

ESCHATOLOGICAL AND SECULAR TIME IN POLITICS: RUSSIA, THE WEST, AND CHRONOPOLITICAL INCOMMENSURABILITY

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Abstract

The conflict between Russia and the West is not only a clash of interests or values but a clash of times. Western diplomacy privileges secular-linear temporality, while Russia gives preference to eschatological continuity. Unless this chronopolitical incommensurability is recognized, diplomatic engagement will continue to falter.

Keywords: *temporal plurality, clash of times, chronopolitical understanding, Messianic temporalities.*

Introduction

The problem of temporality has long haunted both philosophy and political thought. Time is not only a medium of human existence but also a structuring principle of collective life, shaping institutions, rituals, and modes of legitimacy. Modern scholarship, from anthropology to intellectual history, has repeatedly demonstrated that different civilizations live within different temporal regimes, and that these regimes profoundly influence their understanding of power, history, and authority. European modernity has emphasized linear, digital time – a measurable, secularized temporal order that governs labour, governance, and diplomacy [Thompson 1967]. India, Bali, and Mesoamerica historically elaborated cyclical or permutational models of time, embedding political authority within repeating cosmological rhythms [Geertz 1973: 389–391]. African and Indigenous traditions

Culture Crossroads

Volume 34, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol34.740>

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ISSN 2500-9974



often grounded time in ecology and events rather than abstract measurement [Evans-Pritchard 1940]. Religions, across traditions, imposed ritual and eschatological temporalities that oriented societies toward a sacred telos.

Ernst H. Kantorowicz's classic study *The King's Two Bodies* demonstrated that the medieval European political order was not secular in its foundation but rather deeply structured by religious hierarchies and eschatological temporality [Kantorowicz 1997]. Kingship embodied not merely secular authority but a sacred role in the unfolding of divine history. Such insights raise the question of whether modern politics still contains traces of theological time. This question becomes especially pressing when considering the divergence between Western (U.S./EU) political rationality and the Russian state's temporal imagination.

This essay argues that contemporary political conflict between Russia and the West cannot be fully understood without attending to chronopolitical dissonance. The United States and European Union largely frame political bargaining within secular, digital-linear time: treaties, security guarantees, and measurable arrangements grounded in rational calculation. Russia, however, frames its state ideology within a religious-eschatological temporality: the idea of Russia as a messianic polity with historical rights, sacred geography, and the destiny of uniting its Slavic brothers into a millenarian community. Ukraine is thus not "just" a territorial issue but an eschatological necessity. Western leaders, operating within secular-progressive temporality, reject this reasoning as irrational or illegitimate; yet for Russia, it is constitutive of its political theology.

Political theology and eschatological time

The study of political theology – articulated by Karl Schmitt – begins from the premise that modern political concepts are secularized theological concepts. He suggested the following:

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver – but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts. [Schmitt 2005: 36]

Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies* represents a milestone in demonstrating how medieval political order was literally constituted by theology. Medieval kingship was not merely a pragmatic form of governance but a symbolic and sacramental office. The king embodied two bodies: his body natural, mortal and corruptible, and his body politic, eternal and perfect, symbolizing the continuity of the realm [Kantorowicz

1997]. This doctrine located political authority within a sacred framework: the king was a living intersection between divine order and temporal governance.

Kantorowicz situates this duality within religiously sanctioned hierarchies. In the medieval imagination, society itself was understood as a cosmic hierarchy ordained by God. The chain of being – from angels to kings to peasants – was not a contingent social order but a reflection of divine will. Authority flowed from God through the Church and into the secular ruler, who thus ruled as both sovereign and sacred symbol. He explores this sort of vision through practical case of the Duchy of Lancaster. The judges of the time created their legal arguments relying on theological grounds:

Although he [the king] has, or takes, the land in his natural Body, yet to his natural Body is conjoined his Body politic, which contains his royal Estate and Dignity; and the Body politic includes the body natural, but the Body natural is the lesser, and with this the Body politic is consolidated. So that he has a Body natural, adorned and invested with the Estate and Dignity royal; and he has not a Body natural distinct and divided by itself from the Office and dignity royal, but a body natural and a Body politic together indivisible; and these two Bodies are incorporated in one Person ... [Kantorowicz 1997: 9]

As a result, time also was experienced eschatologically: political authority was part of the salvation history. The temporal life of kingdoms was set within the horizon of the eternal kingdom of God. Thus, eschatological temporality gave medieval politics a profoundly different orientation than modern secular politics. The legitimacy of the king did not rest upon rational consent, contracts, or pragmatic security, but on participation in a sacred drama moving toward ultimate fulfilment. Coronation rituals, liturgies, and festivals were not mere ceremonies but enactments of sacred time within political life. The very durability of the polity – the body politic – was imagined as transcending the mortality of its rulers, echoing the eternity of divine order [Kantorowicz 1997].

