



Esotericism and Politics in Early Post-Soviet Russia: Forms of Political Participation

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Abstract

The political orientation and participation of esoteric groups and movements remain under-researched and restricted by many stereotypes. There is an oversimplifying tendency to classify all esoteric groups as extreme right-wing and proto-fascist or, by contrast, as counter-cultural, left-wing, anti-authoritarian, and progressive. An equally persistent stereotype, often expressed by insiders, is that esotericism is *beyond politics*, immersed in thinking only about *eternal* or *spiritual* issues. In this paper, analysing the practices and discourses of Russian esotericists of the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, we will show that the forms of interaction between the esoteric and political spheres are much more complex and ambiguous.

What were esoteric groups like in the times of political cataclysms, namely during the Soviet collapse and subsequent turbulences of the 1990s? Which political participation and exclusion forms were practised inside Russian esoteric communities? Analysing the 1990s esoteric biweekly newspaper *Anomaly*, published in St Petersburg (1990–2019), we have identified two types of esoteric civic activity, which we call *esoteric citizenship* (actions and political statements performed by esotericists) and *metaphysical politics* (esoteric forms of political participation, such as predictions, divination, channelling, and utopian projection). We consider these concepts helpful in describing different variants of esoteric civic participation while being aware that the boundaries between both are rather flexible.

KEYWORDS: *esotericism, citizen participation, political involvement, eschatology, prophecy, millennialism, mass media, New Age, post-Soviet Russia*

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: *ezoteryzm, partycypacja obywatelska, zaangażowanie polityczne, eschatologia, prorocтво, milenializm, środki masowego przekazu, New Age, Rosja poradziecka*

Introduction: Esotericists' attitudes toward the political sphere

The political preferences and citizen participation of esoteric¹ groups and movements remain under-researched and restricted by many stereotypes. In some cases, esotericism means a practice involving people incredibly distant from political issues and engrossed in meditation and self-improvement. In other cases, it is hidden knowledge based on conspiracy theories and inspiring followers to rule the world. Sometimes, esotericists try to fulfil the ideal of a spiritual community and extend it to the universe.

At the same time, as Egil Asprem (2014, 247) pointed out, there is an oversimplifying tendency to classify all esoteric groups according to their political orientation, either as an extreme right-wing, proto-fascist movement or, by contrast, viewing it as a counter-cultural, left-wing, anti-authoritarian, and progressive strand of the political spectrum. Indeed, there are examples of contemporary esoteric (New Age) groups related to far-right ideology and conspiracy theories (Peters 2022) or with radically left-wing political beliefs (Häberlen 2021). However, a closer analysis shows modern esotericism has synthesised

¹ By esotericism, we consider a vast landscape of modern religiosity that includes contemporary forms of occultism and New Age as well. The latter, for instance, according to the historian of religion Wouter Hanegraaff, has a specific five-part characteristic: (1) this-worldliness; (2) holism; (3) evolutionism; (4) psychologisation of religion and sacralisation of psychology; (5) expectations of a coming new age (Hanegraaff 1996, 514).



conservative and liberal elements (Laurant 2005, 966). Gordon Melton noticed earlier that within the New Age movement, “strains of anarchism, Marxism, libertarianism, corporate capitalism, pacifism, communitarianism, individualism, occultism, and romanticism coexist (albeit nervously)” (Melton et al. 1991, 428).

Considering New Age as a form of modern esotericism, we should remember that initially, it was a transformational millennial movement characterised by a radical critique of the existing social order, regarding it as unjust and obsolete. One of the influential New Age spokespersons, Marilyn Ferguson, declared a global “paradigm shift”: “The political system needs to be transformed, not reformed. We need something else, not just something more” (Ferguson 1980, 191). As the name indicates, the New Age movement envisions some utopia, a new world, or a new era in human history (Kyle 1995, 832).

How does esotericists’ desire for society’s changes relate to the idea of individual spiritual transformation? Do esoteric ideas promote political activism and civic participation or lead to disengagement from the political life of society? Michel Foucault, in his late works, proposed a concept of spirituality as “the technology of the self” by which individuals could be “displaced, transformed, disrupted, to the point of renouncing their own individuality, their own subject position” (Foucault 2020, 124). According to Foucault, “the will for spirituality” or the will to self-transformation is a seed and opportunity for political organisation. Moreover, insofar as it enhances the subjectivity of individuals, spirituality is always political (Foucault 2020, 126; Foucault 2007; Bassiri 2022).

