

Preface

Orthodox Christianity is thought to be both inside and outside of time, perhaps even beyond time or timeless. At the same time, it is a faith that is intimately tied to the mechanisms of dating and pacing that mark the chronological and theological passage of days, months, and years. This preoccupation with time is not only seen in the dedication of the Church to remembering and memorializing its historical people, events, and periods throughout world history, it is also central to the liturgical praxis and social ethos of the faith. Feast days, fast days, sunrise, sunset, Lent, Holy Week—each moment of time, each day is accounted for in the Orthodox calendar, a solar and lunar hybrid for religious timing and dating. In the case of Russian Orthodoxy, time takes on rhythm of difference, as I term it. Set apart by their adherence to a dating rubric known as the Julian Calendar, Russian Orthodox Christians are approximately, dependent upon the year, thirteen liturgical (solar) days behind many other Orthodox Christians around the world for most of their feast days. A difference in timing has social, cultural, theological, and ontological implications and effects; as the late Catherine Bell reminds us, calendars help form a “temporal series that molds time.”¹

The Appalachian community of converts to Russian Orthodoxy in this book adhered not only to the Julian Calendar, they also aligned themselves, in large part, with the daily services of the Church. Devoting themselves to the rhythmic liturgical cycles filled with kinetic worship—standing, crossing oneself, prostrating, bowing, kneeling—had an effect on both spirituality and temporality. As one monk noted, “Time moves differently here.” While the daily implications of time were felt in repetitive cycles of prayers, services, and commitments of community members, the powerful social mechanisms of time

in a globalized, digitized world also contoured their reality. Situated in the rural post-2016 United States, this ethnography provides a glimpse into a particularly transformative moment in both American religion and politics—the era of Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump.

While the Putin-Trump era is not limited by a set period of seconds, minutes, hours, days, or years, the election of Donald Trump in 2016 seems to have marked the beginning of a transformational social period in both Russian-American international relations and American conservative politics. An era, as a chronological denotation of time, has different meanings, but a decidedly important aspect is a particularly noteworthy event that seemingly marks a period of change. Vladimir Putin became the acting president of Russia in 1999 and was officially elected as president in the spring of 2000. Since then, Putin has been either the prime minister (2008–2011) or president. Putin's current term is set to end in 2024, but a referendum in 2020, formally signed into law in 2021, would allow Putin to run for two more presidential terms. Putin's seemingly illiberal tenure has been marked by two important social movements: the rise of the powerful and politically charged post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church, and the engagement of western conservative actors with Russian politics, religion, and ideas. Putin's conservative social politics, his focus on keeping the Moscow Patriarchate as a close political ally, and his emphasis on marketing Russia as wholly outside of western secularism and liberalism set into motion a social transformation of Russia in the western conservative imagination, particularly during the 2010s. This shift had effects on the ground in Russia, at the United Nations, in transnational politics, and in international relations.

In many ways, Putin's strongman authoritarian leadership provided a model for Trump, and the Russian president may have realized he found a compatriot in the former reality television star. From the beginning, Donald Trump's ascendency to president of the United States in 2016 was marked by suspicions of Russian intervention. Trump, a longtime admirer of Putin, served in public office for a substantially shorter period of time than his Russian counterpart, but those four years of overlap are where we see the Putin-Trump era begin to unfold, and where we begin to see more substantial engagement between American and Russian far-right actors, both institutionally and individually. The 2018 Helsinki summit between Trump and Putin might have marked the apex of the era, but post-2020 America has been and continues to be shaped by the encounters between Trump and Putin that took place for their four years as political contemporaries. Both strongmen leaders, the two presidents focused on social initiatives for their respective countries that emphasized nationalism, conservatism, and the alterity of their political opposition. The end of Trump's

tenure was marked by an insurrection at the Capitol on January 6, 2021, when members of his base, believing Trump to have fairly won the election, stormed the Capitol building. On the heels of this act of domestic terrorism, Trump was impeached and then acquitted on charges of inciting the insurrection. For Putin, 2021 marked the year that he signed into law a legal safety net to ensure access to continued power. In some respects, it might look like the Putin-Trump era has ended. Yet, those four years will have lasting social and political implications, not only for Russia, but also for Trump's successor—President Joseph Biden—and for American democracy.

From my vantage point, the Putin-Trump era is likely still unfolding. We are still witnessing its manifestation in the political ideologies that were unleashed from 2016 to 2020; the new global culture wars; right-wing, far-right, and alt-right groups that mobilized globally during this period; the continued political tensions between the U.S. and Russia; and the former Russia's potential political interventions in American democracy. Of course, Trump has not ruled out another presidential run. The year 2024 may see Trump return to power, just as Putin either leaves office or tightens his authoritarian grasp. The tightening grasp of other illiberal, arguably authoritarian politicians throughout Eurasia and Europe—Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, and Polish president Andrzej Duda—and the rise of the highly nationalistic, far-right America First movement in the United States signal that the first four years of the Putin-Trump era were an effective catalytic time period for social action among conservative actors globally. While the Putin-Trump era has contoured international relations and institutions that are found in this book, they were and are shaped by the history of American politics and religion, the framing of rural communities in the public consciousness, and myopic social understandings of Christianity outside of Protestantism and Catholicism. Set in the closing moments of the 2010s, this ethnography provides a window into a particular moment in the story of American religion—one of exceptionalism, panic parables, and nostalgic discontent.

Editorial note: Adapted and revised materials from this book appear in a variety of public scholarship pieces I have written over the years, all of which have been included at the end of the book for ease of reference.

