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"Christians! Go home": A Revival of Neo-Paganism between the Baltic Sea and Transcaucasia (An Overview)[1]

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ABSTRACT *A rapid growth of new religious movements, in terms of both their numbers and variability, was a surprising outcome of the move to democracy in post-Soviet societies. One of the movements is Neo-Paganism whose emergence paradoxically coincided with the celebration of the anniversary of the baptism of Rus 1,000 years ago and the birth of Christianity 2,000 years ago. The Neo-Pagan movements challenge Christian values—with regard to ethics, attitude towards the natural environment, view of the past, and approach towards cultural variability. The Neo-Pagan impact on Christianity in the post-Soviet lands is rooted in ethnic nationalism—a common phenomenon at the turn of the 1990s. Neo-pagans are searching for both a primordial past and a pure ethnic culture, which they view as invaluable resources to overcome the hardship and ideological vacuum of the transitional period. However, they do this in various ways and thus, various forms of Neo-Paganism manifest themselves between the Baltic Sea and Transcaucasia.*

Neo-Paganism—One More Paradox of Globalization

The 2,000th anniversary of Christianity is challenged by a paradoxical phenomenon—the revival of paganism. Significantly, this involves mainly urbanized literate people who have long ago lost their links with traditional peasant culture, commonly considered the last fortress of pre-Christian beliefs. The Neo-Pagan movement has been developing in the West for several decades and has recently begun to conquer the post-Soviet lands. The large scale of the movement makes us think of its driving forces—what is the message which attracts urban inhabitants so much, why are they dissatisfied with universal approaches provided by the world religions? What is the nature of Neo-Paganism—is it a purely intellectual activity or does it go far beyond that while claiming to have a solution for burning contemporary problems—problems of a social, political, and cultural kind? If so, what is exactly suggested and how could paganism help? If Neo-Paganism is treated in terms of an 'invention of tradition', how is it related to contemporary urban culture and social milieu? What is invented and for what goal? What are the connections between Neo-Paganism and the world religions—which elements of the latter's heritage are rejected and which elements are appreciated and borrowed by the Neo-Pagans?

What is a social profile of Neo-Pagans? Who are their leaders? How and with what kind of resources do they construct Neo-Pagan beliefs? What is their dogma, what are their rituals, symbols, calendars? Are there any specialized

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priests and sanctuaries and if so, what are their functions? How do Neo-Pagans themselves treat their own beliefs—as a religion *per se* or as a new political or ethnic ideology which is aimed at social mobilization in order to achieve some practical ends? If so, what are the goals of the movement?

It is obvious that there are no uniform answers to all these questions. Instead, it seems possible to distinguish between several different models of contemporary Neo-Paganism. This paper is focused on comparative data regarding various Neo-Pagan movements, their ideologies and practices in contemporary Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. I will trace the development of Neo-Paganism in the post-Soviet lands between the Baltic Sea and Transcaucasia, discuss the main ideas which form the basis for its revival, describe the social milieu in which Neo-Pagan groups emerge and act, analyze their relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church and local authorities, and argue that a fast development of Neo-Paganism in the post-Soviet lands in the 1990s was closely connected with a growth of ethnic nationalism.

The idea of a national religion which should be developed on a Pagan basis was for the first time put forward in Central Europe at the time of the Reformation (Poliakov, 1996: 87–88). For example, Tomaso Machiavelli praised a rationality in the pagan use of religion. It was his dream to develop a religion which might perfectly serve the state (Cassirer, 1946: 138–139). Some contemporary scholars cannot believe that there could be close links between religion and nationalism (Kedourie, 1966; 1970). Others who recognize these connections disregard Neo-Paganism (Hutchinson, 1994: 66–96). In the meantime, some activists of the national movements persistently call for a restoration of the (ethnic) folk religion.

Why is this so important to them? For nationalists, the nation is a focus of all human activity and desire and one is able to become a personality only within the genuine national context. That is why a nation has to carry the attributes which can meet all human demands—ranging from economic and political requirements to intellectual and spiritual ones. Under modernization which levels and de-ethnicizes a material environment, what is called an ethnic authenticity is more and more restricted to intellectual and spiritual spheres. It is with the help of the latter that an ethnic nationalism seeks to legitimize its claims in other spheres of life, mainly in the political, social, and cultural spheres. A spiritual aspect is usually identified with a religion. As a result, in search for its authentic identity, ethnic nationalism, if it desires to be consistent, has to break with the cosmopolitan world religions and forge a genuine religion of its own. Logically enough, this leads either to attempts to nationalize a world religion or to search for Pagan roots and construct a national religion from Pagan resources. In any case, such a constructive activity is carried out by highly urbanized and secularized intellectuals who treat religion mainly as a cultural legacy (Baram, 1991: 138).

