation, as the pantheon of pagan gods all on equal footings with each other meant the multitude of Rurikid princes could each claim their own patron deity against those of the others, while in the monotheistic religion of Christianity, God was only one and could not be simultaneously favor multiple princes over each other at once. The church became a powerful tool in keeping the Rus unified, with priests taking the role of negotiators in conflicts. The article states:

Each time two antagonistic parties of citizens living on two different banks of the Volkhov river—the merchants and the artisans—were ready to start fighting, they waited on the main bridge for a while expecting the archbishop to come between them and start reconciliation talks. This ritual was repeatedly used and was a part of the political order of that city.²¹

Later, however, the Russian Orthodox Church began to amass a large amount of wealth and power. After the Mongol invasions which put large swathes of Russian territory under tribute to the great khan, the church began to play a much larger role in state functioning due to its tax-exempt status by the Mongol overlords. To avoid paying the tax, Russian rulers willingly gave fiscal tax-collection and jurisdiction rights to the monasteries in the occupied lands, and as

²⁰ Ilyin, *Our Tasks*, 662

²¹ Antonov, *Church-State Symphonia: Its Historical Development and Its Applications by the Russian Orthodox Church*, 482.

a result the church began to amass a large fortune and significant power. Previously uninvolved in political matters unless requested to, the church began to favor certain princes in the shattered Rus over others, centralizing control and legitimacy around the Principality of Moscow it favored over the others, holding a lot of sway and money yet lacking the institutions and structure seen in the Roman Catholic Church, and as a result, the church relied upon the state to suppress its dissidents and heresies. From this mix of factors arose the Russian Orthodox church's reputation as a staunch ally of the Russian state, and a key player in its national politics. The church became an institution merged with the state, its interests merged with national interests, at times challenging state power from within. Unlike the contemporary church's speaking of *symphonia* as an unbroken harmony, the Russian emperor at times found himself at odds with the newly formed and powerful Moscow Patriarchate, as was the case between Tsar Alexi and Patriarch Nikon, among others, eventually culminating in the abolishment of the Russian Patriarchate and its reduction to a state ministry, the Holy Synod, by Peter the Great as, "common people do not understand how the spiritual authority is distinguishable from the autocratic, but marveling at the dignity and glory of the Highest Pastor, they imagine that such an administrator is a second sovereign, a power equal to that of the Autocrat, or even greater."²² Nonetheless, the real distinguishing of church and state domains in the concept of *Symphonia* can be observed in the case of Patriarch Nikon and Tsar Alexi, wherein the Patriarch fought back against state encroachment on church affairs by referring to the concept.

²² Antonov, *Church-State Symphonia: Its Historical Development and Its Applications by the Russian Orthodox Church*, 484.

2. Paternalism and Freedom, Ilyin's Conception of the State

Providing a definition for the state is one of the most pressing questions among political philosophers. What is a state, a mere compact of people in agreement, requiring the consent of its subjects to exist, or an imposing force coming from the outside? What qualifies as consent to be governed? First, understanding what a state is, its essence, allows one to derive an ought from an is. As such, it can also be understood what a state *should* look like, what must be present for the state to be, as anything else would not merit being called a "state." Locke and Hobbes argued this point, by inquiring into what a state is, it can then be measured how well real-life states fulfill their definitions as states, allowing for differentiation between true states and what is lawless anarchy under a different name.

According to Locke and Hobbes, the state is a means to certain ends; it exists to protect individual rights and liberties, and individuals join together for their own personal, subjective needs. The state exists insofar as it can meet these ends, deriving its legitimacy from below, from the subjective wills of the people. For Hobbes and Locke, the lack of any state, the "state of nature," already has the thinkers' specified rights fully present in it individual rights are already realized individually and subjectively, in a state of anarchy and distrust, and then give way to the formation of government as following from the self-centered and individually minded drives of its constituents. Rights precede "civil society," and the latter follows from the former; no new consciousness is awoken by the state, rather the state exists to better respect certain pre-existing facts of nature such as entitlement to self-preservation. In saying such, though succeeding at deriving an ought from the actual, in outlining what nature and humanity ought to be to more fully be themselves and the truths of nature which ought not to be denied, no concrete differentiation between the two is made, between nature and the ought, what is natural and

already is is what ought to be to the fullest, to be ignorant of one's own natural rights is to oppose nature. The state, not having anything higher or of divine inspiration separate from nature and all that is below, simply becomes a product of a social contract among its constituents in the philosophies of the two political thinkers. It is on this ground that Locke and Hobbes did not directly propose any structural change to the regimes of their time, rather they merely contested their contemporaries' understanding of what their current governments were, where their roots rested and hence what was needed to maintain said regimes. As such, in declaring the true foundations of the governments of their time to rest upon a social contract with certain inalienable rights, civil society could be differentiated from the anarchic "state of war," which does not equally promote and protect individuals' inherent rights. Keeping with this idea, Locke never stated that acts of defiance by the people against their sovereign for the protection of their rights were either revolutionary or brought about change to the natural order of things, rather, it was the sovereign that was in revolt, putting themselves in a state of war with their constituents by having infringed upon their inalienable rights.