At present, no solid theoretical approaches have been proposed to study the political participation of esotericists and esoteric communities (Asprem 2020), although there are some descriptive studies of the political views and political involvement of notable esoteric leaders and esoteric movements (for instance, Versluis, Irwin and Phillips 2012). This objective becomes particularly challenging when we consider not the intellectual esoteric texts but mass esoteric culture or occulture (Partridge 2015).

In our study, we have based on an analysis of the 1990s esoteric periodical, the widespread biweekly newspaper *Anomaly* (Anomaliia), and its irregularly published appendix *Magic Crystal* (18.1994–22.2000, Magicheskii kristall), published in Leningrad and later in St Petersburg from 1990 to 2019. So, *Anomaly* witnessed and, in its particular fashion, exceptionally well documented the social and political changes at the time after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Initially, the production of the newspaper was supported by the *Commission on Ufology and Anomalous Phenomena* of the Russian Geographical Society. For this reason, in the 1990s, a large part of the newspaper was occupied by Russian-language and translated materials from foreign



newspapers and magazines related to the field of ufology. The members of this scholarly community owned the idea for this periodical during their participation in the international UFO conference *Dialogue with the Universe* in Frankfurt am Main (1989) (Syrchenko 2022). Among *Anomaly*'s regular contributors were not only local occultists and healers or some members of the UFO groups but also well-known Russian scientists – physicists, mathematicians, historians, and psychologists. It accumulated materials on paranormal phenomena and “occult sciences”: parapsychology, ufology, poltergeist, yeti sightings, astrology, healing practices, and others. The editorial board claimed that *Anomaly* was a kind of “research laboratory” (Syrchenko 2022) that was understood in terms of the “search for the truth of our existence, the attempt to unravel the mysteries of the world that surrounds us; the desire to rise from mercantile to cosmic consciousness; drop by drop, word by word, thought by thought, to prepare the Spiritual Human Being for the eternal mission of goodness, and thus for possible contact with the good mind of other worlds” (5.1991, 1).

The *Anomaly* newspaper is unique among other Russian esoteric periodicals due to its continuity of almost thirty years, excellent coverage in Russia's urban and rural areas, and, at a lesser degree, under Russian-speaking audiences near and far abroad. The newspaper's circulation, from the beginning of 1990 with 50,000, very soon reached the mark of 200,000 copies, then dropped sharply to ca. 63,000 copies in the mid-1990s and then 4,000–6,000 copies at the end of the 2000s (due to a lack of funding in a national economic crisis). Tat'iana Syrchenko (b. 1946), a spacecraft radio engineer in her first profession, remained the permanent editor-in-chief of *Anomaly* for all thirty years of its production until 2019.²

We have analysed all the issues of *Anomaly* from 1990 up to and including the year 2000 (a total of nominally 230, or 222 with double issues) by selecting materials related to the sphere of the political and systematising them dependent on the forms of *citizen participation*. We have focused on texts, and passages therein with references to elections and electoral behaviour; social movements, civic initiatives, protests (public demonstrations, strikes, etc.); social activity (participation in local organisations, communities, etc.); individual interest in politics, political events, their interpretations, and future projections.

In line with contemporary approaches in political science, we distinguish between citizen engagement as a top-down initiative and citizen participation

² She worked as an assistant editor for the first two years (1990–1992) under the first editor-in-chief Iurii Gerasimov.



as a bottom-up initiative and a relatively informal process (Olimid 2014). Participation implies citizens' involvement in a country's life and other aspects – social activity on different levels, including families, schools, and local communities, as well as social movements, civic initiatives, etc. It refers to a process in which “ordinary people take part – whether on a voluntary or obligatory basis and whether acting alone or as part of a group – to influence a decision involving significant choices that will affect their community” (André 2012). In terms of institution and organisation, it may take various shapes within and outside institutional structures as well as organised “either by members of civil society (for example, through class actions, demonstrations citizens' committees, etc.) or by decision-makers (for example, through referendums, parliamentary commissions, and mediation, etc.)” (André 2012) In the case of the newspaper *Anomaly*, we are also dealing with a specific form of post-Soviet citizen (occult) journalism. Such journalism, involving communicative action theory, can be approached from a multilevel perspective and “encompasses a wide array of social actors and societal institutions,” among them “political and market system, civil society, various traditional and newly emerging digital media, and non-profit and voluntary organisations” (Nah and Chung 2020, 24f, 164).

