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**CARL SCHMITT AND THE KREMLIN:
THE AESTHETICISED POLITICS OF SOVEREIGNTY
IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA**

Master's Thesis in Philosophy
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Number of characters: 103589

Tartu 2026

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Introduction

With Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, individuals in Western democracies found themselves startled by what had seemed implausible for decades. For much of the post-Cold War period, Russian cultural products were absorbed and even celebrated by Western academia, popular culture, and political movements. Amid the wars in Chechnya, the invasion of Georgia in 2008, and the attempted annexation of Crimea in 2014, the leaders of the world's biggest powers largely condoned such neo-imperialist moves, partly through transactionality and appeasement, but also through a misguided affection for Russia's mythology. A very limited set of semiotic markers, such as Dostoevsky and the Bolshoi Theatre, had long perpetuated the myth of Russia's proximity to the Western cultural canon, while simultaneously exempting it from the liberal-democratic standards of political and historical criticism typically applied within that canon. There is, therefore, a pressing need for a critical examination of the Russian political mythology, one that takes seriously how the aesthetic element not only accompanies but actively determines the nature of politics, both domestically and internationally.

Many attempts have been made to characterise modern Russian politics. "Authoritarianism" remains the most defensible label; "hybrid totalitarianism" (Kolesnikov, 2022), "fascism," "ruscism" (Snyder, 2022), and "putinism" (Stanovaya, 2025) have also been proposed. While each of these descriptions is viable in its context, they also risk restricting a deeper analysis of the structural logic that generates the corresponding political situation. It is more illuminating, as this thesis seeks to demonstrate, to trace the self-referential descriptions from within the system. In the middle of the 2000s, for instance, Kremlin ideologist Vladislav Surkov introduced the term "sovereign democracy," which ostensibly approximated classical definitions of democratic governance while leaving the qualifier fairly undefined. As will be shown, the content carried by this adjective is the opposition to "liberal democracy" and the idea of a practically unrestricted power of the executive.

Given such self-presentation, the concept of sovereignty, together with the broader set of theology-derived political phenomena outlined by Carl Schmitt, offers a notably precise and generative framework for understanding contemporary Russian politics. Schmitt belongs, as George Schwab (2007, p. 3) notes, to a tradition of political thinkers running through Machiavelli, Bodin, Hobbes, De Maistre, and Weber, who stress the centrality of sovereignty and ultimate authority, particularly in moments of existential crises threatening

the political community. The Schmittian framework is especially apt for contexts in which, as Sergei Medvedev writes on Russia, “war has become the language of everyday life” and the state of emergency has become a permanent *modus vivendi* (Medvedev, 2023, Introduction): a situation in which the ordinary presuppositions of liberal-democratic governance do not suffice, and where the logic of enmity structures public life.

Yet Schmitt’s theory cannot be reduced to exception and order. As this thesis argues, it contains an integral aesthetic dimension. His core concepts, such as sovereignty, the exception, the friend-enemy distinction, lack a clear rational or legal starting point, and they cannot acquire public, political life without representation: without being made visible, emotionally legible, and collectively felt. Political authority, grounded in myth and in the theatricality of the exception, must be staged to be operative. This is what is meant by the aestheticisation of politics as it is used throughout this work. It does not refer to the reduction of politics to beauty, nor to the subordination of art to the political. Rather, it denotes the way in which the aesthetic operates as a structure that shapes and sustains the Schmittian political framework: what Martin Jay (1992) describes as “the victory of the spectacle over the public sphere” (p. 45). The central argument of this thesis is therefore that contemporary Russian politics, as well as all its consequences, including the wars of aggression in the 21st century, is driven by the friend-enemy distinction as defined by Carl Schmitt, which functions through, and is perpetuated by, specific aesthetic structures.

The thesis, mirroring the argument, proceeds in two parts. Chapter 1 establishes the theoretical architecture used. It opens with the historical origins of Schmitt’s thought and then identifies and analyses the key relevant aspects in his theory: the political, sovereignty, exception, criticism of parliamentarism, and spatial thinking. Finally, Chapter 1 establishes the aesthetic as an integral part of the framework. Chapter 2 applies this conceptual apparatus to the Russian case, addressing a gap in the existing scholarship, which has neglected the aesthetic dimension of Schmittian analyses of Russia. It demonstrates how contemporary Russian politics is organised around the aestheticised production of enmity: through the mythologisation of Putin’s sovereign body, the rhetorical crystallisation of the friend-enemy line, and the condensation of political theology in an example of monumental architecture.

Chapter 1. Conceptual Foundations of Carl Schmitt's Politics

1.1 Schmitt's Selective Inheritances

This section establishes the genealogy of the conceptual vocabulary used throughout the present work. Particularly, it situates Carl Schmitt's thought in relation to two early modern intellectual precursors: Jean Bodin and Thomas Hobbes. The objective here is twofold. On the one hand, it is important to demonstrate that Carl Schmitt's theory of sovereignty is not an isolated doctrine but rather a set of ideas that belong to the wide and long-standing tradition of the absolutist political philosophy of order.¹ On the other hand, engaging with the conceptual origins will enable us to identify the points that make Schmitt's theory autonomous and distinctive (the next subchapter will present a detailed analysis of his concepts, marking multiple elaborations on the traditions of Bodin and Hobbes), and why it is his work that constitutes a fruitful analysis framework for Russian politics.

While much of the scholarship attempting to locate the predecessors of Schmitt's core ideas focuses on Thomas Hobbes' influence, Jean Bodin's contribution to legal and philosophical thought is often left without due attention. In his *Ex captivitate salus*,² Schmitt (2017) puts emphasis on his metaphorical family relationship with Bodin and Hobbes, "who founded the law of nations upon the constitutional law of states" (p. 52). This description demonstrates what exactly Schmitt values in the two thinkers, since it implies a sequence: no inter- or supranational relations are possible until an internal order is established through the "constitutional law of states." The nod at the phenomenon of sovereignty, permanently relied-upon by Schmitt, is apparent here, as is the role of Bodin, who was among the first to develop the concept. The role of sovereignty as the organising principle of domestic and international political relations serves as the crucial link between the thinkers discussed here.

Bodin (1992) defines sovereignty as "the absolute and perpetual power of a commonwealth" (p. 1), with a clarification just a few paragraphs later that it "is not limited either in power, or in function, or in length of time" (p. 3). Such repetition is emblematic of what is most important in this concept to Bodin. As Christopher Adair-Toteff (2025) maintains, this property of not being limited contributes to the link between Schmitt's and Bodin's notions of sovereignty (pp. 16–17). Additionally, the crucial idea of the sovereign's

¹ As opposed to politics of redistribution of wealth. On the centrality of the motif of order in Schmitt's work see, for example, Meierhenrich & Simons, 2016, p. 50.