On quite a different note, social-contract theorist Jean-Jacques Rousseau also recognized certain rights the state exists to ensure, though said rights were not of or pre-existing nature, but creations of convention, and did not exist on an individual level but as the expression of a general will. Rousseau mentioned "the total alienation of each associate, together with all of his rights, to the entire community" in the state of civil society, and acknowledged the need for the state to act as an educator which informs its subjects of the general will, which exists "independent of what anyone happens to think" but still in the common interests of all. Like his

predecessors, Rousseau views freedom as the absence of coercion, and realized prior to any state form.²³

The individual has not been negated as they have given themselves to a collective will. Rousseau divides the evolution of liberty into three phases: natural, civil and moral. Natural liberty, entailing an “unlimited right to anything that tempts him and that he can attain;”²⁴ civil liberty, obedience to the law and general will; moral freedom, internalization of the law and general will, the only true type of freedom not limited by “mere appetite,” but by self-prescribed law and self-coercion; it is in the final stage that man realizes his greatest freedom and self-agency.

On the other hand, for philosopher Ivan A. Ilyin, legal consciousness, which the state is an expression of, is both the means and the end of itself. Rights are not realized purely subjectively, but through legal consciousness and the partial negation of the individual subject, not expressed by nature alone and not indifferentiable from it. Hence the state, rather than being a “social contract,” a term Ilyin contemptuously repudiates, is an “institution,” the difference being the participatory and dynamic, bottom-up form of the former over the latter’s top-down, separate, static existence regardless of changes in social circumstances. This voluntary state in theory, which Ilyin terms a “corporation” to oppose it to the more realistic “institution” form of government, does not exist divorced from its members, as an entity of its own, but instead as merely as the willed consent of the governed. Under this model, the state has no ground to it other than the consent of those it rules upon. In putting anyone beneath it, attempting to order

²³ Taylor, Benjamin B, *Second Treatise of the Social Contract: A Comparative Analysis of Locke and Rousseau*, Open Works, 2015, 7-8.

²⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and the First and Second Discourses*, translated by Susan Dunn, Yale University Press, 2002, 167.

anyone around, the state inadvertently demands their consent, as anyone has the choice to either leave or refuse service, whatever the consequences of that act may be. According to Ilyin, this notion is a ridiculous formalism, though nonetheless, for Ilyin, the consent of the governed may be a requirement for the physical existence of the state, but does not determine its function or concept, which is to be found in certain universal, transcendent and “suprapersonal” principles rather than solely a will, be it collective or not. As defined in his work, *Our Tasks*, “an institution is built from top to bottom by the founder and a group of persons appointed by him: this is the implementation of care for people. The purpose and objectives of the institution are established from the very beginning by the founder; they are determined by the charter; the charter determines the structure of the institution and the methods of its operation. Some people run the institution and this is their service; other people enjoy the benefits of this institution, but are not authorized members of it.”²⁵

A skeptic of party politics, Ilyin constantly bashes subjective, relative and personal preferences in politics over objective national, religious truths. Much of the argumentation of the Russian thinker rests on merit and the ability of a state to carry out what must be done, rather than unconditional respect for democracy and individuals’ whims. For Ilyin, even the subject itself is not without a certain internal structure, and an individual’s creative freedom does not solely act upon and exist outside of nature. The individual is not an atom acting upon the world from without, but themselves bears a certain psychological structure which must be arrived at through “spiritual education” in connection with the external; the individual’s freedom is not a given abstraction, but structured, grown into, reflecting a certain level of maturity on the part of the individual, with the state as a paternalistic figure devoted to and tasked with educating its

²⁵ Ilyin, *Our Tasks*, 392

people, recognizing certain pre-existing rights in all individuals but the ability to appreciate these rights and self-govern only in some. As such, the mature subject of law is not reduced to a mere slave, bound by law as an “external power” and opposition to themselves, a mindset which the philosopher states brings to the recognition of “the force of law, but not its worth” and the consequent conviction that “might is where the law is.”²⁶ As equally the subject and object of its own thought, containing its own thought yet also resulting from its own thought, law neither can be reduced to a purely external, indifferent force nor an internal, subjective and baseless opinion. The state cannot coerce anyone into spiritual education but can lay out the external conditions to *induce* an individual towards self-reflection and spiritual rebirth. Unlike. In Ilyin’s phenomenological etiology of law, every human being begins as the center of their own universe, which he dubs, “the mystery of solitary being.” In such a state, conscious beings recognize their connection with the world and experiences around them, that the experiences and objects they encounter are necessary for their entire experience of the world, that is to say, constitute and are necessary to their experience and being, and so the will and outward look of the individual subject is not limited in any way, and the individual feels a pre-existing natural right to delineate all around itself as its own and belonging to its being and to feel entitled to what sustenance is needed to maintain itself in whatever way it sees fit (*On the Essence of Legal Consciousness*, pg. 153).²⁷ However, in the case where two wills collide and recognize each other, the question of the rightness of one’s own claims comes to the table, and boundaries are drawn up between the two individuals who live in two separate yet equally subjectively valuable lives, neither of which can collapse upon or subsume the will and preferences of the other due to the atomistic nature of