It is already a truism that Russian nationalism has adopted Orthodox Christianity which has long been considered 'the Russian Orthodoxy'. It is instructive that recently, a Volgograd radical Russian Orthodox newspaper, *Kolokol*, an organ of the restored 'Union of the Russian People', has begun to speak persistently of 'our Russian God' (Pushkin, 1997). Nowadays, some Russian Neo-Pagans do their best to build a bridge between themselves and the Russian Orthodoxy, and argue that 'Russian Orthodoxy' has incorporated a lot

of the former Slavic Pagan rites and beliefs. In this way, they demonstrate that Russian Orthodoxy has grown up from local Pagan roots and view it as a 'younger brother' of Russian Paganism. Simultaneously, a similar trend started among the Turkic-speaking peoples. While stating that the ancient Turks observed monotheism, 'Tengrianism', some Turkic authors attempt to make it a foundation for Islam (Abdullin, 1990) or Christianity (Adjiev, 1993a; 1993b) or all the world monotheist traditions together (Suleimenov, 1975).

Recently, ethnic nationalists of various origins have attempted to nationalize Jesus Christ in the same way. Some Russian 'patriots' state that Jesus Christ was 'Russian' (Beliakova, 1994; Kandyba, 1995: 202; Russkii, 1997), the Ossetian activists argue that he had an Ossetian ancestry (Khamitsev & Balaev, 1992), a Chuvash author identifies Jesus Christ with a local Pagan spirit, 'Keremet' (Egorov, 1993), and the Assyrians advocate his Assyrian origin (Matveev & Matveev, 1992). There is another tendency within ethnic Russian nationalism nowadays which treats the Iranian prophet Zoroaster as 'Slav, Aryan' and to claim that his teaching made up the core of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism (Avdeev, 1994; Torop, 1995). In short, within the ethnic nationalist discourse, attempts are made to indigenize the world religions, to link them to '*Blut und Boden*'.

It is just in this environment that a revival of Paganism is observed in many post-Soviet regions. This paper is a result of a recent survey which covers ethnic Russians, the peoples of the Middle Volga River region (Mari, Udmurts, Mordvinians, Chuvash), the Ossetians, the Ukrainians, the Belorussians, the Abkhazians, the Armenians, the Lithuanians, and the Latvians (Shnirelman, 1998a; 2001[2]). Judging from the comparative data, a revival of Neo-Paganism has both general and specific features. It is apparent that the movement, firstly, covers mainly Christian regions (albeit with an interesting 'Tengrianist' faction among the Volga Tatars) and, secondly, is closely connected with a growth of ethnic nationalism. At the same time, it is possible to distinguish between different models within Neo-Paganism in respect to its roots in particular areas, the specific role of the émigrés in this development, the rituals and resources (books or roots in the living folk traditions), the role of Neo-Paganism in the national education system, and connections between Neo-Paganism and xenophobia (especially anti-Semitism).

Who is a Pagan?

The first problem to be discussed is Neo-Pagan identity. Most Pagans identify an ethnic group with a nation, and, thus, for some of them Paganism means nationalism or, more precisely, ethnic nationalism (Lozko, 1998; Shilov, 2000: 95; Lozko, 1994: 38–39). Interestingly, this approach corresponds precisely to that of the French New Right's intellectual leader, Alain de Benoist, who puts a high value on paganism which respects and retains local identities (see de Benoist, 1993–1994: 186). Some Pagans feel quite comfortable with the term 'Neo-Paganism', like the editors of the Moscow journal *Nasledie predkov* (Ancestors' Heritage) (Tulaev, 1999: 62, 64). It is no accident that the title of this journal recalls the Nazi '*Ahnenerbe*' (heritage of the ancestors). However, for other Pagans, the term 'Neo-Paganism' sounds somewhat artificial and non-authentic and they claim that they are restoring an original genuine religion;

therefore, they call themselves simply 'Pagans' (Velimir, 1999; N. N. Speransky, personal letter to author, 5th October, 1999). Members of the Moscow Slavic Pagan Community avoid the term 'Paganism' and instead call themselves simply 'Slavs' and their religion 'Slavism'. They maintain that the term 'Slav' means 'he who praises his gods' (Kazakov, 1999). Some Neo-Pagans of the 'Union of the Veneds' in St. Petersburg prefer the name 'Vedaism' for their belief system. They identify their beliefs with scientific knowledge and reject any religious worship. This approach is shared by Alexander Aratov, editor of the Moscow radical newspaper *Russkaia Pravda*, who claims that the Slavs knew ('*vedali*') rather than believed ('*verili*'). For him, that means that their knowledge was based on a scientific approach rather than on religion (Amelina, 1998). Yet, whatever they think of themselves, Neo-Pagans are doing their best to restore pre-Christian belief systems.

