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# Residual Orality in Russia and the Russo-Ukrainian War

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## Abstract

This article studies the connection between residual orality and war propaganda in contemporary Russia. I study, based on the theories of Walter J. Ong, the influence of literacy and orality on culture and the claim that Russia is still a society with a high degree of residual orality, although, simultaneously, with an extremely high degree of exquisite literacy. I conclude that contemporary Russia preserves many of the formulas and stereotypes characteristic of oral societies and that this fact is of crucial importance for the support for the current war among the Russian population, especially since the age cohorts in favour of the war also seem to be the most sensitive to motifs characteristic of residual orality.

**KEYWORDS:** *residual orality, Russia, Zakhar Prilepin, propaganda, Levada centre, poetry, rhetoric, stereotypes, Russo-Ukrainian war*

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** *wtórna oralność, Rosja, Zachar Prilepin, propaganda, Centrum Lewady, poezja, retoryka, stereotypy, wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska*

When Western observers analyse the present Russo-Ukrainian war and try to understand why Russia finally did attack Ukraine against, as it seems, purely rational considerations and why it is possible to continue the war for so long, although devastating even for the aggressor, and why there seems to be a considerable, perhaps majority support for the war, various explanations are made. It might be Russian authoritarianism, or perhaps revanchism for the fall of the Soviet Union. It could be a tendency to always search for enemies and a very simplified and stereotypical perception of the West which is simultaneously perceived as the eternal enemy, or indeed it may well be Russian isolation and the relative lack of contact with Western ideas.

All this is probably superficially true and the phenomena described above are indeed present in contemporary Russia. When one reads those explanations, it is inevitable to pose the question whether they correlate with something that is generally valid as an anthropological constant, something that, when present, acts similarly on the mentality of populations. When assuming that those factors are just the expression of a Russian specificity, one wonders whether the real explanation invoked, although few observers would admit that, is just the Russian soul or national character. This is, of course, unacceptable as a scientific explanation. All these descriptions are valid per se, but the question is, of course, why such phenomena occur in contemporary Russia and not, or only marginally, for example, in the contemporary West, nor, in a comparable form, in Brazil. What I mean is, of course, the *frequency* of the phenomena. Every scientifically describable phenomenon in contemporary Russia will have some marginal correspondence in the contemporary West.

Are there any factors which can explain, or which at least correlate with, the phenomena we can observe in contemporary Russia?

I propose studying Russian cultural and political phenomena during the last few years, as well as the means of expression that are common in Russian society. Contemporary Russian rhetoric has, of course, been studied many times. However, what seem to matter more than the content are certain structural characteristics.

In order to narrow the study, I will concentrate on one political and societal actor and his activities since the outbreak of the full-scale invasion the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, but with numerous references to tendencies which were already present before the invasion and which, as I claim, are expressions of the reasons why the popular support for the war is, at present, relatively high.



## Statistics about the popular support for the invasion

I will shortly offer some statistics about popular support in Russia for the war and related themes. I have taken some statistics from the Levada centre for February 2023, published in March 2023.<sup>1</sup> It is hard to say how much those statistics reflect actual public opinion. Even the Levada centre has to refer to the “conflict in Ukraine” and to the “special operation,” the latter being the official Russian name for the invasion, in order to publish those statistics, and also to collect them. It is clear that some respondents might be afraid to give sincere answers, they might fear that their anonymity will not be respected and that their answers might be used against them, even in criminal proceedings. In Russia, as of the day of writing (3 June 2023) and when the statistics were collected, it was not a crime to express lack of support for the “special operation,” but the vagueness of the legislation and the arbitrariness of its interpretation may have probably instilled some hesitation among the respondents. It is hard to say if this reticence in most cases implies that respondents would have preferred not to take part in the polls rather than give insincere answers. During the whole period since February 2022, 5–9% of respondents claimed that they found it “difficult to answer” or were “not sure.”

There is a correlation between support for the full-scale invasion and the sources of information the respondents mostly use, with television being overrepresented among the respondents who support the war.