The main questions regarding the intersections between esotericism and politics are as follows: What forms of citizen participation and exclusion were practised by Russian esotericists and esoteric communities? Did the level and type of political participation by the *Anomaly community* differ from that typical of Russia at the time? Based on an analysis of *Anomaly's* publications over the decade from 1990 to 2000, we identified two types of esoteric civic activity, which we call *esoteric citizenship* (by which we mean the common forms of citizen participation: actions and political statements performed by esotericists), and *metaphysical politics* (that refers to various specific esoteric forms of political participation, such as predictions, divination, channelling, and utopian projection and others). We consider these concepts helpful in describing different variants of esoteric civic participation while being aware that the boundaries between both are quite flexible.

Esoteric citizenship: Citizen participation and political statements

The 1990s was a time of extraordinary transformation processes beginning in the late years of the USSR with perestroika, initiated by the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev (1931–2022), and the fall of the Soviet Union in



1991. In the political sphere, we observed the establishment of the new Russian state under President Boris Yeltsin's rule (two terms, 10 July 1991–31 December 1999) to Vladimir Putin's named as acting president at the end of 1999 and his final election on 26 March 2000, altogether accompanied by extensive economic reforms, local wars in Russia's territories, fierce political struggle and terror. This decade became a symbol of economic instability and social upheaval, the impoverishment of large population segments, and the growth of crime, which gave the period its popular name as the "wild and evil 1990s." According to surveys, Russian society in the 1990s had low trust in political institutions, politicians, and political parties. A fall in confidence in all socio-demographic groups has been recorded since 1991, which increased in the second half of the 1990s (Zorkaia 1999, 26).

Religious life during the first decade of post-Soviet Russia experienced a burst of growth and variety compared to the previous decades of censorship and the official ban and was referred to as an "esoteric boom" due to the new possibilities of private entrepreneurship and the publishing business (DeNio Stephens 1997). Sociological surveys detected a fascination with the mystical and the occult (Furman and Kääriäinen 2007). As citizens of their country, esotericists have experienced rapid political change and increased civic and political participation along with the entire nation. However, they could use their esoteric skills and practices (and their interpretations) in an instrumental way to make their influence on the political agenda more effective. Thus, we would consider this form of citizen participation as *esoteric citizenship*.

Editorial position in the political upheavals of the 1990s

"Are we beyond politics? Politics is all around us!" – this slogan accompanied all of *Anomaly's* 1990s publications on political issues. The political turbulence of the 1990s – the 1991 August Coup, the First Chechen War (1994–1996), the 1995 legislative election, and the 1996 presidential elections – intruded into the newspaper's regular agenda, which was very far from earthly concerns and covered themes of contacts with aliens, poltergeist, channelling, and spirituality. The editorial office position was paradoxical: A high level of engagement was combined with a highly negative attitude towards political activism and the sphere of the political as a whole. On the one hand, there was a belief that politics was a "dirty" and deceitful business. On the other hand, there was a distinct search for a justification for focusing on politically sensitive issues.



“*Anomaly* has always been beyond politics. We talk about unexplored phenomena in Nature. Nevertheless, is not man and society part of it?” asked an editorial concerning the 1991 August Coup that expressed fierce protest:

Dare to intimidate not 5, not ten people, but the whole country – one-sixth of the globe! Dare to summon tanks and armoured personnel carriers to Moscow – just only to put us on Stalin’s inquisitorial hook again, all together and one by one, to make us obedient and suspicious of each other again (let us remember the deadly silence in transport on the first day of the coup)! Never again! (7.1991, 1).

The topic continued in a chronicle of the events and an interview with a participant of the protest rally, which was published in the “Contact” section, where articles about UFOs were usually posted: “But we are going to talk about the contact of a different kind. With danger, fear of death, helplessness, and hard power. With everything that has given rise to resistance” (7.1991, 2).

In the first half of the 1990s, the relevance of the political agenda in *Anomaly* grew from issue to issue. In this way, the editors constantly reaffirmed their active civic position on key issues of concern to Russian society. They encouraged them to become more politically and socially active by appealing directly to their readers. In 1995, a survey of *Anomaly*’s readers, “Who else but me?” was started (9.1995, 1). Among the published responses, there was a letter from a constant male reader of *Anomaly*, in which, in addition to purely spiritual tasks (“I want for myself the conditions for a meditative state”; “I am engaged in my own ‘enlightenment’”), he formulated his vision of the political reorganisation of Russia as a commonwealth of “spiritual communities” and the anarchist ideal of a future world (the abolition of state borders, the “dissolution of the state,” disbanding of armies and ending of arms production) (15. 1995, 2).