² Some (e.g., Fischer, as cited by Adair-Toteff, 2025, p. 20) see Schmitt's invoking of Bodin as an attempt of self-vindication after WW2. His being in the Allies' captivity while writing the text may contribute to this view. It is very plausible, however, that both conceptual ties and Schmitt's wider unapologetic stance point at a genuine ideational affinity, even if the appropriation of Bodin's thinking by Schmitt is only selective.

being above positive law finds its manifestation in both thinkers: Bodin's sovereignty as "legibusque soluta potestas" (free from the laws) anticipates Schmitt's sovereign who "decides on the exception." Where the two diverge, however, is the sovereign's relation to divine and natural law. Bodin's view of sovereign power as unlimited and perpetual still presupposes the sovereign's non-violation of God's laws: "as for divine and natural law, every prince on earth is subject to them, and it is not in their power to contrive them" (Bodin, 1992, p. 13). He equally binds the prince to the *pacta sunt servanda* principle, holding him subject "by the just contracts and promises that he has made, whether with or without an oath, as is any private individual" (Bodin, 1992, pp. 13–14). In contrast, Schmitt does not replicate this caveat. Instead of prescribing a hierarchical relationship between the theological and political modes of power, he restructures the former as a model for the latter. As he famously asserts, "[a]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts" (Schmitt, 2005, p. 36). The secular sovereign in this theory is identified with the logic of divine authority, which translates, for example, into a situation where "the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver" (Schmitt, 2005, p. 36). By adopting this functional equivalence between the two, Schmitt radicalises Bodin and rejects any external order to which the sovereign may be accountable.

The identification of the sovereign with such legislative omnipotence is symptomatic of what George Schwab, in his Introduction to *The Concept of the Political* (2007, p. 3), calls Schmitt's belonging to a tradition of political thinkers who emphasise the unilateral role of the state or the individual embodying it. Unsurprisingly, apart from Machiavelli, De Maistre, and Weber, Thomas Hobbes is mentioned as one of the key influences on Schmitt. All these thinkers stress the centrality of sovereignty as "the ultimate authority" (Schmitt, 2007, p. 20), particularly when it comes to tackling a crisis threatening the existence of a political community. This tradition's emphasis on authority in existential crises finds its most precise formulation in Hobbes's account of how the sovereign consolidates the wills of a fragmented multitude. As Hobbes (1998, p. 114) describes:

By this authority, given him by every particular man in the commonwealth, he hath the use of so much power and strength conferred on him, that by terror thereof, he is enabled to conform the wills of them all, to peace at home, and mutual aid against their enemies abroad. And in him consisteth the essence of the commonwealth.

The emphasis here is on the finality of this act of subjection: a permanent transfer of power rather than a recurring negotiation of civic consensus in moments of existential threat.

Apart from developing this idea, which had already been present in Bodin,³ Hobbes introduced a decisive innovation: sovereignty is reached through authorisation and representation. The authorisation for him is individualistic and democratic, marking a bottom-up contractual approach to shaping state sovereignty: “every man should say to every man, *I authorize and give up my right of governing myself*” (Hobbes, 1998, p. 114). This is where, however, the selective nature of Schmitt’s appropriation of Hobbes can be seen. For while the embodiment of the popular will in a state or person remains a central theme developed by Schmitt, the element of the sovereign’s accountability emanating from the Hobbesian way the covenant is formed is no longer present, similarly to how Schmitt eschews the sovereign’s contractual obligations argued for by Bodin. This is because Schmitt reverses the way a political community is formed: “the state is not a construction made by humans; to the contrary, the state makes a construction out of every human” (Meierhenrich & Simons, 2016, p. 27). Furthermore, as Jan-Werner Müller (2003) claims, Schmitt did not even engage adequately with Hobbes’s idea of authorisation, choosing instead to simply dismiss it as an “anarchist social contract” (p. 62). The different ontological foundations of community formation inform some key contrasts in how they function. For instance, Hobbes articulates the subject’s liberty to disobey when his individual self-preservation is under threat (Hobbes, 1998, p. 114). In contrast, the totalising character of the Schmittian state presupposes the citizen’s biopolitical passivity: the state has “the right to demand from its own members the readiness to die” (Schmitt, 2007, p. 46). This is explained by Schmitt’s criticism of the instrumental reduction of the state to a security apparatus and his understanding of political unity in terms of representation, meaning, and existential order (Meierhenrich, 2016, p. 198). The Schmittian state demands the citizen’s readiness to die because it is not a neutral administrative machine but the living representation of a people’s collective existential identity, and to belong to the political community is to accept that this identity may require the ultimate sacrifice (Schmitt, 2007, p. 46; Meierhenrich, 2016, p. 198). This contrasts with liberal conceptions of the state as a security mechanism, which, by reducing politics to the impersonal administrative protection, can claim no such existential link to or control over its members.

Despite such drastic differences, the logic of sovereignty, unity, and order is still a strong point of affinity between the two thinkers. Furthermore, both of them rely on a

³ Bodin (1992) claims that “a sovereign prince has to have the laws in his power in order to change and correct them according to the circumstances; just as the master pilot ... ought to have the rudder in his hand to move at his discretion if the ship is not to go down while waiting on the opinion of its passengers” (p. 24).

symbolic dimension of the political. Notwithstanding some heavy scepticism towards how Hobbes's central political symbol, the Leviathan, functions, Schmitt does not deny the necessity of a form through which political order and unity become visible and embodied. For him, "it [the Leviathan] has become more like a mythical symbol fraught with inscrutable meaning" (Schmitt, 1996b, p. 5).

Schmitt's ambivalence towards the Leviathan is exemplary of his relationship to the tradition discussed here. While recognising the necessity of giving political unity a visible and embodied form, he rejects some of the central normative and contractual elements that Bodin and Hobbes erect around their sovereigns. What remains is sovereignty in its most radical form, grounded in nothing beyond itself. That is to say, Schmitt retains the structure of sovereign authority (its decisiveness, form, capacity to produce political unity) while discarding the normative conditions Bodin and Hobbes have around it (the divine law, the social contract, the protective purpose). The Schmittian sovereign is therefore self-referential: his rule is based on the decision to rule as the only necessary ground.

1.2 Schmitt's Conceptual Architecture

As has been demonstrated, Carl Schmitt's contribution is hardly constituted by the invention of a radically new conceptual apparatus, even despite some memorable definitions coined. Instead, he succeeded in adapting the intellectual tradition discussed above to oppose the liberal "depoliticisation" he saw as a threat (discussed in 1.2.4). This section therefore examines Schmitt's core concepts in their systematic connection. Concretely, it traces the trajectory from Schmitt's anthropological premises and the friend-enemy distinction, through the concepts of sovereignty and the state of exception, to his decisionist critique of parliamentarism, and finally to the spatial dimensions of his international thought.