²⁶ Ilyin, *On the Essence of Legal Consciousness*, 146

²⁷ Ilyin, *On the Essence of Legal Consciousness*, 153

subjectivity. The recognition of the value of the other's will inevitably means recognizing the importance of one's own will, and vice versa, as its isolation and un-subsumability which distinguish it from others implies the distinction and subjective value of one's own will as well. This striving for fairness is not simply a means to one's initial desires, as with Locke and Hobbes, but out of true respect and recognition of the other and the recognition of value and truth in law as an expression of the value in one's own will as that of another, for law and equality as an end in-itself.

In his work, *On the Essence of Legal Consciousness*, Ilyin speaks of objective law by stating, "the recognition of natural law, founded on a sighted and rational conviction of its spiritual necessity, is the condition under which the personal spirit of a human being, in obeying it, remained free. The freedom of spirit is not disrupted because a person independently perceived and recognized the rational groundedness of the rule: on the contrary, his self-determination receives from this its own true, objective content. The rule's being recognized does not absorb or abolish its *objektive significance*: it is preserved, and consists in the fact that the recognition of it gives objective rightfulness to the one who recognized it, and non-recognition remains powerless to change anything in its objektive content and significance."²⁸ In other words, someone may consent to and follow law externally, out of self-interest or their own subjective opinions, without fully internalizing and knowing the law and its objectively true purpose, but those who come to grasp the objective significance of a law, which exists "objektively" yet is "formulated by thought," neither can reduce it to a just an opinion they hold nor deny it now knowing what it is; in making it their own they do not reduce it to anything purely subjective, rather the law becomes the objective basis of their character and self-

²⁸ Ilyin, *On the Essence of Legal Consciousness*, 156

determination. Regarding the state, others may benefit from it and consent to its rule on this basis, but only those immersed in legal consciousness can carry out its functions and determine its form. All subjects may consent to the state's rule, but only a select few *participate* in its thought. The internal logic driving the state apparatus is determined by those immersed in legal consciousness, which has an external, immediate objective significance independent of human reflection, but an internal logic and being which mirrors human thought, not existing purely in the immediate as with positive law but holding a deeper meaning which reaffirms its objective significance, original immediacy and independence from human opinion.²⁹ Those who know the meaning behind the laws are those that give them life and provide the thought driving the state, setting the charter for others to follow, knowing why the laws are the way they are and telling apart just from unjust laws upon a rational basis that isn't known to all those who follow them.³⁰

In line with this unitarian and institutionalist perspective, the notions of popular sovereignty and national self-determination are rejected, specifically those of nations under the former Russian Empire. Sovereignty for Ilyin is not a given but earned, discovered in oneself through internal spiritual transformation. The monarch, as the most devoted and immersed in Russian legal consciousness, bears the most sovereignty and responsibility, acting as an educating and inducing force from above. As such, it is noted that not all nations were formed horizontally, with all parties on a more or less equal standing, as was the case in Switzerland and the United States, where multiple cantons or states developing by themselves independently of each other came to horizontal agreements to form federal structures which would not collapse the

²⁹ Ilyin, *On the Essence of Legal Consciousness*, 128

³⁰ Ilyin, *On the Essence of Legal Consciousness*, 154-155

powers and duties of their member states onto one political center, but that many nations such as Spain and France were formed from a dominant center which either absorbed or merged with its neighbors.³¹ Opposed to the universal applicability of the United States system assumed by many other nations and most often Americans themselves, Ilyin mentions the trend of “imitation” of the US federal system by recently independent Latin American countries, which suffered countless civil wars between unitarians and federalists as a result.³² In stark contrast to Rousseau’s thought, Ilyin speaks of contemporary Russian radicals’ calls for democracy with harsh words, stating, “what attracts and satisfies them is formal democracy, which does not require the power of judgment from the citizen; these are “rights” that untie a person and are not related to legal consciousness; this is “self-determination” and “self-government”, not ensured by the spiritual independence of a person; this is the “head of state”, who does not lead anything and does not lead anywhere.”³³ Nonetheless, Ilyin recognizes the many duties of a centralized legal monarchy, in a state of laws rather than persons. In line with his view of objective values and law over arbitrary opinion, Ilyin applies many of the same restrictions placed on members of a legal order onto the sovereign as well, and in Ilyin’s works the divine right to rule granted to monarchs is not a matter-of-fact but contingent on the monarch’s ability to rule effectively and their level of legal consciousness,³⁴ and anything else is either a puppet or a criminal tyrant ruling other selfishly minded subjects as the strongest in a state of anarchy resting on external transactions and coercion rather than internal loyalties.