During the First Chechen War – a military suppression of the separatist movement in the Chechen Republic accompanied by multiple crimes against humanity and a fake media campaign – *Anomaly*’s editorial team took an unequivocally anti-war stance. Anti-war statements appeared in different contexts and publications of different genres: in the reader’s letter, the war was named a “state schizophrenia” (18.1995, 1); in a regular column, a medium in contact with the spirit of the famous and untimely deceased Soviet actor Oleg Dal’ talked about the war karmic consequences (20.1996, 1); or rather unexpectedly in an interview about the aliens the famous Soviet writer Chingiz Aitmatov (1928–2008). The latter claimed: “It is difficult to forgive those who have involved their people in a terrible tragedy and those who have carried out this bloody state massacre” (11.1995, 1, 4f). A front-page



editorial informed about the mass media's silencing of the consequences of the war and the manipulation of public opinion, with harsh criticism of the authorities: "We are at war with the gangs," our leaders declare and immediately report that more than 200 tanks, dozens of planes and masses of other military equipment have been destroyed. Exactly, we are being treated like morons" (11.1995, 1). The editorial board also published appeals to psychics to help find journalists missing in the war zone (3.1996, 8) or advertisements to raise money for a war memorial for soldiers from the Leningrad Regiment (11.1995, 1). The anti-war activities of the editorial staff were not limited to publications. At the end of 1995, they went out on the main streets of St Petersburg with a poster, "I want to live in a bright world without war!" collecting signatures for the end of the war from passers-by (20.1995, 1).

The 1995–1996 election campaign was destined to be a turning point in the relationship between society and the government in post-Soviet Russia. The gradual collapse in confidence in the leading figure – President Boris Yeltsin – intensified dramatically after the 1996 presidential election: By November 1998, he had practically exhausted the population's trust resource with the support of only 1%. Apathy has engulfed society, manifesting in low civic participation and a lack of interest in the electoral process (Zorkaia 1999, 27).

At the start of this electoral season, the editor of *Anomaly* sarcastically appealed to readers ("You and I, dear reader, are beyond politics. We are spiritually superior [...] And we think – forget it, play your own elections!"), accusing them of a lack of political activity and an unwillingness to defend their rights, which served the interests of the power holders (11.1995, 1).

However, the editorial activity in connection with the 1995 State Duma elections and the 1996 presidential election was limited to organising an esoteric forecasting competition and publishing its results. In November 1995, the editorial board of *Anomaly* and Pavel Globa's *Avestan School of Astrology* announced an Astrological Prediction Contest for the Russian parliamentary election results ("Elections-95"). Representatives from all Russian astrological branches were invited to indicate which parties would pass the 5% threshold and how the votes would be distributed, as well as to provide astrological justification for the forecast. Three cash prizes were prepared for the astrologers who sent in the most accurate predictions. In addition, a prediction competition was organised for the clairvoyants with a special prize, the polar bear cuddly toy, as it was the year of this symbol according to Globa's "Zoroastrian" calendar (21.1995, 1). The editorial board intended to draw readers' attention to the elections and to "understand what kind of people we are and what our future will be" (21.1995, 1).



However, the contest failed because most professional astrologers and amateurs refused to participate and explained it as “reluctance to get involved in politics” and “fear of taking responsibility” (3.1996, 1). The editorial office received only four letters with astrological forecasts and 64 predictions from clairvoyants, soothsayers, and all kinds of psychics. However, they all contained wrong answers. Five of the participants only approximately guessed the rating of the parties received book prizes and an invitation to the St Petersburg exhibition *Into the Future – Through the Past*. Nevertheless, the organisers remained enthusiastic and urged all interested forecasters to prepare for the 1996 presidential election (3.1996, 1). Pavel Globa noted that the coming year of the Eagle is associated with statehood and charismatic leaders. He suggested that this factor would encourage astrologers to be more active in the field of political predictions. He also expected an increased politicisation of society as the planet Uranus moved into Aquarius (5.1996, 2). However, this does not appear to have been the case – the 1996 presidential election was barely reflected in *Anomaly*'s publications.

Citizen participation: Interaction with officials and institutions

The newspaper's editorial team has developed interactions with authorities at different levels, from the Russian State Duma to the local government.