Those factors throw *some* doubts on the complete sincerity and representativeness of the respondents because of the political situation and the correlation between sources of information and support for the full-scale invasion, which seems intuitively likely, would indicate that the differences between various groups are representative, but perhaps not in terms of the absolute numbers as such.

In February 2023, 48% of the respondents strongly supported the full-scale invasion and 29% “rather” supported it. The question was posed in the following manner: “Do you personally support the actions of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine?” As the statistics also imply, support has been quite constant, with a slight decrease during the mobilisation wave of the autumn of 2022: 44% and 28% respectively in September 2022, 44% and 29% in October 2022, and 42% and 32% in November 2022. This seems to show that the

<sup>1</sup> “Конфликт с Украиной: оценки февраля 2023 года” published on levada.ru the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 2023.



population is, indeed, ready to accept the consequences of the mobilisation. This tendency was even stronger in 2023.

There are major differences across different age cohorts. In February 2023, support in the 55 and above age group was 60% and 26% respectively, whereas in the 18–24 age group it was 28% and 29%, which remains quite a high percentage, while 13% were “not sure” in the last age category. There is a huge difference in support for the invasion between those who support the Russian President and those who do not, which is probably not surprising.

Concerning the sources of information, differences between groups exist, but they are probably not as considerable as many Western observers would expect. Among those who, above all, have confidence in information given via television which in Russia would mostly mean the state television, 59% strongly support the war while 27% “rather” support it. For those who trust internet publications support runs at 45% and 30% respectively, while those who trust Telegram channels these percentages are 37 and 25. However, a correlation exists between sources of information and support for the invasion.

The respondents do not, as a matter of principle, exclude the idea of concluding a peace agreement. For 67% of the respondents, it would be unacceptable if this implies giving the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts to Ukraine, and for 71% of the respondents it would be unacceptable to return the Republics of Donetsk and Lugansk. These are also the numbers for February 2023.

Although statistics always have to be taken with a certain scepticism, and perhaps it is not completely clear what all respondents understand by “support the actions of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine,” again it seems clear that popular support for the invasion is high. It is also worth mentioning that the mobilisation waves did not encounter much resistance; nor did they imply a considerable decrease in support for the war.

## **The reasons for the support for the invasion**

One can say that this is only because of massive state propaganda and a population kept in the dark by the authorities. This might be true on a superficial level, but some types of propaganda are possible in some societies and not in others, so what makes the relative success of the contemporary war propaganda in Russia possible?

One can distinguish several approaches when it comes to analysing the efficiency of propaganda. My perspective is broader and focuses on the structural social reasons for the efficiency of propaganda, rather than the



information structure of propaganda and which means of spreading it are effective, which has been studied by many authors. This latter perspective is, indeed, relevant, but different from the one I apply. Good examples of authors following the latter approach are Paul and Matthews (2016) as well as Labuda (2023).

Does contemporary Russian propaganda have a certain structure which corresponds with the expectations of the population, and do those expectations correlate with anything else? One also has to be very careful when using explanations of the type: “Russia has an authoritarian tradition, and this explains the presence of X.” Does this statement mean anything other than

1. A. Russia has been authoritarian during a certain time frame,
- or
2. B. Russians are essentially authoritarian?

For interpretation a. it is clear that it is only a kind of paraphrase which does not explain anything, for interpretation b. it is a pure essentialism which probably makes all scientific discussion about cultural phenomena impossible. Using the reference to a tradition as a heuristic means does not explain either – and this is a crucial point – why some traditions are preserved in some societies and not in others and why traditions arise. Most traditions or tendencies have, at some point, been present in most societies. *The persistence of an authoritarian or other traditions means that it is constantly preserved and renewed, probably by another factor than the tradition itself.*

## Residual orality

I am going to explain certain elements of contemporary Russian rhetoric and propaganda by the persistence of what Walter J. Ong has called residual orality among the Russian population and the Russian elites. This implies that it is necessary to further develop Ong’s concept, relate it to statistics about literacy and develop a concept that takes into consideration both the residual orality and the literacy of the elites in residually oral societies.

