

In the first days of November 2013, Manezhnaya Square in Moscow was even more crowded than it usually is. Thousands of people filled it. Queuing before the Manezh exhibition center, located just a few steps away from the Kremlin walls, they spent hours in the late Russian autumn cold to see the multimedia historical exhibition “Orthodox Rus’: My History. The Romanovs”. Dedicated to the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Romanov Dynasty, the exhibition narrated the history of Russia from the accession of Mikhail Romanov to the throne in 1613 until the Revolutions of 1917. It was opened on 4 November, 2013, the day that two holidays are celebrated in Russia, a national one (the Day of People’s Unity) and an Orthodox one (the Feast of the Kazan Icon of the Mother of God). Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill were the first visitors of the exhibition; they were accompanied by Tikhon Shevkunov, Archimandrite at that time. Often referred to as Vladimir Putin’s personal confessor, Father Tikhon was the author of the exhibition.

The success of the exhibition was overwhelming: 300,000 people visited it over the period of three weeks. When it was still on display, calls to make “The Romanovs” available to an even wider audience – either by making it permanent or by showing it in regions of Russia – were voiced. Thus, Nikita Mikhalkov, a prominent film director and, at the same time, devoted supporter of Vladimir Putin, suggested that “The Romanovs” be given a permanent placement and personnel who could show it “day and night”. Five and a half years later, it seems that Mikhalkov’s wish has come true. “The Romanovs”, now united under the roof of the “Multimedia Historical Park ‘Russia – My History’” with three multimedia exhibitions, “The Rurikids”, “From Great Upheaval to Great Victory” and “1945 – 2016”, all from the cycle “Orthodox Rus’. My History”, is on permanent display in the Moscow exhibition center VDNKh. Furthermore, nearly identical historical parks are now located all over Russia: from Stavropol to Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and from Samara to Tyumen.

Overwhelming in its scale and scope, “Russia – My History” is far from mere curiosity. Initially the project of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), it received a vast administrative and financial support from the state and, in less than 6 years, has grown to become the chain of multimedia historical parks with the branches located in 19 Russian cities. The product of the (unholy) alliance of the ROC and the state, “Russia – My History” is the vivid manifestation of the rapprochement between the two.

In the historical parks, the history of Russia, from the mysterious city of Arkaim to the annexation of Crimea, is narrated in the politically expedient way. Moreover, “Russia – My History” is the instrument by means of which both history and religion are put to political (ab)use in order to legitimate Vladimir Putin’s regime. It is not by accident that the project’s rapid growth fell into line, almost immediately, with the 2011-2012 political protests, which exposed the crisis of the regime’s performance-based legitimacy. As the project spreads from its Moscow-located headquarters into Russia’s regions, it provokes different – and, more often than not, rather negative – reactions locally. “Russia – My History”, thus, exposes the complex center-periphery relations in multiethnic and multi-religious Russia.

This research is the first attempt to conduct a comprehensive investigation of the project “Russia – My History”: its origins and the dynamics of its development, the vision of Russian history (re)produced through it, the specificity of its functioning in the various regions of Russia. The research will answer the following questions: How does the project fit into the broader process of the rapprochement between the ROC and the state resulting from the crisis of the performance-based legitimacy of Vladimir Putin’s regime? What role does this project play in legitimating this regime through the political (ab)use of history and religion? In what way did the project affect (and was affected by) the relationship between Russia’s federal center and its regions?

The research will shed light on the constellations of history and religion as them both are (ab)used to legitimate Vladimir Putin’s authoritarian regime. It will demonstrate how the religious reading of Russian history shapes the vision of history that the Russian state is attempting to forge. At the same time, the research will show how the rapprochement between the ROC and the state is limited by Russia’s multiethnicity and multi-religiosity. More generally, the research will contribute to interdisciplinary scholarly debates which concern the political (ab)use of history and religion and church-state relations in contemporary multiethnic and multi-religious societies governed by authoritarian regimes.