At the Dawn of Neo-Paganism: A Survey

In different regions, Neo-Paganism emerged from different sources and was forged in different intellectual climates: sometimes émigrés played a crucial role in its development, sometimes local, highly urbanized intellectuals developed their ideas quite independently of any external influences; sometimes paganism was a total invention albeit employing various fragmentary elements of different folk traditions, sometimes it was based on more authentic sources rooted in surviving rural traditions and practices.

In Latvia, Neo-Paganism was born in the 1920s when, after the independent state had been established, some Latvian intellectuals felt they required a special ethnic religion based on Pagan worship. The movement was initiated by colonel Ernest Brastyn'sh (1892–1942), an ideologist of Latvian ethno-nationalism. He formulated the core ideas of Latvian Neo-Paganism—'Dievturiba' ('worship')—having embodied the dream of a famous Latvian poet, Janis Rainis, who wrote: "In our folk songs an ancient religion is embedded which has to be a new religion." After Latvia was annexed by the USSR, Latvian Neo-Paganism was persecuted and found a refuge abroad (Ryzhakova, 1999: 4).

Neo-Paganism emerged among the Armenian émigrés in the 1930s when it was propagated by Garegin Nzhde, a hero of the Armenian-Azeri war of 1918–1920. After the downfall of the Armenian Democratic Republic, he fled together with the Tashnaks and found a refuge in Germany. There he joined the Nazi movement and was granted the position of a General in the German army. Following the Nazi ideology, he attempted to build a genuine Armenian non-Christian religion, 'Tsegakron' (a 'clan religion'), which was based on the idea of an identity which mixed Armenianism and Aryanism and emphasized 'purity of blood'.

Since the end of the 1980s, when the USSR was already beginning to disintegrate, ethnic nationalists felt that they were called to commence a re-building of the nation states; thus, Neo-Pagan ideas arrived at the right time. In late 1989, the Neo-Pagan movement was introduced to Armenia where some intellectuals, dissatisfied with the Christian legacy, suggested a return to the 'genuine' Armenian beliefs of the pre-Christian past. They based these beliefs on the Nzhde's ideas (L. Abrahamian, personal communication, 1997).

Neo-Paganism was brought back to Latvia in the early 1990s by the former émigrés who were returning to the Motherland. Recently, Neo-Pagan communities and shrines have emerged, Brastyn'sh's books have been republished, and 'Dievturiba' has begun to make its way into Latvian schools (Ryzhakova, 1999).

The development of Neo-Paganism in Russia and in the Ukraine has taken a different path. It was gradually constructed by the local ethnic nationalists in the 1970s and 1980s, who borrowed ideas from various sources. Firstly, during that time, Russian and Ukrainian ethnic nationalists rediscovered the world of the Slavic-oriented historical literature (the pre-revolutionary 'Slavic school') of the nineteenth century, which had been rejected by specialists for its methodological poverty. Secondly, they make extensive use of pseudo-historic publications of Russian and Ukrainian émigré amateur authors (among them Vladimir Shaian, Yuri Miroliubov, Sergei Lesnoi, Yuri Lisovoi, Lev Sylenko) whose books and articles were republished in Russia and in the Ukraine in a number of editions in the 1990s. Thirdly, they base their arguments on a forgery, the *Book of Vles*, which they view as a genuine source of 'Russian prehistory' (for details see Shnirelman, 1998b: 3–7). Fourthly, they use some 'historical works' published in the USSR during the wave of chauvinism in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Fifthly, they pick up desired archaeological and linguistic data from a popular literature which is published nowadays. Finally, they highly appreciate ethnological theories which were popular in Germany under Hitler (Shnirelman, 2002, forthcoming).

The Ukrainian Neo-Paganism was built up by the émigré writer Lev Sylenko. After World War II, he found himself in Canada where he began to study Oriental religions, especially Hinduism. In 1964, he began to preach what he called 'Ukrainian native beliefs' among the Ukrainian communities in the USA and Canada and founded a native (Neo-Pagan) Church 'RUNVira' (Native Ukrainian Folk Faith). The Church has now branches in Canada, the USA, the United Kingdom, and Australia; in 1992, it was legally established in the Ukraine (Runvira, 1993).[3]

Neo-Paganism entered Russia practically hand in hand with the faked *Book of Vles* and Krishnaism in 1970–1971. In the 1970s and early 1980s, Neo-Paganism was popular among some ethnic Russian nationalists who were struggling against 'World Zionism', identified Christianity with Judaism, and did their best to find a 'genuine Russian spirituality' in pre-Christian times. It is no surprise that this led them to the 'Aryan idea' (Shnirelman, 1998c) and they re-discovered and appreciated the legacy of Nazi Germany. Since 1989–1990, Russia witnessed a formation of Neo-Pagan communities, political movements, and even para-military organizations based on Neo-Pagan ideology (Shnirelman, 1998b; 1999–2000; 2001; Pribylovski, 1998–1999). A minor faction makes efforts to combine 'Aryan' Krishnaism with 'genuine' Russian religion (Shnirelman, 1997).