Not much has been written about residual orality as an important factor in Russian politics and society; nor, as far as I can assess, has anything been mentioned about its importance for the support for the invasion of Ukraine, until now. Yulia Golobokova wrote a short article in 2011 about the difficulties of a residually oral society as Russia faces when developing abstract, impersonal democratic institutions and the need to internalise literacy in order for such institutions to develop (Golobokova 2011). There is also a monograph



from 2020 by Professor emeritus Jim Curtis entitled *Stalin's Soviet Monastery*, which addresses this theme (2020). Curtis deals, above all, with the epoch of Stalinism, but his approach is valid for contemporary Russia too. Curtis bases his explanation of the characteristics of Stalinist and Soviet society on two factors: Residual orality and the repetition of the structures of the hierarchical Russian monastery. Curtis sees the importance of residual orality above all in its preservation of certain stereotypes, referred to in his work as archetypes, somehow under the influence of Mircea Eliade, which turn out to have facilitated the establishment of Soviet society. One of those is the passion-sufferer, *strastoterpets*, which, according to Curtis, assisted the authoritarianism and the indifference to suffering of the Soviet state. Curtis considers this to be a specifically Russian, or at least orthodox stereotype. He also points out two very interesting, and in my opinion, connected factors. Russian society, which in 1917 changed overwhelmingly and, in many respects, remained the same, with the new elites assuming a feudal character very similar to the old ones (cf. Pipes 1995, 440), did not really have a stereotype for capitalism, nor was the stereotype of the merchant very strong. This happened in a society with rapidly rising literacy and popular books with a large readership articulating the values of society. As demonstrated by Brooks, Russian popular literature during the decades before the October Revolution did not praise individual success in business (Brooks 2003, 278). If success came, it was through excellence in the arts, marriage or pure luck, probably due to the elements present in all residually oral societies, although they might have a specific *timbre* in the Russian case because of even deeper structures which remain to be investigated. As we shall later see, Zakhar Prilepin, the main object of this study, will not praise any behaviour or ideals characteristics of the middle class. He will praise archaic ideals of bards and warriors. The second, related factor, Curtis points out, is the relative indifference of residually oral societies to professional expertise (2020, 101). Except for the hacker, one will rarely encounter professional experts in Prilepin's discourse, and one will practically never encounter professional experts dedicated to making everyday life more comfortable.

If Curtis' reference to the Russian Monastery also implies the statement that certain types of authoritarian societies perpetuate stereotypes linked to orality longer than others, in spite of reaching high levels of literacy, is hard to say. It is a hypothesis which is interesting, but which cannot be tested here, although it would be well worth doing so in the future. I shall only mention this cursorily, since the main theme of this article is residual orality as such



in contemporary Russia and not other structures which might affect which stereotypes it preserves, nor whether certain social systems preserve some stereotypes longer than others. However, it is worth mentioning that the orthodox church certainly reflects and correlates with other structures in Russian and Soviet society. The question is whether the collective patriarchal family – wide-spread in Russian history, although with many regional variations – featuring an authoritarian patriarch and relatively equal, but oppressed brothers, reflected in a Russian society that lacks most intermediary institutions which might otherwise broker the relationship between those who yield power and those are subject to it, is not a better blueprint for Russian society to study (cf. Todd 2011, 314 ff). Studies by economists have shown that the increase in predicative exactitude and the heuristic gain by studying institutions which correlate with family systems is low compared to studying preindustrial family systems themselves and their social implications.<sup>2</sup> How far this is also applicable to general cultural factors remains to be studied. The traditional Russian communitarian family is egalitarian between brothers, not so much between brothers and sisters, and very authoritarian between parents and children. This is, however, a theme for further investigations about the connection between orality, archetypes and other social institutions.

## Literacy in Russia

I claim that the type of residually oral propaganda I study here correlates with late literacy and the preservation of oral modes of thought through a few generations. It is therefore worthwhile to quote some statistics about literacy in Russia. According to Carlo M. Cipolla, in the Russian empire in 1897, 79% of all ages above 10 years old, men and women included, were illiterate (1969, 128). In Saint Petersburg, this figure is 31%, which shows the enormous regional differences. For comparison, in Vienna in 1900 only 3% were illiterate (Cipolla 1969, 129).