For example, representatives of *Anomaly* took part in a meeting of the Russian State Duma Security Committee, where the problems of juvenile delinquency and safety were discussed (13.1994, 1). The result of its collaboration at the local level was the creation of a “Paranormal Research Center” under the St Petersburg district Council's Deputy Commission on Ecology, which was supposed to support residents who encountered poltergeists: “The deputy status of the Center will make it possible to involve police officers, medical workers and scientists from our district's institutes in its work” (8.1994, 1, 5).

Anomaly's editors and contributors were involved in discussions on a wide range of social issues, which included organised criminality (with this agenda, they repeatedly participated at the beginning of the 1990s at the Ministry of Internal Affairs conferences), sectarianism; legal regulation bioenergetic influence and healing, education reforms, and others. Much of the newspaper's coverage focuses on environmental challenges, including the 1986 Chernobyl explosion and the consequences of radioactive exposure (8.1995, 1). In addition, this catastrophe is also of interest to the authors of *Anomaly* in connection with the theme of alien civilisations: “Contactors report that for three days after the disaster, UFOs ‘hovered’ over the destroyed Unit 4



of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. And that their efforts prevented the nuclear explosion” (8.1995, 4).

Members of the editorial board and regular contributors to *Anomaly* (in particular, radio engineer Valentin Goltz and Doctor of biological sciences Professor Viktor Zlobin) participated in discussions on several environmental projects in St Petersburg, meeting with representatives of the city government and the State Committee for Ecology and Natural Resources and other officials and business representatives. Actual environmental issues – violation of environmental regulations during construction, dam construction, wastewater problem, waste management, and recycling – have been covered in the regular column “Eco-Chronicle” and other *Anomaly* publications (see, for example, 3.1994, 6; 5.1996, 2; 8.1996, 1). The editorial team has also sought to engage its readers in discussions about environmental issues, even in the newspaper’s subscription announcement: “If you want to contribute to the preservation of the Earth, develop environmental programs and participate in their implementation <...>, subscribe to the newspaper ‘Anomaly’! ‘Anomaly’ will fill your life with new meaning!” (18.1993, 1).

By the mid-1990s, however, the frustration of *Anomaly*’s editorial team with their involvement in the top-down initiatives was becoming increasingly apparent. The editor admitted to being disappointed in the effectiveness of the formal activities by officials and warned: “Society could turn its back on the current powerless government” (23/24.1994, 6). At the same time, *Anomaly* engaged in grassroots initiatives with even more enthusiasm and announced that it was ready to create a social movement for a “safe environment.” The idea of such a social movement based on the “Friends of the *Anomaly*” community – a kind of “esoteric non-profit organisation” – was reflected in many publications in the second half of the 1990s, for example, in a publication about the educational project “Fantasy 1995”: “This is the hour of self-organisation. We are seriously thinking of organising a joint Public Parliament with readers, which we hope will help our society to get on the road to the Great Ring of Civilisations” (6.1995, 4f).

Thus, the publications in *Anomaly* reflect the hope for the success of civic engagement in the first half of the 1990s and the growing disappointment following the 1996 presidential election, when many people felt that “politicians should not be trusted” (68%) and that “ordinary people are always detached from real power” (85%) (Zorkaia 1999, 24). The scholars observed a passive “spectator attitude” towards politics and an explicit wait-and-see strategy in everyday life (Levada 1998, 8). Only 3% of the respondents participated in political meetings and assemblies “often” or “very often.” More than 90% were neither members of any local clubs or associations. However, interest



in politics and political events was a consistently significant indicator: One-third of the respondents “often and very often” had read about politics, and approximately the same proportion (31%) claimed to discuss political events in their midst (Zorkaia 1999, 25).

Metaphysical politics: Ways of transformation and esoteric expectations

While the previous chapter has thematised the politics *proper* as esotericists’ participation sphere, the following overview turns to *metaphysical* dimensions of the political in Russia, which is expressed in complex, interconnected views on universal magic or divination (influencing humanity, the Earth and the Cosmos), channelling, UFO, conspiracy, eschatological and utopian thinking. In the eyes of *Anomaly*’s authors and readers, such a metaphysical policy consisted of studying universal, cosmic “laws” and “values” and involving esotericists in discourses and practices around the “unknown.” They have meant particular, magical ways of perception or participation, interpreted differently, including political meanings. Hence, the basics of metaphysical participation are rooted in the same hermetic idea of correspondences between the micro- and microcosm and human abilities to influence the universe through personal actions. Channelling, divination, prognostic and visionary practices aimed to shape a country’s imaginative political future (considered an unbroken, strong continuation of the past), often consonant with esotericist’s vision on a broader – planetary or universal – scale. Only rarely did magic and healing contribute to the wishful transformation of the present in the political sphere; mainly, both were directed at the esotericists themselves, who sought to preserve their best spiritual and physical conditions in periods of political changes and economic crisis. By the end of the 1990s, we see a diversification of such individual practices at the expense of collective ones, including political participation.