1.2.1 The Political as the Friend-Enemy Binary

Like Bodin and Hobbes before him, Schmitt's political theory proceeds from a pessimistic anthropological premise: "all genuine political theories presuppose man to be evil" (Schmitt, 2007, p. 61). In contrast with theories that base politics on ethics, economics, or aesthetics, it compels an existential reflection on the most basic conditions under which a political community can be constituted and sustained at all. Openly following Hegel, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Bodin, Fichte, and others, Schmitt rejects the binaries of good and evil, profitable and unprofitable, beautiful and ugly, in favour of the single factor of enmity as the

foundation for politics. The conclusion is that “the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy” (Schmitt, 2007, p. 61). While the rule may appear uncomplicated, the mechanism of practically arriving at this binary is certainly not. Despite his critique of emotions and lyricism in the context of Romanticism (see Schmitt, 2011b), Schmitt views certain emotional responses as the existential origin of such politics. Particularly, he reflects on anxiety emanating from “the indeterminacy of the enemy” (Schmitt in Meierhenrich & Simons, 2016, p. 15). With the help of reason, the enemy is determined and the anxiety translates into a sense of fear, which, according to John McCormick’s interpretation, is the key force behind political order for Schmitt, as well as Hobbes. McCormick (2017) proceeds to explain Schmitt’s logic:

He [Schmitt] seeks to revive the fear that is characteristic of man’s natural condition: by demonstrating the substantive affinity between his concept of the political and Hobbes’s state of nature; by making clear the ever-present possibility of a return to that situation in the form of civil war; and by convincing individuals—partisans and nonpartisans alike—that only a state possessing a monopoly on decisions regarding the political can guarantee peace and security. (p. 276)

This reading illuminates an important rhetorical component: Schmitt’s project aims to convince individuals that sovereign authority is the only guarantee against the return to a condition in which, as Schmitt (2017) warns, “all legitimate and normative illusions with which men like to deceive themselves regarding political realities in periods of untroubled security vanish” (p. 52). Therefore, fear of the state of nature functions as the very ground for sovereign order and is not to be dealt with within the normal pluralised legal procedure. Schmitt’s affinity with Bodin and Hobbes on this point is notable: in *Ex captivitate salus*, Schmitt (2017) calls them “brothers,” noting that “both were entirely formed by civil wars” (p. 53). The emphasis is natural, since civil war represents for Schmitt the most acute form of political disintegration (in other words, and in line with his theory, the paroxysm of enmity inside of a political community), where the legal order itself becomes the site of conflict rather than its resolution (Schmitt, 2017, p. 47). Crucially, McCormick (2017, p. 279) observes that Schmitt does not treat this tendency as historically isolated but rather as an ever-present latent possibility that any political order must confront. At the same time, Hobbes not only acknowledges the underlying likelihood of enmity. What is taken no less seriously and then developed by Schmitt is the former’s recognition of “the conviction of each side that it possesses the truth, the good, and the just” (Schmitt, 2007, p. 65). The convergence of all these elements (pessimistic anthropology, the ever-present possibility of civil war, the limits of legal rationality, and the subjective nature of enmity) generates the core rhetorical thrust of Schmitt’s political theory: to convince both partisans and non-

partisans that only a sovereign capable of making the friend-enemy decision can prevent the dissolution of political order altogether.

1.2.2 Sovereignty

Given that the departure from the normal condition⁴ is always a threat, and that conventional normativity offers no resources for such moments—as Schmitt’s remark that “there is no norm that would be applicable to chaos” (as cited in Adair-Toteff, 2025, p. 34) makes clear—the question of who can restore order and on what basis stands as the fundamental political issue. This is where the concept of sovereignty becomes central for Schmitt. It is seen not as part of the already functioning system but as the power over the normative condition and as the legitimate ability to decide whether such normal situation even exists. Schmitt’s labelling of sovereignty as a “borderline concept” (*Grenzbegriff*) “pertaining to the outermost sphere” (2005, p. 5) therefore signals that it should constitute the foundation which defines the border by clearly separating order from chaos, which cannot be done by norms, coming from within the compromised system.

By defining the sovereign as “he who decides on the exception,” (2005, p. 5) Schmitt highlights his authority to depart from the routine legal norms, thus differentiating between the state and the law. Since the preservation of the former is the ultimate goal, adherence to the legal norms may be sacrificed. Crucially, for Schmitt, the sovereign’s “stand[ing] outside of the normally valid legal system” does not mean his abandoning it, “for it is he who must decide whether the constitution needs to be suspended in its entirety” (Schmitt, 2005, p. 7). Hence, the sovereign simultaneously embodies the law and surpasses it. His function in the moment of decision is, as Tracy Strong (2005) argues in her Foreword to *Political Theology* (pp. xi–xii), necessarily twofold. She claims that the linguistic ambiguity in the German “*entscheidet über*” (“decides on”) is intentional, as it carries the two integral elements: the sovereign decides *what* the exceptional case is and *how* to address it. As a result, the nature of true sovereignty lies in the power to identify *and* act upon the threat without legalistic constraints on any of the two steps.

⁴ The *Normalzustand*, or “normal condition”, is the existential prerequisite for any legal norm to function. As Schmitt writes in *Dictatorship*, “every legal norm presupposes a normal condition as a homogeneous medium in which it is valid” (2014, p. 118).

1.2.3 Exception

The question of what constitutes the state of exception is not less ambiguous. Since it resists legal systematisation, the exception is fundamentally characterised by its indeterminacy. Schmitt (2005) describes it as “a case of extreme peril, a danger to the existence of the state, or the like” (p. 6).⁵ This is a deliberately vague description: enumerating the possible perils would mean normalising and anticipating them within a legal system, which Schmitt attempts to transcend. As George Schwab (1989, p. 7) notes, the maxim *necessitas non habet legem* (necessity has no law) means that no concrete reference point in the existing legal order is required to proclaim the exception. Hence, while “the precise details of an emergency cannot be anticipated” (Schmitt, 2005, p. 6), the single necessary condition that warrants the state of exception is a direct danger to the survival of the political entity, which is not legally codified. This leads to a condition of pure decisionism: the absolute authority of the sovereign derives not from prior legal authorisation, but from the existential reality of the threat itself. His power to name and articulate the threat is quasi-theological in nature, resonating with Schmitt’s claim that “the exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology” (2005, p. 36). Like the omnipotent God circumventing natural law, the sovereign may choose to interrupt the normal workings of the legal system. Following the analogy further, it is extremely challenging to identify the ontological origin of this absolute authority. As Schmitt (2005) maintains, “looked at normatively, the decision emanates from nothingness” (pp. 31–32) placing the very fundamental starting point of political processes beyond rationalisation or codification.