<sup>2</sup> Cf.: Duranton et al.: p. 40: “Finally, when regressing family structures together with other ‘proximate’ factors, such as demographic structure, education, labor force participation, social capital, or sectoral structure on economic performance, the family structure factors are more robust than any of the ‘proximate’ factors.”





In 1920 the level of literacy in Soviet Russia was 50.6%, 84% in 1939, and 98.2% in 1959<sup>3</sup>

This was indeed a very rapid development, but this means that for long probably the majority of the Soviet population remained strongly residually oral. See below for a definition of residual orality. Richard Pipes quotes statistics from a Russian historian according to which, in 1920 92.7% of the members of the communist party were functionally semiliterate, and 4.7 were completely illiterate (1995, 439).

## Characteristics of residually oral societies

Here I shall refer to Walter J. Ong's definition of the concept of residual orality.<sup>4</sup> Ong's point of departure is a completely oral society, one where writing is absent or practically absent. This implies a certain way of thinking of the population, which Ong has frequently described, but which it is worth describing here in a few points:

1. A formulaic type of expression, which implies the frequent repetition of certain formula, adages and characterisations. This is, in a purely oral society, a necessity in order to preserve knowledge, which in purely oral societies is mostly "knowledge" of the *mores* and traditions of the community, including genealogical and historical awareness. Transmission of the latter type tends to change along with the power relations within the community, which also reflects the obsession of oral societies with historical justification. One can also say, according to Eric A. Havelock, that the oral tradition preserves a tribal or social encyclopedia (1963, 31).
2. Thinking per se tends to take place in mnemotechnic patterns (Ong 2002, 480). It is impossible to elaborate long, analytical chains of thinking in such a society and what can be thought has to be tied to the formulas, both in order to be thought and in order to be transmitted. This heavily influences the content of what can be thought. It is, I would like to add, hard to imagine advanced constitutional thinking around the

<sup>3</sup> Those figures are based on information from Boris N. Mironov (1991). It has to be taken into account that those figures include both people with extremely elementary literacy and people with higher education.

<sup>4</sup> Those characterizations recur in almost all of Ong's work, the best summary being *Orality and Literacy*, first published in 1982.





complexity of checks and balances in a purely oral society, and even less a public discussion about it.

3. Society is, in general, antagonistic and conflictual. It is hard to say whether Ong relates to heavy presence of stereotypes as such, but one could assume that stereotypes are easier to retain if they appear as dichotomies, and that this would at least strengthen a certain type of very simplistic conflictual thinking. Ong comments on this as follows: “Oral modes of storing and retrieving knowledge have much in common in all cultures. They are formulaic in design and, particularly in public life, tend to be agonistic in operation” (Ong 1981, 123).

### Elite residual orality

The concept of residual orality (Ong 2002, 314) implies that those characteristics survive for a few generations after the introduction of literacy. Since my main research questions also concern the residual orality of the elites, it will be necessary to develop Ong’s theory about residual orality. One could assume that in many literate societies, the social, economic and political elites would abandon the characteristic ways of expression and thinking of a purely oral society and soon, because of their better access to education and simply greater exposure to reading, and perhaps mathematics, measured in years and intensity of schooling, would adhere to a different, more analytical, way of thinking. This, however, does not seem to be the case in any society. The elites, in spite of a high degree of literacy and prolonged schooling seem to preserve, at least for a few generations – as long as the rest of society – the characteristics of orality, a very specific type of thinking and rhetoric, which I shall refer to as to *elite residual orality*. It would be possible to refer to this phenomenon as a species of exquisite literacy, but since it is structurally conditioned by, and reflects, the residual orality of the rest of society, I prefer this term. From a superficial point of view, it is a pompous, bombastic exquisite literacy, incorporating a huge number of commonplace and fixed expressions, as well as ascribing an absolute value to arts and letters and science for its own sake. One can think of the strong interest of Russian political and media personalities – Vladislav Surkov, Sergey Lavrov, and Mariya Zakharova – in letters. This residual orality is cultivated by an elite, whose power is not built on technical knowledge but on access to resources within a system where the mastery of elite residual orality is one determining factor, which both creates cohesion within the ruling group and, even more importantly, the



mastery of this orality is what confers legitimacy from society at large, much more than managerial capacities as such.