The Neo-Pagan movement emerged in Lithuania in 1967, when the summer solstice ('Shvento Rossy') was celebrated for the first time and a 'Romuva' movement was established which borrowed its name from the ancient Prussian pagan sanctuary. The activists began to restore Lithuanian folklore and to arrange pagan festivals that became popular, especially among the youth. All of this alarmed the local authorities and the 'Romuva' movement was arrested in

1971, but in the late 1980s, the Neo-Pagan 'Romuva' community was restored. The post-Soviet Lithuanian authorities are more sympathetic towards its activity than their Soviet predecessors. They allowed Neo-Pagans to build a pagan altar in the center of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania (Trinkunas, 1997).

In Belarus, where local ethnic nationalism was weaker than in Russia and in the Ukraine, Neo-Paganism has emerged only in the early 1990s. Some Belorussian authors are glorifying local paganism, are searching for close connections between the Belorussian language and Sanskrit, and accuse Christianity of attempts to eliminate the pagan heritage (Tsiarokhin, 1993). The Belorussian Neo-Pagans are restoring the 'Sviatogor cult' which is as negative towards Christians and Jews as the Dazh'bog cult of their Russian and Ukrainian counterparts. Suffice it to note that an Orthodox cathedral was desecrated in Minsk in June 1996—its walls were covered with insulting graffiti, including one that read 'Christians, go away from our Belorussian soil'. At the same time, a less aggressive branch of Belorussian Neo-Paganism aims to restore paganism as a valuable part of the ethnic Belorussian spiritual culture (Salavei, 1992).

Since the turn of the 1980s, a growth of Neo-Paganism has been observed in the Middle Volga region, in North Ossetia-Alaniia, and in Abkhazia. Pagan traditions had never disappeared there completely and, in contrast to the Slavic and Baltic regions, there was no need to invent too much by reference to books, as almost all the resources were intact there. Thus, in these regions, interest in Paganism developed in two different environments: firstly, in the countryside with its unbroken continuity of traditional folk beliefs, and secondly, in the urbanized areas where local, highly secularized intellectuals began to construct a new synthetic religion in order to overcome a crisis of identity. In the latter case, this was a manifestation of local ethnic nationalism resisting Russian Orthodoxy as a 'religion of exploiters' (Filatov & Shipkov, 1996).

A special situation has emerged in Abkhazia where the religious situation was traditionally complicated: in formal terms, Christianity was widespread in the South and Islam dominated in the North. However, the Abkhazians still appreciated their Pagan beliefs very much. The priests were the main bearers of the folk beliefs and they managed to maintain their authority even in the Soviet time. They were well-known by the Abkhazians who turned to them in times of need. However, they were inaccessible to strangers and their activities were kept secret (Krylov, 1999).

Nor have the Pagan traditions been broken among the Mari people (in the Middle Volga region). Until 1887, mass prayers were arranged regularly and a tradition of family and communal prayers survived afterwards. The Mari priests ('*karty*') managed to keep up the tradition, despite Soviet prosecutions. For example, the prayers took place openly in some areas at the time of World War II and in 1957, the Mari even managed to arrange a large sacrifice in the sacred grove near the village of Kupran-Sola (Popov, 1996). One could observe a similar pattern in some other Republics of the Middle Volga region (Filatov & Shipkov, 1996) and in Northern Ossetia-Alania (Popov, 1995).

On the one hand, the Pagan traditions were secured by the living practices. On the other hand, they were treated as less prestigious by local, urbanized intellectuals, for the traditions in question were closely associated with rural backwardness. That is why ethnic nationalists of the Middle Volga region initially avoided the use of Pagan cultural resources. The advocates of ethnic

revival turned to them somewhat late, after they had realized that they could not expect the support of either the central authorities or Russian Orthodoxy, the latter having an obviously strong ethnic Russian flavor.

The Neo-Pagans in Defense: Looking for a Foe

Almost everywhere (except among ethnic Russians), an appeal to the Pagan legacy brought about an anti-colonial message and emphasized the necessity to mobilize local cultural resources in order to struggle against the destructive external forces that were aiming, or were thought to be aiming, to enslave the people and destroy their culture. These attitudes were quite popular and were mainly directed against the ethnic Russians in the non-Russian Republics.