Predictions, divination, channeling, and utopian projection

The gradual decline in willingness to address politically sensitive issues and decision-making at the local level during the 1990s has not diminished the *Anomaly* community’s attempts to look to the future. Over the decade, it actively produced different types of predictions, including political, depending on their length and critical elements. The *Anomaly*’s publications provide short-, medium-, and long-term prognoses and typical secular forecasts (over



several decades or centuries) that often stood thematically close to visions and ideas of geopolitics and the popular history of civilisations. Indeed, such predictions were often the result of both diachronic and synchronic historical intersections of multiple discourses in Russian society.

There are far fewer close-range prognoses than general visionary ones; both modes are often combined. As an illustration for the first case, Sidik Mohamad Afghan, an “Afghan mathematician who studied in the USSR,” appeared many times on the pages of the newspaper. While towards the end of 1990, Sidik said that “in 1994, the Soviet Union will begin its economic recovery. In 1998, the perestroika process will be completed. In the year 2000, there will be general disarmament in the world.” According to his (actually failed) prediction, Mikhail Gorbachev should remain in office for a long and see a complete victory of perestroika (4.1990, 8). A half year later, he stated, “in 1992, the first phase of perestroika ended, in 1994, the country moved to a market system, economic growth began, and in 1998, perestroika will be completed with success” (10.1991, 4). A medium presented another vision of the near future, Marina E. from the Pskov region, who has been contacting the spirit of Oleg Dal’ (see above, 6.1993, 5). The woman wanted to know whether the political opposition would succeed: “No. A new shift will come to power, not the opposition, but a new formation. (According to Dal’, this will happen in 1994).” Regarding a new leader of the country, the spirit said that “in 1996, a new leader born under the sign of Aquarius will come to power in Russia.” He will be “powerful and energetic – will follow the path of the revival of the original Slavic. Unlike Peter (the Great), he will be a bright man, and the blood of his countrymen will flow no more,” and “his name will be typically Russian – Ivan.” Even though the short-term predictions above did not come true, not a single reader’s letter or article had been published in *Anomaly* that questioned the talents of a visionary, channeller, or astrologer.

The New Age movement’s central idea – the expectation of mental and material transformation of the world – was often reproduced through foreign translated sources. *Anomaly* collaborated with foreign periodicals and provided material for foreign newspapers and magazines (Syrchenko 2022). The picture of the future they painted is promising and lacks dystopian images. Thus, the American astrologer Jacob Schwarz (1932–2010), famous for being one of the first to visit and lecture in the late Soviet Union, underlined in the article *What will the Age of Aquarius bring?* a mixed character of such transition in the long run. In 1993, if Uranus and Neptune conjunct in the zodiacal circle of Aquarius and Pisces, it is to be expected a “preliminary rehearsal of the Age of Aquarius.” After the period of “significant deterioration [...] aliens from other worlds will bring amazing new knowledge. The human



brain will possess powers that now seem supernatural. Hidden human abilities such as telepathy and levitation will become all shared. And the ability to travel through time and space will open up before us” (13/14.1992, 8). In the Russian case, however, the modus vivendi of the past becomes decisive for future transformations. Even Schwartz argues that “Aquarian transformation” astrologically began “during the revolution of 1917, for example, the constellation Aquarius contained the planet Uranus, symbolising revolutionary change, and the asteroids Russia and Aurora” (13/14.1992, 1). American astrology star Robert Hand (b. 1942), in an interview at a conference in 1991 in Chicago, said:

And more about Russia. I do not see how the old regime here will return. I think the changes brought about by Gorbachev and others are long-lasting, although there could be fluctuations. Moreover, you can be congratulated on a peaceful revolution if everything goes peacefully. That does not happen very often. It is a significant achievement for the future, although the present looks ominous. Russia has a bright future if the change is peaceful! (1.1992, 7).