I propose the concept of elite residual orality based on the following assumptions:

1. In residually oral societies, the elites will, as long as the type and degree of education and knowledge of the majority do not radically change, preserve the same type of orality as the masses, just in a much more refined form.

This is necessary for them:

- (a) to stay in power and retain credibility, in the case of societies with a strong personal continuity of power;
  - (b) to seize power in the case of societies with less personal continuity, without hereditary power. In many respects, the Russia which emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union was such a society. In spite of the continuity of the representatives of the *Komsomol* organisation, many of today's influential politicians do not have a family background within the higher Soviet establishment.
2. This implies that there will be certain structural continuity of the elites in a residual oral society, which will have to preserve this structure in order to be directly (through elections) and indirectly (through the absence of revolutions or *coups d'état*) accepted by the masses. This also implies a stability, often in the repetition of the conflictual, of the characteristics of the political behaviour of a specific society.
  3. The elites will preserve and reproduce an antagonistic worldview in which politics becomes a zero-sum game. This is one of the most important aspects which appeal to residually oral masses.
  4. The elites will preserve and reproduce a thinking in stereotypes, both as concerns society and world politics. Society will be one of estates rather than classes.
  5. The economy will be based not on the production of resources but on the administering of resources based on criteria which are as such not concerned with efficiency.
  6. How long a society, both in terms of the masses and the elites, is able to preserve those characteristics, in spite of a rapid rise in education – in Russia's case during the 20<sup>th</sup> century – probably depends to a large extent on the isolation and autonomy of the society, a factor which I would prefer to call *autarchy*. It is not out of the question, either, that it also correlates with the society's preindustrial family systems.



The residual orality of the elites described above is not something that directly influences the masses or even the *intelligentsia*. People like Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, although they publish poetry and recite Pushkin in the media and their politics reflects the residual orality of the masses, are obviously mostly concerned with practical politics and also spend most of their time with everyday politics. Lavrov's poems, published in the journal *Russian Reporter*, are relatively advanced and probably not intended for a mass audience either. They are similar to a certain type of elegiac Neo-Latin poetry. This, however, does not mean that the fact that it is natural for them to create this type of literature does not reflect the broader society's residual orality. Poetry, rhetoric, and political power are closely related in traditional, residually oral societies.<sup>5</sup>

## Mediators and propagandists

The mediation between the orality and the ideology of the elites is performed by various propagandists, who are often highly educated people with a deep knowledge of classical Russian literature and history. One ought to remember that even a TV personality and propagandist like Margarita Simonyan has this kind of knowledge. Simonyan was also, together with writer and poet Zakhar Prilepin, the moderator of a poetry evening in support of the so-called special operation against Ukraine organised by the Russian state television on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 2022. The evening was introduced by an address from President Putin, read by Simonyan. One can therefore assume that the importance of the event was not marginal.

Another mediator worth mentioning briefly is the actor Ivan Okhlobystin, who in September 2022 appeared with a speech at Red Square in Moscow, attacking the decadent West with relatively stereotypical phrases and claiming that Russia needs to have an expression, a war cry, which encourages immediate action and proposed the word *goyda*, which he cried a few times, saying that it was an ancient Russian word.

## Zakhar Prilepin

A very important mediator of this type is the writer Zakhar Prilepin, born in 1975 and, according to some polls, the most famous writer in contemporary

<sup>5</sup> Cf. concerning poetry and rhetoric Curtius (2013, 145).



Russia. His novel *The Monastery* was the best selling book in Russia in 2014 and also the most borrowed in Russian public libraries. In 2015 he came second in the “Russian writer of the year” poll after Darya Dontsova. For a long time, he was active in Eduard Limonov’s *National-Bolshevik party*. He has been very active in supporting the so called “popular republics” of Donetsk and Lugansk and has also written books about his experiences from those “Republics.” He was also the advisor of Alexander Zakharchenko, “the president of the Donetsk Popular Republic.” In 2023 Prilepin was the victim of a car bomb attack but survived, whereas his driver was killed. He has actively supported the invasion of Ukraine from the beginning in February 2022.