Indeed, after having been integrated in the Russian state, the peoples of the Middle Volga River (except the Tatars) were completely Christianized. However, they treated Christianity as an external agent which could not get deep into their hearts and remained alien to them. Recently, this feeling has been reinforced by ethnic nationalism. Indeed, local peoples view Christian Orthodoxy as an 'ethnic Russian religion' which has been introduced by force in order to enslave and exploit indigenous inhabitants. The local non-Russian peoples are aggrieved that they experienced ethnic oppression and were denied their own independent states for centuries. Besides, they are frustrated by an obvious contrast between the growing wealth and power of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is now generously supported by the Russian state, and the impoverished local inhabitants. Finally, the growing local ethnic nationalisms require their own ideologies. A nationalization of Orthodox Christianity might be a possible solution, i.e. the introduction of the vernacular into liturgy, recruitment of clergy from the indigenous peoples, and setting up the cults of local non-Russian saints. However, the Russian Orthodox priests oppose a development along such lines (V. P. Ivanov, personal communication, 1997).

Therefore, the only alternative for the local peoples is to reject Russian Orthodoxy and to return to their own pre-Christian beliefs and practices. Over the last decade, this idea has encouraged local intellectuals, especially people in the humanities and in art, among them ethnographers. As a result, the latter have begun to study and systematize local Pagan resources.

Meanwhile, ethnic Russian Neo-Pagans have their own 'enemy' in the idea of the 'Cosmic Jewish conspiracy'. They believe that the Jews have deliberately invented Christianity in order to enslave all the other peoples of the world. They treat the Christian Orthodox epoch in the Russian history as a big black hole. A brief Pagan period of the Kievan Rus cannot help either, since it was preceded by the time when many East European Slavic tribes were paying tribute to the Jewish Khazars. Although the Kievan Pagan princes, especially Sviatoslav, managed not only to liberate the Slavs, but also to destroy the powerful Khazar Khanate, this cannot offset the 'Jewish occupation' at the dawn of Russian history (Moroz, 1994; Shnirelman, 1996; also Shnirelman, 1998d).

What is Bad about Christianity?

Medieval history can therefore not feed the pride of the Russian Neo-Pagan

nationalists with regard to their ancestors' deeds. Besides, the Christian Church always tried to play down ethnic differences and to indoctrinate its followers with a cosmopolitan attitude. That is why the contemporary ethnic nationalist idea cannot live in peace with a Christianity which is aimed at de-ethnicization (albeit, in the Russian environment, it means Russification of the non-Russians). Finally, while calling for humility Christianity disarms ethnic nationalists who need quite different qualities in order to struggle for power, such as aggressiveness, brevity, sacrificial behaviour, fighting skill, intolerance towards 'enemies of the nation', etc. (see, for example, Barkashov, 1994). Thus, some ethnic nationalist ideologists admire Neo-Paganism for its bellicose spirit; indeed, they need a struggling God rather than a suffering one (Eliseev, 1995). It is worth mentioning that the Ukrainian radical nationalists connect a successful national development with an aggressive, militant attitude (Yavors'kyi, 1992: 26–29).

The latter reason manifested itself clearly in the Abkhazian and Armenian Neo-Pagan rhetoric: an emergence of Neo-Paganism among the Armenians was accompanied by a growth of tensions with the Azeris (Abrahamian, 1999: 68) and an interest of the Abkhazians in Neo-Paganism expressed itself at the dawn of the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict in 1989. The Ukrainian Neo-Paganism is strongly aimed at ethnic Russians; even anti-Semitism seems to be of a subsidiary importance in this respect. Lev Sylenko emphasized strongly that it was the ethnic Russians who used Christian Orthodoxy in order to enslave the Ukraine (Sylenko, 1979).

Thus, Neo-Pagans are deeply and insatiably in love with the pre-Christian past, as if at that time, peoples lived in virgin purity, were not corrupted by external influences, could therefore enjoy the best ideology in the world, wage successful wars, and accomplish great heroic deeds.

The Neo-Pagans as Nation-Builders

Another trait of Neo-Paganism which distinguishes it from traditional Paganism is its aspiration to build a unique integral national religion, devoid of any internal variability. Lev Sylenko discusses this topic. Only those can be genuine, he argues, who have their own original culture, spiritual life, and unique history. In this respect, the Ukrainian authenticity is mainly linked with the pre-Christian past (Sylenko, 1979: 973). The Christianity 'based on the nomadic Judaism' was permanently treated as 'Paganism' by the Ukrainians. According to Sylenko, the Ukrainians have to move back to their original pre-Christian faith ('in order to be selfless and strong in the battle we need a faith—sacred Native Ukrainian National Faith'), for every people has to enjoy its own genuine ethnic religion: let the Israelites worship their own Lord, but it is Dazhbog who is the Lord of the 'Rus' (Ukraine). Jesus Christ is an alien ('the Jewish Rabbi') for the Ukrainians, he was the spiritual leader of the Jews and there is no room for him next to Dazhbog (Sylenko, 1979: 247ff). It is interesting that while discussing a restoration of the pre-Christian faith, Sylenko calls his teaching a monotheism, breaking away from the traditional Pagan polytheism (*Who is … ?*, 1984: 45–54; Runvira, 1993).