Despite the difficulty of articulating it clearly, the paramount importance of the exception is traceable in Schmitt’s usage of Søren Kierkegaard’s premise that “the exception explains the general and itself. And if one wants to study the general correctly, one only needs to look around for a true exception” (Schmitt, 2005, p. 15). While the nature and correctness of Schmitt’s appropriation of Kierkegaard can be questioned, it is difficult to overlook some key affinities between the two, specifically when it comes to their criticism

⁵ Unsurprisingly, the vague wording here is comparable to Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution reading as follows: “If public security and order are seriously disturbed or endangered within the German Reich, the president of the Reich may take measures necessary for their restoration ... For this purpose he may suspend for a while, in whole or in part, the fundamental rights provided in Articles ...” Schmitt famously advocated for a very broad interpretation of the article, which manifested in his endorsement of the presidential extra-parliamentary decrees as the Weimar crisis of the early 1930s deepened. Such abuse of Article 48, culminating in the Reichstag Fire Decree, proved crucial in cementing the Nazi dictatorial rule through the Enabling Act of 1933. This sequence of events, together with Schmitt’s transformation into the Third Reich’s “crown jurist,” unsettles his theory, raising the question of when the state of exception is ever meant to end, and whether any principle remains to address the *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*?

of certain modes of liberalism and their leaning towards decisionism. Furthermore, Kierkegaard provides the existentialist basis for Schmitt's political theology, in which the idea of surpassing the codified norms in the exercise of sovereignty is comparable with the non-rational choice the Knight of Faith in *Fear and Trembling* makes instead of staying within the bounds of the ordinary morality (Kierkegaard et al., 1983, pp. 54–55). Both cases present an individualistic teleological choice.

The undefined beginnings of Schmitt's concept of sovereignty therefore contrast sharply with the more clearly identifiable teleology of order and security he develops, further contributing to the theistic idea of *creatio ex nihilo*. By articulating the emergency and instituting the state of exception, the sovereign introduces boundaries on when this situation is to end. Schwab (2005), in fact, considers this power a no less important element of "deciding on the exception" than those discussed above (determining when the state of exception occurs and how to address it). Grounded in his reading of Hobbes, Schmitt (2007) ties sovereignty directly to the function of protection: "The *protego ergo obligo* is the *cogito ergo sum* of the state" (p. 52). If the sovereign's authority rests on his capacity to guarantee safety, then the state of exception can only be justified for as long as it takes to restore what Schmitt (2007) calls the condition of "tranquility, security, and order" (p. 46). Thus, the exception is, by its own logic, self-limiting and, in principle, should expire the moment such a restoration takes place.

1.2.4 Sovereign Exception as Critique of Parliamentarism and Depoliticisation

For Schmitt, the necessity and possibility of a sovereign decision on the exception contrasts with the systems of 'perpetual fruitless discussions,' primarily liberalism and romanticism, where, as Schmitt ironically notes, when faced with a fundamental existential choice, such as "Christ or Barabbas," the response can be to "adjourn the meeting or set up an investigative committee" (Schmitt, 2005, p. 62). The attack is mainly pointed against Hans Kelsen, who, according to Schmitt (2005, p. 42), "openly reveals the mathematical and natural-scientific character of his thinking" by accepting that a numerical majority could decide such a question, reducing political truth to an arithmetic procedure (McCormick, 1998, p. 226).

Such polemic resonates with what Schmitt claims in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1985). His contention is that parliamentarism, as a system of open discussion whose goal is reaching political truth, has largely become ineffective and even harmful. As

he writes, “[t]he development of modern mass democracy has made public discussion an empty formality” (Schmitt, 1985, p. 6). The structural decay of parliament is twofold. Apart from becoming a “mere façade” in losing its true conversational nature in secluded and fragmented committees (Schmitt, 1985, p. 49), the primary failure of such endless conversation is seen to be its incapacity for decision: “in contrast to the truth, it [discussion] means renouncing a definite result” (Schmitt, 1985, p. 35).

This is the context in which Schmitt imports the logic of the Kierkegaardian “leap” to combat the paralysing “endless conversation” of liberalism. Decisionism comes to the fore here, since the absolute act of will is meant to substitute a deliberative normative process. In Schmitt’s framework, as Heiner Bielefeldt (1998) summarises, there is “an unbridgeable hiatus between abstract legal norms on the one hand and the particular situation on the other,” a hiatus which “under normal circumstances may be concealed” but which in the state of exception “becomes patent and thus leads to open decisionism” (p. 31).

This critique of liberalism’s incapacity for decision connects to what Schmitt diagnoses as the broader process of depoliticisation in a longer historical perspective. In “The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations,” he traces a shift from the theological to, ultimately, technical-economic stage of politics, which was caused by “the striving for a neutral domain ... in which there would be no conflict and they [Europeans] could reach common agreement through the debates and exchanges of opinion” (Schmitt, 2007, p. 89). As has been shown, this is incompatible with Schmitt’s idea of the political process. Thus, what Matthias Lievens (2017, pp. 401–402) describes as Schmitt’s “metapolitical struggle against depoliticizing types of spirit” must be understood as the broader frame for his attacks on parliamentary liberalism and Kelsen’s normativism. Decisionism is therefore a response to this general historical drift toward the erasure of the political as such, with the paralysis of parliamentary procedure being its manifest example.

1.2.5 Schmitt’s Spatial Thinking

Naturally, the logic of Schmitt’s conceptual apparatus extends beyond the borders of a single state, profoundly affecting the international domain. Having established the friend-enemy distinction as the irreducible criterion of the political, Schmitt (2007) concludes that war, as “the most extreme realization of enmity,” must always remain a real possibility if the concept of an enemy is to retain any meaning at all (p. 33). This understanding of war connects to Schmitt’s historical account in his *The Nomos of the Earth* (2006) and to the

concept of the *jus publicum Europaeum*, whose crucial achievement was the restriction of war to sovereign states and their monopolisation of *jus belli*. The important aspect of this system for Schmitt was that the political was autonomous in that there could be no moral judgement by the third parties if a sovereign state was to wage war: “in international law, in no case can it [war] be considered to be a moral-theological question of guilt” (Schmitt, 2006, p. 142). The post-1918 liberal international order did the opposite by introducing institutionalism, criminal guilt and the language of humanity against aggressors, thus undermining the unilateral sovereignty of states in pursuing military action. Schmitt met this critically and claimed the non-viability of such international order (Schmitt, 2011c, p. 69).