For a few years, Prilepin has hosted a TV programme on the private chain NTV entitled *uroky russkogo*, a word game meaning both “lessons in Russian” and “lessons from a Russian.”<sup>6</sup> It addresses some very diverse themes, among others Russian hackers, but above all literature and the arts. Prilepin began producing his programmes long before the full-scale invasion. They do, probably, testify to a tendency which was present in Russian society long before the full-scale war broke out in 2022 (at least since the beginning of the hybrid war in 2014).

Prilepin’s TV programmes contain several themes typical of a residually oral society.

Lesson number 194 (*Pushkin is our patriotic everything*, 12<sup>th</sup> of November 2022) about Pushkin is very interesting. Prilepin had already before the war celebrated the supremacy of those who live only through their words, without being dependent on performance, as if the perception of the meaning and the *timbre* of the word was not a historical phenomenon either. This is how a culture, which has newly acquired literacy, perceives the written word.

This is also the foundation for the cult of Pushkin who, in Prilepin’s view, carries many other characteristics of the poet and the rhetor in residually oral societies.

It is important to remember, that although the word “poetry” is always used, the function is much more that of rhetoric.

Prilepin celebrates, among others, Pushkin because his expressions pervade Russian society, quoting many of them, which are certainly well-known to the audience. Those quotations are, indeed, present in everyday Russian language, perhaps more among people around 40 and above. This is also where

<sup>6</sup> Prilepin’s programmes are to be found on youtube.com if one searches for “Уроки русского Прилепин.” The publication date on youtube is not necessarily that of NTV.



the support for the war increases in the opinion polls. Prilepin himself said in 2019 that his audience is, above all, people over 35, “the older generation.”

This presence of stable quotations, which remain in the general consciousness for a few generations, although their frequency may vary, is characteristic of a residually oral culture. This is how a certain worldview is transmitted. This is, however, not their only function. Oral and residually oral cultures are initiatic in a certain way. It is essential to master a certain, often elaborate way of speaking and writing in order to belong to them. This is why, in conflicts between residually oral cultures, language becomes excessively important, which has been the case in the present war. Languages and their usage are, of course, always part of identity, but in residually oral societies this is the case to an extremely degree.

A theme not identical with the precedent, but closely related to it, and which often appears in Prilepin’s programs is that of the warrior-poet, a theme Prilepin addressed already, to some extent, in his book *People from the Donbass*. Residually oral cultures are agonistic, conflictual and dualistic, inclined to perceiving the world through the frame of friend and foe. It is therefore not surprising that a central figure in such a noetic universe is not only linked to bellicose capacities, but also to poetry, that is, in a residually oral society above all rhetoric. This is important to highlight. Poetry is such a diverse phenomenon that it is hard to compare poetry in a modern Western society to that of a residually oral society, except perhaps when it comes to typography and only to a limited extent when it comes to rhythm. An expression of this is the fact that, at least until the 18<sup>th</sup> century and in some countries even later, poetry was close to rhetoric in Western Europe. One example would be Hermsilla’s *El arte de hablar en prosa y verso* (1826) where expression in prose and verse is still perceived of as speech, in a society, early 19<sup>th</sup> century Spain, with a mainly oral population and a cult of exquisite literacy among the elites. In an oral society, the capacity to convince by rhetorical means is the only way of intellectually influencing people. Poetry is a part of this context. So, it is not surprising that both antagonistic-bellicose and rhetorical capacities appear in one character which is central to Prilepin and given his presence in the public space in Russia, probably to Russian society as a whole. This is the warrior-poet. The association of violence and rhetoric, which Walter J. Ong calls “oral and physical bravado...” (Ong 2002, 107) and also appears in the lesson about Pushkin. Pushkin, Prilepin affirms, would have hit (*izbyl*) those who are ready to give up Russian territory. He notes with satisfaction that Pushkin always carried an iron rod when roaming the streets. He also,



affirms Prilepin, praised Tsar Nicolas I for reviving Russia thanks to a *new war*. The parallel with the current situation is obvious.