³¹ Ilyin, *Our Tasks*, 213-215

³² Ilyin, *Our Tasks*, 216-217

³³ Ilyin, *Our Tasks*, 656

³⁴ Ilyin, *Our Tasks*, 660

Regarding moral freedom and its “determinate” rather than its simple, abstract concept, which gives no definition to freedom and roots it in indeterminacy, the Russian thinker states, “naïve morality, believing in unconditional free will, would begin to cry here for a personal “effort” that supposedly “can easily be done” ... The problem of spinelessness is incomprehensible to the indeterminist. It is also in vain that the naïve opponent of “violence”, believing in the unconditional power of spineless conspicuousness and spineless love, would “convince” and “ignite” a spineless soul. The problem of education is insurmountable for the sentimental. To help a person incapable of a good self-inducement, one can either weaken the power of his passions, or by strengthening the power of his will. To educate a characterless child or, that which is almost the same, a spineless adult, means not only to awaken in him a spiritual sight and to spark love within him, but to teach him cathartically in the discipline of self-compulsion and peremptorily in the discipline of self-restraint. For a man incapable of good self-inducement, the only way to lead him to this art is to subject him to external pressure emanating from others.”³⁵ Like Rousseau, Ilyin views moral man under a state as his own governor, though those who prove incapable of self-governing must either be nudged towards such or physically separated from their desired outcomes to encourage cooperation, for those who consent to the law only out of their own interests and external concerns of repercussion or reward cannot be said to be doing so out of their own free will but of passing passions, and from their perspective the law is not law but merely an arbitrary limitation from outside, ignorant and solipsistic. As best put by Russian president Vladimir Putin in a quoting of Fyodor Dostoevsky, “leaving boundless freedom, I conclude with boundless despotism” - this, by the way, is what our Western

³⁵ Ilyin, *On Resistance to Evil by Force*, 30-31

opponents came to.”³⁶ To intervene in such circumstances is not to impede on one’s freedom as true freedom is realized through law and cooperation, through its own self-limitation. For Ilyin, simply following the rules, though preferable to the alternative, does not mean one has acquired moral freedom, and though freedom necessitates certain determinations that exist objectively and beyond the individual, as a thinking subject of their own, people, knowing only themselves first and foremost and never others for certain, cannot be controlled or owned the same way an object can, and external “inducement” can only encourage the human spirit to internalize the basis for freedom it offers, but never force it.

Unlike Locke and Hobbes, however, Ilyin does not see freedom as purely a means to individual ends, and neither does he see it as inseparable from nature as is. Meaning is apparent in yet not reducible to the immediate, in the passions or sentiments, but in the transcendent moral law which transcends nature but nonetheless belongs to it as “natural law.”³⁷ In a critique of renowned thinker Leo Tolstoy, the Russian philosopher criticizes appeals to nature alone, stating that in his contemporary’s works “God’s will not only fails to depart from these “eternal, immutable” laws of nature, but directly corresponds to them.”³⁸ Tolstoy, as an “indeterminist,” does not give freedom any concrete meaning other than the lack thereof, and hence brings such a position to its logical conclusion of opposing any external actors or structures which would introduce limits and determinations to the individual, eventually carrying him even further to the ironic rejection of nature on the grounds that its negatives have “control over the life of the entire organic world, and hence over that of man, regarded as an animal”³⁹ and then after having built

³⁶ Vladimir Putin, "Full Text of Putin Speech and Answers at Valdai," *Mirage News*, October 28, 2022, accessed September 20, 2025

³⁷ Ilyin, *On the Essence of Legal Consciousness*, 4

³⁸ Ilyin, *On the Essence Legal Consciousness*, 94

³⁹ Ilyin, *On the Essence Legal Consciousness*, 94-95

such a doctrine with the aim of defending man's freedom from nature's limitations and not reducing man to "an animal" goes on to paradoxically reject man's freedom on the grounds that the exercise of humanity's will over nature would constitute a "usurpation" of God's domain which he had willed the way it was before being touched. This type of false, "negative" freedom presented by Tolstoy and common to liberal thought takes itself in pure abstraction and hence is "paranoid" and self-negating as it closes in on itself, attempting to wrest itself of all shackles and thereby reducing itself to nothing, defined not by its own "positive" internal definition as that would always involve some limitation of the subject by the external object on which freedom is being exercised. Differentiating himself from the liberal tradition, Ilyin neither grounds freedom in a lack or in nature alone, nor does he consider it to be constructed and second to its constituents as is the case with Rousseau's "general will." Accordingly, legal consciousness is not a submission to or leaving nature to its own accord but based on the creative transformation of nature by human subjectivity and the universal, transcendent principles that can be derived from such a relationship. And neither is it something to be created but a knowledge to be acquired, reflecting centuries of Russian empire, autocracy and orthodoxy in Ilyin's case. The state, having its basis in historical and transcendent knowledge, exists to educate and by definition can only have its rule imposed on those who welcome it, but nevertheless acquires its basis and will not from its constituents but tradition and spiritual truths collectively discovered but not created. Freedom does not exist only at the level of the individual citizen as is believed in the liberal tradition, but as cited by President Putin, "he who loves Russia should wish freedom for it; above all, freedom for Russia as such, for its international independence and self-sufficiency; freedom for Russia as a unity of Russian and all other ethnic cultures; and finally,