Against the liberal aspirations in international law, Schmitt (2007) insists that “the political world is a pluriverse, not a universe” (p. 53), since only under the condition of differentiated states that do not try to embrace the whole humanity can politics, with its confrontational nature, exist. The concept of *Großraum* (literally, “greater space”) is the expression of this pluriversalist logic. Developed most fully in *Großraumordnung* (Schmitt, 2011c, pp. 75–124) and modelled on the Monroe Doctrine, it presupposes a global order divided into several regional blocs with a single dominant power (the *Reich*) at the core of each group. Importantly, the groups should be immune from intervention by “spatially foreign” (*raumfremde*) powers. This structure is meant to preserve the very possibility of the Schmittian political with *Großräume* “meant to provide guarantees against the homogenization of the world into a liberal flatland” (Teschke, 2017, p. 376).

In this way, the *Großraum* can be seen as playing the role of an international counterpart to Schmitt’s domestic theory of sovereignty. The actions of such sovereign in the international arena, similarly to Schmitt’s ideas on the political as such, still follows the logic of movement from an uncertain state of affairs to order through concrete decisions. One example is his discourse of land-appropriation (*Landnahme*) as a constitutive act, which, importantly, underpins the impossibility of decoupling political power from its rhetorical grounding. While, according to Schmitt (2006), “land-appropriation precedes the order that follows from it [and] ... constitutes the original spatial order, the source of all further concrete order and all further law” (p. 48), such order should be “spatially visible” (p. 70), thus informing Schmitt’s etymological view of *nomos* (the central idea in his discussion of spatiality) not in terms of laws and regulations but through the more primordial act of division. This visibility is connected to the relation between land-taking (*Nahme*) and giving a name (*Name*). Schmitt (2006) sees the latter as a necessary condition for the former, and it is precisely the combination of the two that leads to the cessation of indeterminacy:

“what is most phenomenal about *Nahme* and name is that with them abstractions cease, and the situation becomes concrete” (pp. 348–349). The inseparability of spatial order from its act of naming already reveals the link between sovereign power and rhetoric, and, by extension, the central role of the perceptible dimension and visibility in Schmitt’s political thought, which the following section is dedicated to.

1.3 The Aesthetic Dimension of the Political

In *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (1996a), Carl Schmitt elucidates: “there is no politics without authority and no authority without an ethos of belief” (p. 17). As the preceding section established, the political has at its core the fundamental distinction between friend and enemy, which cannot be articulated entirely rationally through the languages of morality, aesthetics, or economics. The only necessary condition for enmity Schmitt names is that “he [the enemy] is... the other, the stranger... he is, in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien” (2007, p. 27). Yet the passage from this bare logical criterion to actual political life requires “an ethos of belief” to enable authority. This points at an inherently mythological character of authority and, consequently, of politics and of how the friend-enemy distinction is perceived and enacted. The realisation of the political is therefore a communicative process, one whose core demand is the public embodiment of political unity in a representative form.

1.3.1 Representation and Personification

It follows that representation⁶ becomes constitutive of politics, and, as Schmitt draws on Hobbes, it “first establishes this [political] unity”⁷ (Schmitt, 2008, p. 247). Just as sovereignty emerges to establish order ex nihilo, Schmitt (2008) describes representation, the process through which the sovereign acquires public form, in supra-legal terms: it is not

⁶ Effectively, throughout his writings Schmitt delineates two contrasting modes of representation. The first, dismissed by him, is parliamentary representation, labelled as *Vertretung*. This is seen by Schmitt, in line with his criticism of liberalism, as a degenerate form of representation, since it is simplified to the level of mechanistic delegation of various voter interests resulting in fruitless parliamentary debates. Under such conditions, as he notes, “the parliament increasingly ceases to be representative of the political unity. It becomes an exponent of the interests and moods of the masses of voters” (Schmitt, 2008, p. 337), which contradicts his idea of politics as ensuring order. In contrast, representation as *Repräsentation* contains the crucial movement from formlessness to political unity, carrying, according to Kalyvas (2008), “the aspects of transformation and transubstantiation” (p. 148), thus contradicting the *Vertretung* logic of the representative as a mirror image of the represented. It is this latter understanding of representation as *Repräsentation*, endorsed by Schmitt, that is used in the present work.

⁷ I.e., it is the first to establish the unity.

“a normative event, a process, and a procedure. It is, rather, something existential” (p. 243). This is where Schmitt’s mechanics and objective of such form acquisition differ drastically from those of the preceding intellectual tradition.

While borrowing from Hobbes the embodiment metaphor of the state as an “artificial man” and “mortal god,” whose unity arises when a multitude is “made one person” in and through a sovereign representative (Leviathan), Schmitt shifts the focus. Hobbes uses representation in rather technical terms: to solve the juridical problem of how to attribute acts and decisions to artificial persons so that the sovereign can personate the *civitas* and speak in its name, while still representing each individual (Schupmann, 2017, p. 96). In contrast, Schmitt (2008) thematises representation in terms of making-present: “To represent means to make an invisible being visible and present through a publicly present one. The dialectic of the concept is that the invisible is presupposed as absent and nevertheless is simultaneously made present” (p. 243).

According to Kalyvas (2008, p. 148), this is where Schmitt’s idea of representation becomes inseparable from personification. As Schmitt (1996a) himself writes,

To represent in an eminent sense can only be done by a person, i.e. not simply a deputy but an authoritative person or an idea which, if represented, also becomes personified. God or ‘the people’ in democratic ideology or abstract ideas like freedom and equality can all conceivably constitute a representation. (p. 21)

The primary purpose of such representation is not that of delegation. Rather, it lies in the acquisition of a visible and public presence by something that cannot appear on its own in empirical reality. Entities such as God, political unity, or “the people” require a particular person to make them present, which is why Schmitt draws on the Catholic notion of the church leader as his model for the sovereign who performs this representative function in a secular setting. This understanding, labelled as the “liturgical conception of sovereignty” (Vatter, 2017, p. 255), contrasts with Hobbes’s contract-grounded vision in that the sovereign’s authority is not derived from the horizontal authorisation of individuals aggregating their wills into a collective person, but rather flows downward from a transcendent, quasi-sacred source, which makes political unity less a product of rational consent than a result of staging and belief.