There are also attempts to turn local traditional gods into objects of national cult in North Ossetia–Alania. For example, in former times, a grove at the

Alaghir highway was devoted to the local communal Saint Khetag. After the Georgian–Ossetian clashes in Southern Ossetia in 1991–1992, a glade near the grove has served for the pan-Ossetian worship which includes both religious and political rites. This activity is supervised by the Big Council (*'Styr-nykhas'*), a non-governmental committee of the Congress of the Ossetian people established in May 1993. The Khetag celebration was finally approved by the former president of North Ossetia–Alania as a national festival and has thus official status. In order to raise money for the reconstruction of the site, a special foundation was established and since July 1994, a big annual sacrifice is arranged in the Khetag grove, which involves hundreds of thousands of people. The Khetag grove is declared as the main sacred site of the Ossetians and there are plans to build an ethnographic museum there (Popov, 1995: 62–67; Dzeranov, 1996).

Since 1991, a religious community, 'Oshmarii-Chimarii' ('White Mari' or 'Clean Mari'), has been active in the Republic Mari El and pan-Mari prayers are arranged regularly. The Charter of the Mari Religious Center proposes to build a highly centralized organization covering all the territory of the Republic and subordinating all the rural communities to uniform leadership; this distinguishes this movement drastically from traditional Paganism (Guboglo & Chervonnaia, 1996: 217–222). An attempt to build a national religion is obvious.

Indeed, for the leaders like Sylenko, a turn to Paganism means building an ethno-national cult, a 'national spirit', in order to unite a nation in its aspiration towards freedom. Cosmopolitan Christianity which equalizes everybody before the Lord, regardless of ethnic origins, erodes ethnic integrity and hinders the mobilization of an ethnic will. In the eyes of some non-Russian ethnic nationalists, this situation disarms them and renders them unable to win over powerful Russia, since the latter is a stronghold of Christian Orthodoxy. To put it differently, Christianity is closely associated with Russia by some Ukrainian and many Middle Volga ethnic nationalists. In their turn, ethnic Russian Neo-Pagans reject Christianity, for it weakens man's spirit with its sermon for non-violent behaviour and does not allow to mobilize the will in order to struggle against the 'world evil'.

In Abkhazia, a somewhat different process developed. At the beginning of the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict, one could observe a growth of interest in Christianity among some Abkhazians who considered that the war was brought about as punishment for the neglect of Christianity. However, with tensions growing, more and more Abkhazians began to associate Christianity with the Georgians and a lot of them chose to stick to their own original gods. However, this is not to say that they entirely reject Christianity. Nowadays, their rhetoric emphasizes tolerance towards any religion.

Thus, a return to Paganism was closely linked with a growth of ethnic nationalism almost everywhere on the eve of the collapse of the USSR and immediately afterwards. It is therefore no accident that the most radical political movements use Neo-Paganism extensively as a core of their ideologies. There are more than a dozen radical political parties and movements in Russia that advocate Neo-Pagan values, including anti-Semitism and racism (Shnirelman, 1998b; 1999a; Shnirelman & Komarova, 1997). Their counterpart in Armenia is a Neo-Nazi party, 'Admirers of the Armenian Clan', which was registered in July 1991.

At the same time, a turn towards Paganism in the Republic of Mari El was closely connected with the activity of the democratic movement, 'Marii ushem' (the 'Mari Union'), which is the largest ethnic nationalist organization among the Mari people. Its goal is to revive and develop the Mari language and culture by the Mari themselves, wherever they live now (Sharov, 1995: 54–55). One can observe similar trends in some other neighboring Republics of the Middle Volga River region. The Udmurt Neo-Pagan community, 'Udmurt vos' (the 'Udmurt Prayer'), was born within the 'Demen' ('Society') movement which was established in December 1989 for the protection and restoration of the Udmurt ethnic culture. In the Mordvinian Republic, a 'revival' of Paganism was initiated by a cultural association, 'Mastorava' (the 'Earth-mother'), established in 1990 for the 'restoration of the Moksha and Er'zia ethnic communities'. In their turn, the leaders of the Chuvash National Congress are very active with regard to the restoration of Chuvash Paganism.

In some Caucasian regions, the Neo-Pagan movement also enjoys protection from local authorities or nationalist movements. For example, in North Ossetia–Alania, a revival of Paganism is patronized by the Congress of the Ossetian people. In Abkhazia, Neo-Paganism flourishes, especially since the Georgian–Abkhazian war of 1992–1993, and is protected by the Abkhazian authorities. In particular, the latter took part in the bull sacrifice in October 1993 in order to thank the Lord for the victory over the Georgians. The Abkhazians believe that their ethnic god Dydrypsh awarded them the victory. Since then, the Abkhazian leaders have regularly taken part in traditional rituals (Krylov, 1998a: 24–26; 1998b).