freedom for the Russian people, freedom for all of us: freedom of faith, of the search for truth, creativity, work, and property.”⁴⁰

3. Ilyin’s Critique of Formalism: Toward a Substantive Legal Consciousness

To understand President Vladimir Putin’s positions, one must look first and foremost to his speeches. There one will understand that Putin is quite well versed in the history and humanities of his country, making frequent references to a plethora of specifically Russian philosophers. It’s undeniable that Putin attempts to present himself first and foremost as in touch with the unique tradition and spirit of his country and only after with democracy and the whims of its citizens, something you would expect from more of an institutionalized, hereditary head of state than an elected figure in principle kept in power by popular vote at the end of his every term. The president often remarks on the perceived hypocrisy of the West, skeptical of occidental ideology and models of governance, which in quoted Russian thinker Aleksandr Solzhenytsin’s words are tinted with “a continuous blindness of superiority” which “upholds the belief that vast regions everywhere on our planet should develop and mature to the level of present-day Western systems”⁴¹. Putin presents the Western claim to universally applicable standards and norms as an illusion, as merely one particular civilization with its own traditions and beliefs eroding another’s with the pretense that its own are superior.

In a speech delivered to a Moscow-based think tank, President Putin expressed his hostility towards Western ideological hegemony by stating, “power over the world is exactly

⁴⁰ Vladimir Putin, "Address by President of the Russian Federation," *Kremlin.ru*, December 4, 2014, accessed September 20, 2025.

⁴¹ Vladimir Putin, "Vladimir Putin Speech," *Earth Future Action*, October 27, 2022, accessed September 20, 2025.

what the so-called West has staked in its game. But this game is certainly dangerous, bloody and, I would say, dirty. It denies the sovereignty of countries and peoples, their originality and uniqueness, does not put the interests of other states in anything. In any case, if it is not directly stated about denial, but in practice this is precisely what is being carried out. No one, except those who formulate these very rules that I mentioned, has the right to original development: everyone else must be “combed” to these very rules.” Nonetheless, the Russian leader recognizes a possible “unity of humanity” built upon cooperation and mutual recognition which is “much more complex, original and multidimensional than in the simplified ideas of some Western ideologists.” On a similar note, in a work of his, Ivan A. Ilyin draws inspiration from popular nineteenth-century Russian legal scholar, Pavel Novgorodtsev, who in his time had helped introduce the neo-Kantian formalistic understanding of universal law to the East. Ilyin attempts to reconcile such a “formal” theory of law elaborated and justifying itself in thought, through its own concept rather than its applicability, with the historical and positivist school of law which saw law as varying between nations and lacking universal meaning.⁴² In Putin’s thought, disregard for creative freedom and autonomy can be observed today in the West, which holds certain forms of consciousness over and without regard for the cultural contexts of different civilizations, approaching other countries with presuppositions of how they should be run and presenting countries with so-called “universal” laws which in form are no different than the arbitrarily-formed traditions and cultures they claim superiority over. The leader states, “simplification, the erasure of all and any differences have become almost the essence of the modern West. What is behind this simplification? First of all, this is the disappearance of the

⁴² Ilyin, *On the Essence of Legal Consciousness*, 12-13

creative potential of the West itself and the desire to restrain, block the free development of other civilizations.”⁴³

According to Ilyin, the concept of “right” requires universality in the first place, and to establish one’s own right to something means to recognize that same right for all others. In the philosophers’ words, “it is impossible for a human being not to possess a legal consciousness; everyone who realizes that there are other people in the world besides himself possesses it,” and “it also lives in the soul even when positive law is as yet lacking, when there is as yet neither “law,” nor “custom.””⁴⁴

3.1 Positive Law as an Appearance

Particular and universalizing, it is no surprise that Ilyin’s philosophy has been picked up by Russian audiences. In stark contrast to the Western system, the Russian and even Byzantine, or simply Eastern Orthodox tradition for that matter, did not put a stark emphasis on the value of law in-itself or its immutability. Regarding religious law, the Orthodox interpretation of law differed greatly from the strict adherence to every detail of tradition in the Catholic Church. To the Greeks and particularly the Russians, law belonged to the Old Testament and was supplanted by and a *servant to* the grace and Holy Spirit of the New Testament. Law if it existed had to be *embodied* and concrete, and this concrete authority was in the autocrat, who ruled as a uniting principle which had a real effect on people’s lives, similar to God in heaven in form. As established by the important Byzantine legal text the Epanagoge, traditions and decisions of the