We have observed the same (even metaphysical) tendency to refer to the extraordinary significance of the past in authentic *Anomaly*'s materials where, retrospectively, Russian/Soviet history had been interpreted from some ‘patriotic’ perspective. The modus of the “paranormal” in its many forms offered transfers for nationalist ideas. In the first half of the 1990s, the future and the leading role of one’s country and its mission for human civilisation were almost emphasised. For instance, an author cited the British-American theosophist and channeller Alice Bailey (1880–1949), one of the foremost inventors of the Western New Age as we know it today and an author whose books had been distributed in Soviet samizdat. Unlike other nations, Russians are “still students; they are still learning a new consciousness and an inner understanding of life.” After “terrible upheavals,” Russia “will surpass all other countries in the art of the new life and the new, especially esoteric, knowledge, which it has to pass on to mankind” (9.1991, 4f).

In tune with Russia’s exceptionalism, there were numerous prophecies whose meaning lies in just a few aspects: (1) that the Messiah is to be born in Russia and (2) that Russian/Slavic people will impact new humanity. In the words of Timur Sviridov, the SF writer and Pavel Globa’s student of astrology, “P. Globa predicts that in 1999, the Messiah will come, who will be born in Russia and will give a new era – the Age of Aquarius, his worldview, another type of religion. And not later than in a hundred years, the world will aspire to study the Slavs, the Slavonic languages, to master that new that will



enrich all humanity.” He also predicted a dissolution of Russia. Still, it was perceived as a challenge, an opportunity for radical change in the course of history: Russia “may break up into many small entities” and the USSR “will be split into three parts, but they will be somehow linked into a common structure of former borders, with new and unusual links” (2.1990, 7).

Magic transformations: Self-care vs. concern for the world

Apart from the helpful tips on how to use magical power, make an amulet, or heal yourself in times of anxiety and crisis (the *Magic Crystal* appendix tells us more about this), *Anomaly* published many inspiring stories of how to transform the world, whether in dreams or reality.

One of the central goals of the *Anomaly* community was humanity’s global transformation. It was sought by various means, including magical-ritual ones, practised regularly throughout the analysed decade. An important role was played by a collective spell to be cast at a specific time, once a week, by as many people as possible, which the editor of the *Anomaly* announced every year since 1992 in the spring issues, launching a “wave of kindness and love” on International Children’s Day, 1 June. This action, performed towards the rising sun “mentally or loudly,” aimed to “purify” the Earth by the invisible wave “set in motion” by saying the following: “I wish you kindness and love to my loved ones. I wish kindness and love to all the people on Earth!” That symbolic action of “Choice of Goodness” resonates with *Anomaly*’s readers. One writes: “There is probably not a meter on our Mother Earth by the end of the twentieth century that was not soaked in human blood. Moreover, she is alive and tired of dirt, evil, blood, and tears. The Minute of Choice may be the most important thing people must do. If all the newspapers in the world got involved, maybe wars and strife on Earth would stop?” (16.1992, 4). The ritual of the “wave of kindness and love” proved to be stable and lasted for many decades (Syrchenko, 2022).

Politics aired through the Russian media affected Russian citizens of this period in every home. One letter to the editor, describing a kind of “rescue” of political leaders, captures the growing cult of the president and the idea that the individual application of magic can serve as a tool for transforming political reality. A female reader from the Perm region wrote about two dreams, symbolically marking the dividing line between two historical epochs and two political leaders in the eyes of an insider. Both are related to a specific political event – the August coup of 1991. In the first one, a reader witnesses the poisoning of Mikhail Gorbachev by an unknown person. In the second dream, the woman rescues President Yeltsin’s companion on a



plane about to crash into a cliff: “And the rock is huge, grey. And then, just a few centimetres before the cliff, my energetic exertion causes the plane to swerve and fly the other way. Furthermore, we are both glad to have been rescued. Boris Nikolaevich, in particular, was delighted” (16.1992, 5). If, in the early 1990s, politics penetrated the field of influence and interest of individuals, it was obviously drifting away by the end of the decade.