Despite the negative attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church, local authorities are sometimes very sympathetic towards Neo-Pagans. They help them with both the organization of the prayers (in the Middle Volga region) and the introduction of special courses in folk beliefs to school curricula (as happened in Latvia, Mari El, Udmurtiia, Chuvashia, and even in some ethnic Russian regions of the Russian Federation and in the Ukraine).

Conclusions: The Effects and Limits of the Neo-Pagan Development

The decline and finally the collapse of the Communist ideology caused the quest for a new intellectual reward. The process was accompanied by a disintegration of the former political system, an infiltration of new ideas and religions from abroad, economic impoverishment, a growth of ethnic tensions and clashes, and a crisis of identity. In this quite confusing and distressing environment, many people made attempts to ground themselves in what they took as traditional values. Hence, a sharp growth of interest in folk culture, in the remote past unspoiled by any alien influence, in what people ultimately interpreted as a genuine culture developed by their own remote ancestors. This attitude was skillfully exploited by local politicians who taught that all the misfortunes were a result of evil alien intervention, although they did not specify who the 'aliens' might be. Thus, the emergence of Neo-Paganism was rooted in the growth of nationalist attitudes aimed at the protection of folk cultures in order to attenuate the effects of fast modernization. In this context, modernization is identified with some 'World Evil', as if it were embodied in some mighty people which deliberately oppresses and swallows local cultures. All or almost all the

Neo-Pagan ideologies in the post-Soviet lands contain an anti-colonial message and have xenophobic connotations. The Neo-Pagans' anger is aimed at either a dominant majority—Georgians in Abkhazia, Russians in the Middle Volga River region and the Ukraine—or at those who are viewed as evil alien agents—Jews in ethnic Russian regions. An image of the enemy is used by local nationalists to promote ethnic consolidation and nation-building on a mono-ethnic basis.

Similar attitudes feed Neo-Paganism in the Muslim lands, albeit any ideological pressure from outside is a matter of resistance there. Tengrianism, popular among Turkic-speaking people, is based on a clear anti-colonial attitude. However, in various political environments, it advocates different values and looks quite different: it calls for an inclusive pan-Turkic ideology in the multi-cultural regions where the Turks feel like hurt minorities (the Kazan' Tatars, the Kumyks), while in some newly established Turkic national states (for example, in Kyrghyzstan), it calls for an exclusive national ideology.

This is not to say that Neo-Pagans base themselves on negative attitudes alone. A romanticized folk peasant culture is another focus of their attraction. They teach that it contains everything one needs for a prosperous material and intellectual life. Most of all, they appreciate harmony with the natural environment as if it had been perfectly mastered and enjoyed by their distant ancestors. Evidently, these claims are directed against contemporary industrial development which devastates and pollutes the natural environment. Thus, the Neo-Pagans stand for the protection and restoration of the environment. Yet, at times, their struggle for the purity of nature slides into a struggle for the 'purity of blood' and their 'ecology of culture' turns into a new form of racism.[4]

Ecological orientations of Neo-Paganism are expressed through advertising a 'healthy way of life' and an emphasis on folk, non-professional health care based on herbs, spells, meditation, and the like. This list includes various martial arts exercises and rituals, which are especially popular among the Russian Neo-Pagans.

Contemporary Neo-Paganism is constituted by two different branches—one of a 'bookish' approach which is artificially cultivated by urbanized intellectuals who have lost their links with folk tradition, and the other, more authentic, is of a rural movement based on a continuity rooted in the remote past. The first dominates among the Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians, Lithuanians, Latvians, and Armenians and can be defined as an 'invention of tradition', after Eric Hobsbawm (1983). A more complex pattern can be observed among the ethnic groups of the Middle Volga River region as well as among the Ossetians and Abkhazians, where both tendencies are interacting with one another.

The urbanized bookish Neo-Paganism is constructed by people of high educational standards. They do not restrict themselves to an oral tradition and are searching for earlier cultures reconstructed by scholars. It is on this ground that the Russian Neo-Pagans forge their versions of the Neo-Pagan belief system: some of them emphasize an Indo-Iranian heritage ('Aryan', 'Vedaic'), others are more fascinated with Zoroastrianism, still others are adherents of the 'Runic Magic'. A growing faction makes efforts to restore some 'original Slavic pagan faith' or are developing some eclectic versions of the 'Russian religion', as Kandyba does.[5] While emphasizing the authenticity of their 'genuine faith', Neo-Pagans do not fail to borrow from Christianity (the idea of the Trinity), from Hinduism (the idea of reincarnation), or especially from occultism. This

does not stop them from isolating themselves from the New Religious Movements and stressing the primordial nature of their beliefs. The latter is especially expressed in their call for returning to pre-Christian or pre-Muslim personal names and in the publication of guide books to the naming systems of the pre-Christian or pre-Muslim past.