⁴³ Vladimir Putin, "Full Text of Putin Speech and Answers at Valdai," *Mirage News*, October 28, 2022, accessed September 20, 2025

⁴⁴ Ilyin, *On the Essence of Legal Consciousness*, 118

church were to become law only by the decree of the emperor, and the emperor had the role of orchestrating the symphony between church and state, existing outside of and directing both. The ruler was expected to act in accordance with law and the Holy Spirit, whilst also being its highest living embodiment.⁴⁵

Similarly, Ivan A. Ilyin does not see law as purely static, foundationless, or building off itself as is the case with legalistic philosophy and common law systems. In the Russian scholar's framework, law has a basis in something other than itself which nonetheless does not negate the universal value of or relegate law to simply a means but instead strengthens the value of law as also an end to itself, albeit not in abstraction from the particular situation from which it arose. According to the philosopher, law in its most mature and developed form appears as a norm, universally shared rather than merely an order, and positive law at its best is simply an appearance of something more substantial, and at its worst the arbitrary oppression of the weak by the strong. The thinker states that law is not relative, but changes in form while retaining the same logical content. It is not written words or codes which preserve such content, but only thought which possesses this unique capability to apprehend universals and unities between things which are not immediately obvious in the physical world and the constitutions of objects by themselves. In the same way that the written and spoken words of positive law cannot adequately express meaning without thought on the part of a person, external reality is in particulars, has universals and meaning yet cannot hold them the way thought does; to think in universals and note the similarities between things is unique to human thought.

⁴⁵ Antonov, *Church-State Symphonia: Its Historical Development and Its Applications by the Russian Orthodox Church*, 478.

Ilyin, though recognizing the need for universality in law, nonetheless does not recognize the value of law as static and immutable. In contrast to the common law systems of the United States and England, in which law builds off itself and has its value simply in precedent, law in Ilyin's legal theory must come with a certain meaning, must not hold any worth purely by itself or lose its concrete meaning in formalities.

3.2 Higher Law and Punishment

A radical change from Roman to Byzantine times was in the field of law. While in ancient Rome law stood as a field of its own, separate from philosophy and religion, in the east the empire and its laws began to adopt a more Christian appearance, unifying the study of law with the fields of politics, philosophy and religion rather than preserving it as much of a school of its own, though law schools and professors remained up until its last days nonetheless (). During the Byzantine Empire, justice for the sake of justice itself became less prominent as an idea than it was with its predecessor. Punishment became mainly for the purpose of intimidation and prevention of further infringement rather than as a means to make things right, with the Christian virtues of forgiveness and harmony being given precedence. Even as early as the twelfth century, the punishment of the death penalty was already being put into question by important figures such as legal scholar and Patriarch of Antioch, Theodor Balsamon⁴⁶, who decried it as “inhumane murder, not criminal punishment.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶John Anthony McGuckin, "Christianity and Family Law," *Cambridge University Press*, October 12, 2017, accessed September 16, 2025.

⁴⁷Vakhtang Bolkvadze, "Religion and Politics in Russia: Historical Overview," *Scientific Periodicals*, accessed September 20, 2025.

Such can be seen in Ivan Ilyin's legal theory of the purpose of punishment, which bears a more grounded and harmonizing aspect as opposed to the theory of justice proposed by his main philosophical influence, German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Fredrich Hegel, who shared the retributive conception of justice popular in the West.⁴⁸ Throughout Ilyin's work lies a "substantive" understanding of law which the philosopher distinguishes from formalistic and positivist theories of law by giving it a ground and basis in natural law and judges' internal convictions about certain cases. In his work, *On Resistance to Evil by Force*, Ilyin establishes that there are no evil acts, and that good and evil are internal states.⁴⁹ The fact that there are no evil acts means law here gives a lot of importance to intention, quite differently from the Western model of jurisprudence, which gives more concern to the specific crime committed and its consequences, rather than the intention of the perpetrator. In describing the Western system of jurisprudence, Slavophile Ivan Kireevsky described it as, "the orderliness of external formality, taken to the amazing logical perfection" and "equally amazing absence of inner justice."⁵⁰

In contemporary Russian legal circles, the concept of "higher justice," is mentioned often. Already existing and prominent in the nineteenth century, the term is distinguished from legal justice and refers to justice outside the bounds of the law and upon correct personal convictions. After the Russian annexation of Crimea, a flagrant violation of international law, the term was tossed around by some pro-regime journalists. One pro-regime website asked itself, "who knows how much time lawyers in various international courts could have wasted in futile