Kantorowicz's point is not antiquarian but theoretical: political orders cannot be understood apart from their temporal frameworks. In the Middle Ages, this framework was eschatological. Authority was grounded not in calculations of power but in alignment with the divine narrative of history [Kantorowicz 1997: 499–502]. This insight provides the foundation for understanding how Russia, in its contemporary ideology, continues to anchor its political reasoning in religious and eschatological time, despite existing within a modern global order shaped by secular, linear temporality.

Modernity and the secularization of time

The transition from medieval to modern conceptions of politics was inseparable from the transformation of time itself. If the medieval polity was grounded in eschatological temporality, modernity arose through the secularization and rationalization of time. This shift did not simply alter calendrical systems or timekeeping devices; it reorganized how political authority, history, and progress were understood. Reinhart Koselleck's classic work *Futures Past* describes this transformation as the temporalization of history (*Verzeitlichung der Geschichte*): history was no longer embedded within a sacred cosmic order but became an autonomous field unfolding according to its own logic [Koselleck 2004].

Enlightenment is frequently identified as the epoch of this temporal revolution. Eschatological frameworks – orienting history toward salvation and the eternal kingdom – were displaced by linear-progressive narratives of human development. In this new order, time itself became measurable, divisible, and abstract. No longer oriented toward eternity, it was directed toward a future conceived as open and improvable. As Koselleck observes, modern historical consciousness is distinguished by a widening gap between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation [Koselleck 2004].

This can be explained semantically: concepts drenched with reality presuppose as categories alternatives; meanings that they exclude. They thereby constitute more closely defined and concrete semantic fields, even if these remain related to one another. The category of work thus refers to leisure, war to peace and vice versa, a frontier to an interior and an exterior space, a political generation to another or to its biological correlate, productive forces to production relations, democracy to monarchy, and so forth. The conceptual couple “experience” and “expectation” is clearly of a different nature. The couple is redoubled upon itself; it presupposes no alternatives; the one is not to be had without the other. No expectation without experience, no experience without expectation. [Koselleck 2004: 257].

The secularization of time was not merely philosophical but profoundly material. E. P. Thompson's seminal essay *Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism* demonstrates how the mechanical clock transformed European society [Thompson 1967: 60–65]. In agrarian economies, time was primarily event-based. With the rise of industrial capitalism, time became abstracted into uniform units, measurable in hours and minutes, producing what Thompson famously termed “time-discipline” [Thompson 1967: 80–85].

This transformation reshaped political philosophy. Thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke grounded sovereignty and rights not in sacred order but in contracts made in linear time, presupposing durable promises and predictable futures [Hobbes 1996:

chs. 14–15; Locke 1988: II, §§95–122]. Although theological residues remained, modern legitimacy increasingly rested on procedural rationality rather than divine eternity. Schmitt argues that “Democracy is the expression of a political relativism and a scientific orientation that are liberated from miracles and dogmas and based on human understanding and critical doubt” [Schmitt 2005: 42].

Western diplomacy, especially in the post-Enlightenment and modern era, has been fundamentally shaped by this secular temporality. Treaties are time-bound; negotiations are evaluated by deadlines and deliverables; security is defined in terms of calculable risks projected into the future. Even when invoking history, Western political reasoning tends to treat it as background context, not as an eschatological narrative with binding obligations. This linear-progressive temporality profoundly structures U.S. and EU approaches to global politics.

It is precisely here that the divergence with Russia becomes stark. While the West conceives political time in measurable, secular units, Russia often appeals to a sacred historical temporality where past, present, and future are bound in eschatological continuity. This divergence produces a chronopolitical incommensurability: Western leaders assume rational calculation in linear time, while Russian leaders appeal to sacred continuity in eschatological time.