Besides, many urban Neo-Pagan traditions owe a debt to the activities of émigrés. One can observe this especially in the Ukraine where Neo-Pagan communities receive substantial financial support from their Canadian counterparts. The émigré heritage is extensively used in Armenia, Latvia, and among ethnic Russian Neo-pagans.

It is worth noting that urban Neo-Paganism sometimes displays itself as a form of politicized ideology rather than a religion *per se*. In this case, it is closely connected with a search for a national idea and is employed by radical political parties and movements. Radical political movements appreciate Neo-Paganism in the ethnic Russian regions, in Armenia and the Ukraine, and it feeds some radical factions of the national-democratic movements in the Middle Volga River region. In all these cases, Neo-Paganism claims to be the national faith and ideology. It is true that a traditional local variety of Pagan beliefs and rites cannot meet this demand. That is why systematization is carried out and newly developed national cults are based either on a still polytheist, but artificially uniform belief system ('Oshmarii-Chimarii' in the Mari El) or on a monotheist religion absorbing a lot of the Pagan heritage ('Russian religion' of Kandyba or 'RUNVira' of Sylenko). In these cases, the Neo-Pagans do their best to introduce their belief system to the national school curricula and have been quite successful in some regions (Latvia, Mari El, Udmurtiia, Chuvashia), but only partially successful in others (Russia, the Ukraine).

Yet, it proves very difficult or even impossible to develop a uniform well-integrated version of Paganism. Suffice it to say that almost every leader of the Neo-Pagan community has her/his own view of what a 'national religion' should be about, which particular gods should be worshipped, and which rites should be performed. Hence, there are a number of inconsistent versions of myths and rituals. Being an inherently disintegrative movement, Neo-Paganism, despite all attempts by its proponents to promote a national or ethnic consolidation, is hardly able to turn into the ideology of a mass movement. It is highly improbable that the non-Russian people of the Russian Federation would be able to unite under the Neo-Pagan banner against the ethnic Russians, quite contrary to what some experts believe (see, for example, Filatov & Shchipkov, 1994: 187; Bourdeaux, 2000: 18).

Everywhere within the surveyed region, except Abkhazia, Neo-Paganism is a fringe religious movement. It is more popular in the Republic of Mari El where between a quarter and a half of the Mari people either worship the Pagan gods or are sympathetic towards Neo-Paganism (Sharov, 1997). It is less popular in the other Middle Volga Republics: its admirers account for 4% among the Udmurts and less than 2% among the Mordvinians. No more than a few hundred people are active in the Neo-Pagan movement in Armenia.

All the cases which have been analyzed refer to the Christian regions where the Neo-Pagan movements are growing fast. This pattern of development is less characteristic for the Muslim areas, although some Turkic intellectuals manifest an aspiration to 'revive' a uniform Turkic religion of 'Tengrianism' (for example,

the radical Kazan Tatar nationalists). In my opinion, this movement has hardly any prospects. A reason for that is that there is no sense of building a new religion in the Muslim regions in order to withstand a Russification promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church. Islam serves perfectly well for that end. Another reason is the great vitality of the Pagan legacy, which was well-integrated in the local varieties of Islam to the extent that the local *mullahs* perform essentially Pagan rites treating them as true Muslim ones. One can easily observe this pattern among the highlanders of Daghestan. That is why the Krishnaits with their 'Aryan ideology' who tried to proselytize among the indigenous people there have failed completely (R. I. Seferbekov, personal communication, 1997).

However, democratization has brought about a quite unexpected phenomenon to the post-Soviet lands, namely Neo-Paganism, which, in contrast to other new religions, is searching for some genuine ethnic values. It might be qualified as a ethnic religion *par excellence* in the sense that it provides its adherents with valuable symbols of ethnic identity. Yet, more often than not it embraces only a minor segment of an ethnic community and its myths and rites are by no means as original and homogeneous as their advocates claim they are. Thus, Neo-Paganism is as controversial as the social and political environment which gave birth to it at the dawn of the 21st century.

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NOTES

1. For details, see Shnirelman, 2001.
2. For a more general discussion of the religious aspect of the ethno-nationalist discourse in the post-Soviet states, see Agadjanian, 2001.
3. For further details regarding Sylenko's ideas, see Shnirelman, 1999b.
4. For contemporary 'cultural racism', see Barker, 1981; Taguieff, 1990; 1993–1994; Balibar, 1991; Gilroy, 1987; Modood, 1997.
5. For further details, see Shnirelman, 1999–2000.

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