⁴⁸ Ilyin, *On the Essence of Legal Consciousness*, 181

⁴⁹ Ilyin, *On Resistance to Evil by Force*, 13-14

⁵⁰ Anna Schur, "Law, Conscience, and Russian National Identity: "Higher Justice" in the Shadow of the War," *Modern Criminal Law Review*, April 8, 2025, accessed September 19, 2025.

arguments if once again people hadn't got down to business themselves?" "This was a long road home, but higher justice triumphed."⁵¹

4. Ilyin's Vision of the Sovereign and the Problem of the Oligarchs

Regardless of ones' political views, it is undeniable that much of the history of Russia is the history of a vast empire bordered by various hostile powers who threatened its very existence. Whether that be the Mongol Empire and its Tatar successor states, who shattered the first Russian state and held it much of its former territory under their control for nearly two hundred and fifty years,⁵² or the infamous Nazi Germany in the Second World War, who pulled Russia into a conflict which would result in the deaths of a staggering number of lives. The vision of Russia as a historically persecuted nation, which Ivan A. Ilyin seems to share, though maybe applied erroneously in certain cases, nonetheless reflects a historical trend in Russia's history.

Throughout his writing in *Our Tasks*, Ilyin makes countless references to strong, autocratic figures which unified the Russian nation in times of strife and foreign encroachment. Though an avowed monarchist, the conservative political thinker initially welcomed the February Revolution which overthrew the old monarchy, believing it could result in a stronger Russia than the one that preceded it,⁵³ reflecting where his main priorities laid for Russia. A similar sentiment can be found among many Russians in the modern day, who hold generally positive views of certain figures who are -rightfully- vilified in West, such as Ioseb Besarionis

⁵¹ Anna Schur, "Law, Conscience, and Russian National Identity: "Higher Justice" in the Shadow of the War," *Modern Criminal Law Review*, April 8, 2025, accessed September 19, 2025.

⁵² Ilyin, *Our Tasks*, 248

⁵³ Ilyin, *On Resistance to Evil*, i

dze Jughashvili, commonly known as Joseph Stalin, de facto dictator of the Soviet Union throughout the Second World War, who since the fall of the Soviet Union has amassed a wide popularity among Russian citizens. In a poll reported by the BBC, slightly over half of Russian adults held a favorable view of the Soviet leader, due in large part to state propaganda over the victory in the Second World War, an image of Stalin as anti-elitist and putting greedy and conniving bureaucrats in their place, and merely the passage of time softening his crime.⁵⁴

Similarly, Russia's first and most notorious tsar, Ivan the IV, more commonly referred to as Ivan the Terrible, had the hearts of the commoners in his time for his brutal crackdown on the Boyar elite, many reforms, and his unification of much of Russia under Moscow, (Ivan the Terrible, *Free to Reward and Free to Punish, The Oprichnina in Action*), notwithstanding the senseless violence against civilians and nobles alike he used to get there. According to one source Ivan "denied his victims last rites" and sometimes "exterminated all relatives that could have arranged memorial prayers for them."⁵⁵

Being an autocratic monarch for Ilyin, rather than a position of hedonism and pleasure, involves endless sacrifice and devotion, as the sovereign, taking the helm of the entire nation, puts upon themselves its endless limitations and responsibilities. Among the many things to be taken into consideration, a monarch must take into consideration the human limitations of their subjects they seek to rule, the natural limitations of the country and its laws, and the needs of the people, among others. In Ilyin's words, "the first thing that needs to be understood in the position

⁵⁴ "Joseph Stalin: Why so many Russians like the Soviet Dictator," *BBC*, April 18, 2019, accessed September 19, 2025.

⁵⁵ Charles J, Halperin, *Ivan the Terrible: Free to Reward and Free to Punish*, September 13, 2019, Chapter: The Oprichnina as Religious Institution.

of the Sovereign is the limitation of his power and the limitlessness of the responsibilities that bind him.”⁵⁶

For Ilyin, Russian autocracy was not always realized to its fullest extent, as was the case with the abolition of serfdom, which the thinker states required four palace coups over the span of a century; only then was the tsar able to assert his independence from his “autocracy,” in other words, the nobility.⁵⁷ Similarly, Ilyin mentions that prior to its destruction by the Mongols, the push to centralize the state and establish the strong autocratic state Russia needed found itself foiled by the upper classes of boyars and industrial merchants, who worked against the common people and clergy who backed the unitary ambitions of the descendants of a prince Vladimir Monomakh. Still split up into many quarrelling princes, the Kievan Rus,’ which according to Ilyin united could have amassed up to three hundred thousand warriors, was shattered by the Mongols picking off princes one by one.⁵⁸

An analogy of this thought can be made to the case early post-soviet Russia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the movement away from its planned economy, the disastrous distribution of privatized companies’ stock and shady deals gave rise to a new class of “oligarchs” who had amassed immense power. The first president of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, was far from what Russians wanted from capitalism, and frequently conducted backdoor dealings with oligarchs who in turn would support his election bid.⁵⁹ In his wake arose Vladimir Putin, an obscure ex-intelligence agent who Yeltsin chose as prime minister for his