Russia’s political theology and messianic temporalities

Where Western modernity secularized political time, Russia followed a different trajectory in which religious eschatology and political identity remained entangled. After the fall of Constantinople, Muscovite clerics articulated the doctrine of Moscow as the “Third Rome”, locating the Russian state within an eschatological horizon of final guardianship of Orthodoxy [Obolensky 1971]. Philotheus’s declaration “Two Romes have fallen, the third stands” captured this temporal logic [Meyendorff 1981: 378].

When Western Europe underwent the influences of the French Revolution conquered by Napoleon, Russia considered itself the main fortress against the all-embracing military plans of Napoleon. Alexander, who defeated the unconquerable Napoleon, was hailed as God’s anointed one.

Despite a deep-seated sense that Russia was self-sufficient and had a mission in the world, right alongside this sense omission there was a craving and longing to the West. This became more and more noticeable during the middle of the century. The Russian intelligentsia liked to spend some time abroad to be exposed to culture and German philosophers. Two schools of thought originated thereof: the Western school considered Russia a backward country which had to learn from the West, whereas the other school of thought emphasized the unique Russian or Slavic character and the mission of Russian nation and the Orthodox Church. They were willing to listen with one ear, to the West, whilst above all they were listening to

the Russian soul, aiming to discover its genius and make it meaningful. They found the Russian soul among the Russian people [*narod*] and became known as *narodniki* ("populists") [Krahn 1963: 211].

Russian identity was further shaped by the notion of "Holy Rus", a sacred geography uniting East Slavic peoples within a single spiritual organism. Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia were not regarded as separate polities but as branches of a common spiritual organism. This conception of unity was not only cultural but theological [Hosking 1997: 42–44]. This conception persists to this day. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 was justified not only strategically but as a return of a holy site: the baptism of Prince Vladimir in Chersonesus, regarded as the founding moment of Russian Christianity. Putin himself invoked this symbolism, declaring Crimea "the spiritual source of Russian nationhood" [Putin 2014]. Russian thinkers reinforced this messianic temporality across centuries. The Slavophiles of the 19th century argued that Russia had a special destiny to embody Christian community in contrast to the individualism of the West. Dostoevsky envisioned Russia as the bearer of universal salvation [Dostoevsky 1994].

The Slavophiles absorbed the Hegelian idea of the predestined role of the nation in history. The preferred role which Hegel applied to German nation, the Slavophiles applied to the Russians. Aksakov even claimed that the Russian people had a special vocation for understanding the philosophy of Hegel. They believed that the culture of the West was exhausted and senile. Motors of social life had lost its force. Russians on the contrary were considered full of youthful force and having a great mission to fulfil. They believed that the future victory of Russians are already written on the tablets of victory praising science, art and faith which await them on the ruins of tottering Europe [Krahn 1963: 212].

These statements were part of timeless continuity of sacral identity of Russia. M. A. Pogodin, a Slavophile, was overawed by the greatness of the Russian empire after its victory over Napoleon. He wrote:

My heart trembles with joy, oh Russia, oh my Fatherland! Is it not you? Oh, if it were only you! You, you are chosen to consummate, to crown the development of humanity, to embody all the various human achievements (which hitherto have been accomplished only separately) in one great synthesis, to bring to harmony the ancient and modern civilizations, to reconcile heart with reason, to establish true justice and peace. You alone can prove not only that science, liberty, art, knowledge, industry, and wealth are the goal of mankind, but that there is something higher than scholarship, trade and education, freedom and riches – true enlightenment in the spirit of Christianity, The Divine Word, which alone can impart to Man earthly and heavenly happiness...

[Quoted in Krahn 1963: 213]

Soviet ideology preserved a secularized eschatology, casting the USSR as humanity's vanguard toward historical fulfilment [Kotkin 1995: 25–30]. In the post-Soviet era, this logic has re-emerged in explicitly religious form, with Patriarch Kirill and Putin portraying Russia as the defender of Christian civilization against Western secularism [Kirill 2013; Laruelle 2018].

Temporal incommensurability in geopolitical bargaining

The eschatological temporality explains why Russia appeals to historical rights in its foreign policy. Within this framework Ukraine is not merely a sovereign state but part of a sacred historical body, rendering compromise structurally difficult [Neumann 1996: 105–110]. The safety of Russia, in this framework, is defined not by pragmatic calculations but by the preservation of a millenarian community. Western interlocutors regard this reasoning as irrational; Russia regards it as essential.