The same theme is addressed in the programme about Alexander Vertinsky, from times before the 2022 aggression (Lesson 65, *Vertinsky and his machine gun*, 19<sup>th</sup> of May 2019). Prilepin says that we tend to perceive Vertinsky as a bohemian Pierrot, someone a little decadent. However, he wrote a song where he imagined grabbing a machine gun and expressed his readiness to die. In this lesson Prilepin also comes back to the cult of pure literature, of the pure word. He says that none of the once famous singer-songwriters are remembered; their performance was completely bound to specific circumstances. Only Vertinsky lives, in spite of this. To Prilepin it is obvious that the pure word, pure poetry is eternal. This is, however, an opinion as bound to the cult of letters in recently literate societies as many other statements of Prilepin's. Words also have a *timbre* bound to a certain time. In a culture such as today's Russia, the opinion that they represent something absolute seems obvious.

In lesson 190 (*Arise, Great country*, 14<sup>th</sup> of October 2022) Prilepin describes enthusiastically how the Soviet poets praised the Soviet army and participated in the war themselves. He contrasts them with the liberal, modern intelligentsia of today, which he considers to be indifferent to the sufferings of the soldiers. In lesson 144 (*Russian poets go to war, and that is the norm*, 10<sup>th</sup> of June 2021) Prilepin praises and recites Russian warrior-poets of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In lesson 189 (*VVP*, about Vladimir Putin, 7<sup>th</sup> of October 2022) he insists on something very interesting. He considers that Russia should be a country for workers, poets, priests and scientists, priests and poets and not for merchants. The combination, which is indeed worthy of comparison with what Curtis says about the indifference of residually oral societies to practical professional expertise, is highly characteristic for the type of communitarian socialism Prilepin envisions.

## **Conclusion: the social and political importance of residual orality in contemporary Russia**

Above, I have tried to demonstrate that Prilepin's public appearances contain many characteristics of a residually oral way of thinking. Even in societies that have had very high literacy rates for centuries, one encounters examples of appearances, texts and performances which are highly residually oral. What matters is the *frequency* of such phenomena, which as I claim, is





extreme in contemporary Russia, and in this case, their political importance. This is shown by the strong presence in Russian public life of personalities like Prilepin.

One factor ought to be highlighted. Prilepin's audience does coincide with the age groups which mostly, according to the statistics of the Levada-centre, support the war against Ukraine. One may object that these cohorts will watch anything that supports the war and that residual orality is not decisive either for their media consumption or their thinking. However, Prilepin's popularity is not recent, but was established long before the outbreak of the full-scale invasion. Even then – and many of the programs I have described above date from times of the hybrid war – all those characteristics of residual orality were present. One might argue that the presence and receptiveness of the audience to those characteristics have rendered the relatively strong support among those age cohorts possible. Many of the themes addressed are, as I claim, not explicitly, but only structurally related to the invasion. If the audience's goal were merely to receive a confirmation of a pro-war stance, the programs would probably not be able to keep their attention. What makes them interesting to the audience is the line between those, apparently more general themes and the war, understandable only by a certain audience in a certain historical context – remaining orality.

The contemporary Russian propaganda can thus rely on a readiness in the population to accept and embrace certain stereotypes linked to war and aggression.

That the preservation of a certain tradition, expressed in slogans and catchphrases, correlates with late literacy and ensuing residual orality seems clear. The frequency of this type of expression was considerable in Russia even before the war and was marginal in most, although not all, Western countries that have had a high literacy for hundreds of years. The residual orality of the elites is also much more striking in Russia than in most Western countries, given the constant references to the Russian literary heritage and relatively high production of independent literary works (cf. Sergey Lavrov, Vladislav Surkov).

This, in total, creates an atmosphere where the type of propaganda represented by Prilepin encounters understanding and support and seems to facilitate the war efforts, including the mobilisation waves.





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