⁵⁶ Ilyin, *Our Tasks*, 657-659

⁵⁷ Ilyin, *Our Tasks*, 645

⁵⁸ Ilyin, *Our Tasks*, 248

⁵⁹ Greg Rosalky, “How “shock therapy’ created Russian oligarchs and paved the path for Putin,” *NPR*, March 22, 2022, Accessed September 19, 2025.

second term. Upon his ascension to the presidency, Putin began to neutralize his critics among the elite, eventually stripping Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the richest oligarch in the country at the time, of his oil empire and imprisoning him. According to NPR, Putin has begun to replace the liquidated oligarchs with his own “silovarchs,” who sit in top leadership positions in many of Putin’s re-nationalized state enterprises.⁶⁰ Finally, the consolidation Putin follows bears a strong semblance to many famous autocrats in Russian history, the consolidation in his crackdown against those elites Ilyin would dub his “autocracy,” centralization of power and the reconquest of lost lands; in Putin’s case Chechnya and Dagestan.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Ivan A. Ilyin's philosophy shows itself not as a curiosity from the past but as something that continues to live in the essence of the Russian state today. The Russian philosopher places large emphasis on motherland, faith, and autocracy, and this is why Russian president Vladimir Putin and others constantly go back to the thinker. It is not because Ilyin provides a detailed program that the Russian state chose to follow by chance, but because Ilyin gives words and justification to the way the Russian state already sees itself. The philosopher makes sense of Russia's many differences from the West in a way which still recognizes certain universal values and substance to Russia’s uniqueness, rather than being a simple assertion of relativism.

What comes through in reading Ilyin alongside Putin is that the twentieth-century thinker’s philosophy does not just inform Russia but reflects it. The suspicion of liberalism, dislike of formal rules for their own sake and the authentic submission to a higher authority are

⁶⁰ Greg Rosalky, “How Putin Conquered Russia’s Oligarchy,” *NPR*, March 29, 2022, Accessed September 19, 2025.

all ways Russia has long understood its own politics. Putin's appeals to unity, religion, and national destiny sound familiar because they fit into that same frame.

This does not mean Ilyin has no influence. The thinker gives structure and authority to ideas that otherwise would have seemed arbitrary and without a deeper reason to be valued the way he and other prominent Russian figures value them. He ties Russian autocracy and Russian survival together and argues that both are not only necessary but righteous, and drastically diverges from the social contract dogma widely accepted by political philosophers of his time, arguing that no state could be a true social contract among equally powerful members and should instead be defined as an “institution” than a contract of members on equal standing. Ilyin stands as an ideal philosopher for a nation that finds itself in a moment of internal and external conflict.

Religion and the church also stand at the center of this picture. Ilyin never wanted the state and the church to be completely fused yet was not a secularist who wanted all question of religion out of government and politics. For the thinker, religion was part of the legal and moral consciousness of the people, something that gave meaning to law and made loyalty possible. In Russia the Orthodox Church has long played this role, sometimes as a partner of the state and sometimes as its critic, but always involved in state affairs while not being a state in its own right. Today the church and its head, Patriarch Kirill, openly support the state and its wars, blessing soldiers and framing sacrifice as holy, and in this way it keeps the same role of giving spiritual justification to political power.

The emphasis on morality and spirit in the Russian thinker's writings, paired with the importance that inner conviction and spontaneous authenticity were given historically in the Orthodox world, makes Ivan A. Ilyin an obvious choice among top Russian political philosophers. Arguing that religion could not be removed from the life of the nation without

destroying its spirit, Ilyin's line of thought is clear in the way Putin presents Orthodoxy as the soul of Russia. However, like some Tsars and Eastern Roman Emperors of medieval times, Putin does not shy away from intervening in religious affairs of not just the Russian Orthodox Church, but even the Buddhist and Islamic institutions in Russia. It is undeniable that the legacy of strongman worship is still very diffuse in the country, being a product of the notion of the sovereign as nearly God, and in Ilyin's works the holder of the most divine legal consciousness and an almost divine institution. Like in the times of the Rus,' the church gains authority by being adopting the interests of the state, and the state gains its moral legitimacy by presenting itself as its defender and follower. In this way Ilyin's vision of spiritual substance living inside the state is carried forward in modern Russia, giving the union of faith and power.

Finally, Ilyin shows that Russia does not imagine itself as just another modern state, but instead as a civilization with its own path guided by history, Orthodoxy, and the duty to preserve its unity and independence. Having suffered many invasions threatening its very existence, even in the last century, Russia continues to see itself as a victim of foreign aggression, whether that is through physical means and war, or on the ideological plane against a West which in Putin's words is tinted with a "continuous blindness of superiority." In Ilyin we see both the language of authority and the story of Russia's destiny, and in that sense he remains central to the political project of the Russian Federation today.

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