The loss of the mythical element of representation is what Schmitt finds critically problematic in Hobbes’s theory. The latter, according to Schmitt’s interpretation, does rely on the quasi-theological and fear-inducing dimension of Leviathan. In this symbol, Schmitt sees “a mythical totality composed of god, man, animal, and machine” (1996b, p. 19). This last element of mechanisation, however, appears to eventually overshadow and undermine

the personalistic and mythological power of the sovereign. As Schmitt analyses the logic of Hobbes's theory, "[t]he sovereign-representative person is only the soul of the 'huge man' state. The process of mechanization is not, however, arrested but completed by this personification. This personalistic element too is drawn into the mechanization process and becomes absorbed by it" (1996b, pp. 33–34). What remains is "an externally all-powerful, internally powerless concentration of power" which has "only the appearance and the simulacra of divinity on his side" (Schmitt, 1996b, p. 61). In this way, Hobbes's Leviathan loses its mysticism and becomes increasingly mechanistic: "Once the state becomes a leviathan, it disappears from the world of representations" (Schmitt, 1996a, p. 21). In Schmitt's reading, this overshadowing of myth and personality undercuts the very conditions under which sovereignty can appear as such. With the state becoming a mere technical instrument (the Leviathan's mechanisation can be read as depoliticisation, as discussed in 1.2.4), any substantive political content disappears since, by its nature, it has a mythological ground. Under such circumstances, sovereignty as the power to decide on the exception and to found order *ex nihilo* (Schmitt, 2005, pp. 5, 31–32) cannot become operative, since it depends on a visible, personified form that can be believed in and recognised as embodying the unity of the community (Schmitt, 1996a, p. 17; 2008, p. 243). Therefore, through his critique of Hobbes's model, Schmitt shows how the loss of the communicative element of sovereignty constitutes not simply an aesthetic, but a political deficit.

1.3.2 Rhetoric

Apart from personification, the necessary form creation finds its crucial manifestation in rhetorical power. Although the questions of language and its public use are rather latent in Schmitt's theory, both appear to play a significant role in constructing and exercising the sovereign power. Developing his quasi-ecclesiastical model of politics, Schmitt portrays the so-called 'great rhetoric' of the Catholic Church as one of the central indicators of a functioning hierarchical institution where "the spiritual resonance of grand rhetoric derives from the belief in the representation claimed by the orator" (Schmitt, 1996a, p. 24). Another dimension where Schmitt establishes the importance of rhetoric is its "classical and rational" relation to the "representative discourse" as opposed to the "irrational" discussion and Romantic eloquence one finds in parliamentarism (1996a, p. 23). So understood, the intended function of language lies in reinforcing the form of political representation, discussed in the previous section.

When contraposing the “primitive symbolism” of the Russian Soviet Republic and the aesthetic features of the Catholic Church, Schmitt notes the absence of “something human” in the former, which is largely present in the latter (1996a, p. 24). This element, according to him, is language. In fact, language seems to be the only mode of aesthetic communication recognised by Schmitt as politically significant,⁸ compared to other media: “the ability to create form, which is essential to aesthetics, has its essence in the ability to create the language of a great rhetoric” (1996a, p. 22). As has been shown, form-creation proves to be essential for delineating Schmitt’s principal binary of friend versus enemy, which makes it reasonable to consider aesthetics, with rhetorical expression as one of the core elements, beyond the mere variables of beauty or persuasion, but rather as constitutive instruments of political order. This understanding positions rhetoric as the primary medium through which political representation is made visible. Johannes Türk (2016) argues that “the Catholic Church and its grand rhetoric becomes a model that — although not emulated — allows Schmitt to rethink the relationship between institution and language” (p. 772).

Apart from this, the sovereign’s use of language reflects and perpetuates his monopoly over the exception. In his 1933 essay *Forms of Modern Imperialism in International Law*, Schmitt investigates how U.S. imperialism operates through legal semantics. As Türk (2016) summarises, Schmitt observes that the Monroe Doctrine and the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 exemplify “a scenario in which one country reserves for itself the right to ‘define, interpret, and apply’” legal terms (p. 752). This interpretive monopoly is made possible because the Pact, as Schmitt (2011a) notes, “knows ‘no sanction, no organization and no definition’” (p. 44), and it is in this very openness that the great power’s advantage resides. The sovereign alone decides what counts as war and what counts as a “peaceful means of upholding order and security” (Schmitt, 2011a, p. 44). This leads to manipulation of language, resulting, for example, in military missions not being called war, and interventions framed not as acts of aggression but “benevolent attempts to secure the integrity of a foreign country” (Türk, 2016, p. 752). As Schmitt (2011a) declares, “whoever has real power is also able to appropriate and determine concepts and words. *Caesar dominus*

⁸ Although Schmitt’s discussion of rhetoric in *Roman Catholicism* is in the ecclesiastical context, it is safe to assume that by discussing its use within the Catholic Church, Schmitt is building a more general argument fitting within his political theory. Firstly, in the mentioned passage he juxtaposes the Church and its practices with a state (the Russian Soviet Republic). Secondly, in his other writings, as shown in this section, he explicitly considers the political value of rhetoric in line with the present discussion. As Johannes Türk (2016) speculates, “The most profound reason for Schmitt’s alignment with the Catholic Church might not be biographical contingency, but rather its exemplary theory of rhetoric that authorizes the ethos and pathos to speak in the name of an idea” (p. 754).

et supra grammaticam: the emperor is ruler over grammar as well” (p. 44). The sovereign, in other words, together with deciding on the exception, decides what the exception is called.

1.3.3 The Aesthetic in the Political

The preceding analysis established that form is intrinsic to the political, but for Schmitt, the political itself cannot be severed from an ethical and symbolic dimension. As Andreas Kalyvas (2008) shows, “[t]he political is the realm of substantive ethical principles, of invisible and abstract values, that is, the realm of symbolization and representation in which society forges its own symbolic unity, transcending empirical divisions through some normative collective significations” (p. 149).

Thus, in giving the political its visible, communicable shape, representation inevitably draws upon the other fundamental binaries: beautiful-ugly, good-evil, etc. This follows from what is at stake in the friend-enemy distinction itself. While the fear of physical destruction is the fundamental force that drives political mobilisation, Schmitt departs from Hobbes by developing a second, deeper criterion. As he maintains, “[t]he enemy is our own question as form” (Schmitt, 2017, p. 71, citing Theodor Däubler), and the genuine threat is losing “one’s own form of existence” (Schmitt, 2007, p. 27). The problem is not merely biological survival: “If such physical destruction of human life is not motivated by an existential threat to *one’s own way of life*, then it cannot be justified” (Schmitt, 2007, p. 49, emphasis added). In *Constitutional Theory*, Schmitt (2008) goes so far as to link the very possibility of representation with existential traits: “something dead, something inferior or valueless, something lowly cannot be represented” (p. 243). This presupposes that representation always already operates according to certain criteria that define the presence of “value.” Even if those criteria are not explicitly invoked in every instance of representation, the very structure of the process requires them: that which is represented must have worth, must not be “inferior,” and, crucially, the consolidation of the friend community during the state of exception takes place by making visible how the enemy threatens its way of life.