Conclusion. Political hope, disillusionment, and metaphysical escapism of post-Soviet esotericists

Our case study provided an overview of topics at the intersection of esotericism and politics during the first post-Soviet decade. In the example of the esoteric newspaper *Anomaly*, we have seen a particular form of post-Soviet citizen (esoteric) journalism as political events at local, country, and international levels immediately found a reaction on its pages: wars and armed conflicts, elections, political party activities, and political murders became topics for discussion. However, the “active esoteric citizens” position in the newspaper was highly controversial. On the one hand, they proclaimed that being spiritual means being “beyond politics,” on the other hand, they actively shared the topical political discourse on the issues of education, ecology, civil society, and even security (for instance, in the ‘struggle’ against the spread of so-called “sects” that was classified as highly dangerous (8.1996, 1)). Esotericists were eager to participate in public discussions on the path of the country’s development, emphasising Russia’s leading role in the destiny of humanity and the planet. On the whole, members of *Anomaly*’s spiritual community (editors, authors, and readers) followed a political agenda relevant to Russia in the 1990s, when hopes of rapid positive change accompanied criticism of the authorities. The spatiality of political discourse on the pages of *Anomaly* also varied significantly with the shift in political attitudes in the second half of the 1990s and growing disillusionment with incumbent political leaders and opportunities for civic participation (Levada 1998; Zorkaia 1999). Whereas in the first half of the 1990s, all kinds of instruments and spaces were used to highlight political issues, in the second half of the decade, the political gradually gave way to publications addressing the spiritual and paranormal: divination techniques (horoscopes, Tarot, minerals), poltergeist, (self)healing, and many others.

The transformation processes in post-Soviet Russia also adopted the esotericists’ mystical dimensions through the idea of what we call *metaphysical*



politics. Two modalities of esoteric political behaviour could be traced in the newspaper's activities: active transformation and complementation, expressed metaphorically for "initiates" (also well-known defensive techniques of hidden communication in authoritarian regimes). A special place was occupied by (metaphysical) patriotism, which turned to the past – one of the characteristics of Russian esotericism, which subsequently intensified.

Although in the framework of this article, we consider the two manifestations mentioned above of *esoteric participation* independently, in fact, it is not possible to separate them: Esoteric or metaphysical activities can be transformed into political resources and added to political mobilisation in times of increased civic engagement (Asprem 2020, 16) or vice versa, esoteric political participation virtually disappears and is reflected exclusively in the practices of metaphysical influence: wishing well to all living things, collective and individual meditation, and divination.

The Russian sociologist and political scientist Dmitrii Furman, using his early 1990s survey data, has provocatively attempted to question how a person's worldview influences his commitment to democracy or authoritarianism: "There was a strong correlation between belief in UFOs and a preference for Yeltsin over Gorbachev. In telepathy, in oriental cults, the preference was for Yeltsin. Very strong! New Age! Nevertheless, sympathy for Gorbachev and the Soviet Union was strong at the poles, among the Orthodox and the atheist Communists. They were for the KGB, for a strong Russian empire" (cited in Spencer 2011, 252). Furman believed that the more eclectic the worldview is, the more democratic the people are. The *Anomaly* esoteric community members were neither right nor left, and typically, they often expressed a mixture of heterogeneous political ideas. However, the common ground for them, depending on personal disposition, is self-transformation, often revealed in the slogan "Change yourself, and the whole world will change." However, the reaction of the editorial board to critical events in the political sphere and its anti-war and anti-totalitarian position allow us to be characterised as liberal-democratic and oriented towards human rights and democratic freedoms. The fact that the editorial board has initiated many civic projects shows its commitment to citizen participation as an essential democratic practice in modern societies. A further study of the newspaper's issues in the following decades (the 2000s and 2010s) will enable the dynamics of the editorial board's political attitudes and civic activism to be traced, particularly their hesitancy between democratic values and freedoms and Russian nationalist messianism.

Finally, we would like to emphasise the specific language of the *Anomaly* articles. Its authors tended to use the same terms, for example, "anomaly"



and “anomalous,” in different – everyday and metaphysical – contexts, thus generating metaphors with a broad spectrum of political-esoteric meanings. On the one hand, these terms had positive connotations of the “unknowable,” “that which requires scientific investigation,” and synonymous with the notion of a miracle. For example, the human being has been seen as a “miracle” and as a “beautiful anomaly” (20.1996, 1). On the other hand, the variety of meanings also included negative connotations: “anomalous,” as “abnormal,” or “immoral” (“we live anomalously (=abnormally)”); the 1991 putsch was called an “abnormality”. Among other things, perhaps such strategies of replacement/substitution or wordplay led to the disintegration of the political and the loss of public relevance and reinforcement of a strategy of self-exclusion.

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