The divergence between Western secular-linear temporality and Russian eschatological temporality has profound consequences for diplomacy. It creates what might be called a chronopolitical incommensurability: the two sides negotiate not only with different interests but within different conceptions of time itself.

Western diplomacy operates within linear-progressive temporality, relying on treaties, deadlines, and calculable risks [Ikenberry 2001]. Russia, by contrast, frames diplomacy through sacred continuity, rejecting the notion that such issues can be settled purely by contract [Neumann 1996]. These divergent temporalities help explain repeated diplomatic failures, from Crimea to NATO expansion [Putin 2014; Laruelle 2018: 155–160]. Thus, the legitimacy of Russia's claim is rooted not in measurable commitments but in participation in a divine narrative. As Sarah Sharma argues, temporality structures power relations themselves [Sharma 2014: 9–12]. When one side treats everything as negotiable, whilst the other treats certain issues as sacred, compromise becomes nearly impossible.

This temporal asymmetry also shapes expectations about victory, loss, and endurance. Western policymakers often assume that material costs, sanctions, or battlefield attrition will eventually compel recalibration. Such assumptions presuppose a time horizon in which actors seek optimization within finite intervals. By contrast, eschatological temporality is inherently patient: sacrifice in the present is rendered meaningful by its inscription into a transhistorical arc. Losses do not necessarily delegitimize policy; they may instead be reinterpreted as trials that confirm the righteousness of the cause. This further weakens the coercive logic of deterrence, which relies on the anticipation of unacceptable future outcomes.

Moreover, chronopolitical incommensurability distorts signalling. Actions intended by Western actors as provisional or reversible – temporary deployments, conditional sanctions, or incremental alliance enlargement – are perceived within

the Russian frame as irreversible violations of sacred order. What appears negotiable in linear time, appears ontologically fixed in sacred time. Misinterpretation is therefore not accidental but structural, embedded in incompatible temporal grammar.

This mismatch also complicates mediation efforts. Diplomatic formats premised on sequencing – confidence-building measures, phased withdrawals, or sunset clauses – implicitly assume that time heals or at least neutralizes conflict. Eschatological narratives deny this premise: time does not dilute meaning but accumulates it. Each moment adds weight to historical obligation rather than opening space for forgetting or compromise.

Recognizing this temporal divide does not imply endorsing either worldview. Rather, it underscores the limits of diplomacy conducted as if all actors inhabited the same temporal universe. Without an explicit reckoning with chronopolitical difference, negotiations risk becoming ritualized exchanges in which neither side can truly hear the other. In such conditions, bargaining fails not because of insufficient incentives, but because the very medium of negotiation – time itself – is contested.

Postcolonial and postmodern perspectives on temporal hybridity

Postcolonial and postmodern scholarship challenges the simplistic dichotomy of Western linear time versus non-Western cyclical or sacred time. Muhammad A. Z. Mughal notes that anthropology once relied heavily on this dichotomy, but globalization and critical theory now emphasize temporal plurality [Mughal 2023].

Bhabha's concept of hybridity is instructive [Bhabha 1994: 36–39]. Russia is neither purely modern nor purely eschatological; it is a hybrid formation where modern institutions coexist with sacred narratives. Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to provincialize Europe underscores the same point: the secular-linear temporality of the West is not universal, but one among many [Chakrabarty 2000]. Paul Rabinow adds that the contemporary is not a single time but a moving ratio of pasts, presents, and futures [Rabinow 2008: 3–7]. Russia exemplifies this: it assembles Orthodox eschatology, Soviet legacies, and global capitalism into a single chronopolitical formation.

Conclusion

The failure of diplomacy lies in the West's assumption of universality. Recognizing temporal hybridity does not legitimize Russian expansionism, but it reveals why Russia and the West talk past one another: they weight temporalities differently within their hybrid chronopolitical orders.

The conflict between Russia and the West is not only a clash of interests or values but a clash of times. Western diplomacy privileges secular-linear temporality, while Russia grants precedence to eschatological continuity. Unless this chronopolitical

incommensurability is recognized, diplomatic engagement will continue to falter. Politics, ultimately, is always temporal.

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