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PUTIN'S CLAIM THAT GOD RULES RUSSIA

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Putin has said Russia is governed directly by God. He stated this on March 6th in Moscow at the World Youth Day festival. *“Russia is such a country which is directly governed by God”, he said. “Because if it were not so, it cannot be understood how it would exist at all?”* (“Россия - это такая страна, которая напрямую управляется Богомъ. Потому что если это не такъ, непонятно, какъ она вообще существует?”).

The original quote comes from a light-hearted comment by Marshall Burkhard Christoph Graf von Münnich (1683-1767), which was probably a direct reference to the problems of administration he faced at his time. However, as a Lutheran, living his later life in Tartu (modern-day Estonia), his notion of Orthodox theology and Byzantine law might have been less sharp.

Putin, for his part, is neither Orthodox nor a successor to Byzantine culture. He does not seem to know either the Bible or Byzantine Law.



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Christians most often quote Saint Paul's letter to the Romans (*"Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God"*, Rom 13:1). For many interpreters, it means that power on earth is administered by people. The power that they use has been awarded to them by God. It is for this reason and based on this verse that the short lived English tradition of the Divine Right of Kings developed. For them it was not God who governed, but the divinely appointed ruler.

The Code of Roman law is probably one of the most important legal codes ever published and a monument of European culture. It was issued in Constantinople in 529 when it was the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantine). The emperor was Justinian (527-565). The Byzantine formulation of imperial power is described in Novella 105 (July 5th, 534) where the emperor is defined as living law: *"The Emperor, however, is not subject to the rules which We have just formulated, for God has made the laws themselves subject to his control by giving him to men as an incarnate law"* (Πάντων δὲ δὴ τῶν εἰρημένων ἡμῶν ἡ βασιλείᾳ ἐξηγήσθω τύχη, ἧ γε καὶ αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς τοὺς νόμους ὑπέθηκε νόμον αὐτὴν ἔμψυχον καταπέμψας ἀνθρώποις). The emperor is described in Byzantine law as sent by God. The emperor then administered according to his own understanding and will. God did not rule directly on Earth.

Putin's remark is, therefore, neither Christian nor Byzantine.

While Putin's comment too may have been light-hearted, the innuendo is rather disconcerting. If one applies this idea to today's Russia, two interpretations are possible: either Putin thinks he is not at all responsible for what is going on in Russia today, or he believes he is ruling as God. Neither option fits with traditional Russian thought, such as was endorsed under Czarist Russia. Indeed, Czar Nicholas II's had been advised against his decision to go to Mogilev (Belarus), the frontline during World War I, a choice which was political but also religious and based on the Orthodox and Byzantine premises described above.

Putin is also distant from Czar Alexander I (1801-1825) who was rumoured to have secretly abdicated, feigned his death, and retired to a monastery as a monk (named Feodor Kuzmich) in Taganrog, on the Sea of Azov, in 1825.

Putin is entrenched in the Kremlin.

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