It follows that, whereas “the morally evil, aesthetically ugly or economically damaging need not necessarily be the enemy” (Schmitt, 2007, p. 27), the enemy will inevitably be shaped in such a way as to fall under some of these categories. The mechanism at work is one of reduction: moral, aesthetic, and economic judgements, operating here not on their own terms but in the service of political demarcation, are collapsed into what might

be called a second-order aesthetics. Rather than functioning as independent evaluative criteria, they are instrumentalised to give the friend-enemy binary a perceptible and legible form. Schmitt does reluctantly acknowledge that the political “draws upon other distinctions for support” at the emotional level (2007, p. 27), but he stops well short of recognising the constitutive role of these distinctions in shaping the friend-enemy binary. Instead, he attempts to distance politics from aesthetics by portraying them as separate, even opposite, realms. As Neil Levi (2007) observes, the aesthetic is “a kind of disturbing presence that Schmitt repeatedly disavows,” seeing it as “a mode of defense, a refusal to recognize something about either reality or oneself” (p. 37). This reluctance is understandable, since much of Schmitt’s political theory is aesthetic in nature—contrary to his wish to present it as metaphysically independent from the domain of perception—for two connected reasons. First, his central concept of sovereignty depends on representation (frequently in the form of Catholic theatricality and rhetorics imported into secular politics) as the only instrument through which they acquire public and practical political life. Second, Schmitt’s core concepts, by their nature, usually have no clear, rationally traceable starting point; and, as noted by Levi (2007, p. 29), many of them, such as exception and sovereignty, are defined circularly. As a result, David Pan’s (2017) analysis of Schmitt’s later work, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, concludes that

the question of representation for Schmitt is simultaneously the question of political authority, and his approach to this question is fundamentally aesthetic to the extent that for him representation is not simply propaganda for a preexisting set of values but is itself *constitutive for those values*. (p. 734, emphasis added)

In sum, form and perceptibility are central in producing the political and its fundamental distinction. The aesthetic, far from being an inferior and detached binary, actually conditions the necessary visibility of Schmittian politics.

1.3.4 Defining Aestheticisation

The preceding analysis of Schmitt’s concepts of representation, rhetoric, and the friend-enemy distinction points toward a specific and delimited use of the term “aestheticisation” in the present work. It is important to establish what this term does and does not denote, since the concept carries considerable theoretical weight in the existing literature. “Aestheticised politics,” as used in this thesis, should first be distinguished from the frequent reading identified by Martin Jay (1992) as the reduction of political life to criteria of beauty in line with the *l’art pour l’art* tradition. In this case, non-aesthetic criteria

tend to be excluded from political consideration (pp. 43–44). Another known framework, not relevant directly to this work, is the subordination of artistic production to pre-given political ends, that is, propaganda. While elements of both approaches can definitely be traced in Russian politics, they are misreadings of the aesthetic prerequisites of Schmittian politics as developed here.

Instead, aestheticisation, in the sense employed in this thesis, refers to two interrelated processes. The first is the instrumentalisation of value judgements to give the friend-enemy distinction a perceptible, emotionally legible form. As the preceding analysis has shown, although Schmitt insists that these categories are conceptually independent of the political, they are structurally recruited to consolidate the friend community and shape the enemy as a threat to an existential way of life (Schmitt, 2007, p. 27). Hence, the enemy is a shape that indeterminate anxiety takes, transforming a diffuse collective fear into a concrete and identifiable threat. Importantly, the “enemy” takes precedence over the “friend” in Schmitt’s framework, producing a fundamentally negative definition of political identity: the political community discovers what it is through the act of identifying what threatens it. It is therefore constituted from the outside in, and the act of constructing the public enemy remains indispensable henceforth.

The second dimension is representational: collective political will must be embodied in a sovereign figure in order to acquire publicly operative form. This requirement holds even at the most elementary level of Schmitt’s theory. Even where the political is grounded in nothing beyond “the real possibility of physical killing” (Schmitt, 2007, p. 33), the consolidation of a friend community against that threat must still be made publicly visible and given representative form before it can function politically. Together, these two dimensions constitute what this thesis understands by the aestheticisation of politics in Schmitt: not the ornamentation of the political, but the condition of its public existence.

Chapter 2. Russia's Aestheticised Politics of Sovereignty

The purpose of this chapter is to apply the conceptual apparatus, examined in the preceding part of the work. As the thesis argues, Carl Schmitt's theory and the current Russian state share a specific mode of politics organised around the existential production of enmity, in which sovereignty is constituted through the decision rather than through legal procedure, and in which the political community discovers what it is through the continuous staging of what threatens it. On these grounds, contemporary Russia presents itself as a particularly apt site for the application of the theoretical framework developed above, and especially of its overlooked element of the aesthetic.

The chapter proceeds in four sections. Section 2.1 identifies the gap in the current literature on applying Schmitt to Russian politics that this thesis seeks to address. Section 2.2 sets the historical stage by analysing the 1990s as a period of sovereign fragmentation and identity vacuum that created the structural conditions for subsequent developments. Section 2.3, elaborating on the theoretical frame of 1.3.1, examines the consolidation of sovereign power in the person of Vladimir Putin himself: the mythologisation of his body, his emergence as the representative of national unity, and the liturgical fusion of political theology, Orthodox sanctification, and militarism into a single sovereign figure. Section 2.4, mirroring 1.3.2, examines the aesthetic dimension of the political as the sovereign's rhetorical performance: from Putin's addresses and the crystallisation of the friend-enemy line in language to Decree 809's legislative grammar of sovereignty. Section 2.5 then turns to the architectural dimension of representation, reading the Cathedral of the Armed Forces as a sovereign spatial act that fuses military, ecclesiastical, and national symbolism into a monumental condensation of Russia's aestheticised politics.

2.1 The Aesthetic Gap in Schmittian Analyses of Russia

The systematic academic treatment of the connection between Carl Schmitt and the current Russian political conjuncture has been relatively limited. David G. Lewis, with his *Russia's New Authoritarianism: Putin and the Politics of Order* published in 2020, comes closest to a holistic application of Schmitt's political and legal thought in this context. Lewis traces what he calls a "Schmittian conservative paradigm" (2020, p. x) across the architecture of the current regime, affecting both domestic and foreign policy. An earlier important publication was Stefan Auer's 2015 article "Carl Schmitt in the Kremlin: The Ukraine Crisis and the Return of Geopolitics," published in *International Affairs*. Writing in the immediate

aftermath of the occupation of Crimea in 2014, Auer deployed Schmittian categories as a diagnostic lens to expose both Russia's logic of action and the EU's structural unpreparedness.

The analyses of Lewis and Auer retain their fundamental relevance. However, a revised account is needed due to two reasons. First, the shifted situation, resulting primarily from the new phase that the Russo-Ukrainian war entered in 2022, has brought about new variables that need to be considered. Second, even the wave of scholarship that has since attempted to explain the invasion through Schmitt's work has done so in a notably fragmentary fashion: some authors (e.g., Hilpold, 2023; Regenbrecht, 2025) have concentrated almost exclusively on the *Großraum* concept, reading Putin's territorial ambitions through the lens of Schmitt's theory of greater spatial ordering. While this is viable and fruitful, such an approach leaves aside what Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons, in their introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt* (2016), identify as the tripartite architecture of Schmitt's thought, namely the mutually constitutive relationship between his political, legal, and cultural theory – a dynamic that, to a significant extent, guides this thesis. Importantly, the cultural aspect carries an integral aesthetic dimension, whose manifestations and indispensable nature are discussed throughout the present work.

The second gap in the existing literature is no less significant: there is a lack of attention to the aesthetic dimension of Schmitt's thought and, consequently, its application to the Russian case remains virtually entirely neglected. Yet as the argument developed in section 1.3 establishes, this dimension is not supplementary to the Schmittian political framework but rather constitutive of it. According to Meierhenrich and Simons (2016), "Schmitt engaged in practices of what [they] term cultural ordering because he believed that cultural disorder was just as inimical to the creation and maintenance of social order as political and legal disorder were" (p. 39). For them, Schmitt's endeavours in the spheres of literature and culture were a necessary part of his holistic theory structured around the motif of order. This cultural dimension, however, has been the most underdeveloped one, compared to his political and juridical thought. As Pan and Berman argued, Schmitt's work

consists of a series of incomplete attempts to understand the foundations of the decision and of the political in a *mythic-theological-cultural dimension* ... Although he never achieved a conclusive account of the cultural basis of law and political order, he recognized the inadequacy of considering a political order as a self-sufficient system (as cited in Meierhenrich & Simons, 2016, p. 38, emphasis added).

One of such missing aspects, namely the inevitable grounding of political order and the friend-enemy distinction in the aesthetic dimension, was uncovered in the previous

chapter. Given that the cultural dimension of Schmitt's thought is considerably latent, it is not surprising that it does not normally accompany the application of his more widely recognised and deeply developed theory. Despite this, a Schmittian analysis of Russia that stops at political and legal categories is still deficient in bypassing the essential cultural aspect and, in our case, the very aesthetic mechanism through which the friend-enemy binary is reproduced as lived and perceptible political experience. This is the scholarship limitation that this thesis attempts to overcome.

2.2 The 1990s as Hobbesian State of Nature

While the thesis focuses on the current state of Russian politics, the pre-Putin Russia of the 1990s remains decisive for the degenerative dynamics of the decades to follow. The fluidness and indeterminacy of this decade are, in fact, what made it so important. As the previous chapter argued, the Schmittian framework of politics presupposes a movement from disorder to the establishment of sovereign authority. Given that, as discussed in 1.2.1, political order is not seen as the natural condition but as an achievement, won in defiance of dissolution, civil conflict, and the ever-present possibility of the state's collapse, the period between the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Putin's rise to power in 1999 served as such a springboard for the steep adoption of anti-liberal policies in the 2000s, which eventually solidified into a fully consolidated order based on a specific idea of sovereignty.

Instead of focusing on the transformation of isolated democratic tendencies in Yeltsin's Russia into authoritarianism, Lewis (2020) rightly prefers the binary of order versus chaos as decisive at the time (p. 6). This is explained by the rise of non-state centres of power following the collapse of the USSR, which can be seen through the prism of Schmitt's warning: "If within the state there are organized parties capable of according their members more protection than the state, then the latter becomes at best an annex of such parties, and the individual citizen knows whom he has to obey" (Schmitt, 2007, p. 52). The state of Russian politics exhibited such fragmentary tendencies, with state sovereignty lacking a single holding figure but rather being contested among business and criminal groups, governmental institutions, and regional (sometimes separatist) lords (Lewis, 2020, p. 22). As a result, the presidency, which should have inherited the function of sovereignty's embodiment from the Soviet state leadership, lost its exclusive representative function. The sense of visibility and discernment attributable to power verticality was lost. Hence, not only the basic Hobbesian premise of ensuring security was absent—as Volkov (as cited in Lewis,

2020, p. 64) claims, the state was seen as just “one private protection company among others”—but the “mythic-theological-cultural dimension” of sovereignty as “making-present” vanished as well.

This period was marked by a number of tumultuous developments, the most fundamental of which was a crisis of collective and personal identity alike. As Serguei Oushakine (2009) observes, the “model of Soviet nation building allowed Russian ethnicity to persist as a blank spot, as an indeterminate source of power, framed by ethnic differences of other Soviet nationalities” (p. 10), thus perpetuating the model of self-identification through the other. As the designated successor to the Soviet Union, the new Russian state struggled to forge a self-image independent of this tradition of imperial subjugation and colonisation. According to Medvedev (2023), “the ten years of Yeltsin’s transition failed to produce for Russia a new style, a new ideology, a new elite or a new nation. The country remained in a dead faint and total uncertainty as regards its identity” (“The Half-Life of the USSR” section). Of course, attempts were made. As Serhii Plokhly (2017) observes, for example, the laws of the new Russian state used the word *rossiiane* rather than *russkie* for its citizens (Chapter 18). The former, signifying a civic, rather than an ethnically-bound form of belonging to the state, is still used today. However, the latter, intended to point at the ethnic Slavic origin of the title’s bearer, as well as a mythological connection of the Russian Federation to Kyivan Rus (and subsequent ambitions to control the respective lands), remained prominent in the public discourse as well. The balancing between the two ways of being Russian illustrates the lack of a stable and defined identity resulting from “the implosion of the empire [which] had produced a class of disenfranchised citizens” (Plokhly, 2017, Chapter 18) who had to find their place in the ruins of the colonial power which had not yet become a nation-state.

The loss of a sense of positive belonging to a political community coincided with the erosion of the negative way of self-identification, i.e., through the image of an external enemy. This was substituted by internal factional animosity, a “civil war” whose very existence demonstrated the entity’s failure to meet the Schmittian benchmark of a functioning political body. The initial post-Cold War absence of a clear external enemy ruptured what Vasily Klyuchevsky called the “combative order of the state” (as cited in Medvedev, 2023, Introduction): the centuries-old tradition of Russian political self-presentation organised around armed struggle against foreign adversaries. In the 1990s, this militaristic tendency underwent a steep decline. Both Gorbachev and Yeltsin reduced their respective states’ military strength, while failing to restrict the influence of the internal

coercion organs, such as KGB and FSB (Medvedev, 2023, Introduction). This reorientation marked a decisive shift. Whereas Russia had previously organised its political identity around a public enemy (the *hostis* in Schmitt's terms), the state now turned its coercive power inward.⁹ This transformation moves enmity from the public register of the *hostis* toward the private register of the *inimicus*, the personal adversary "whom one hates" which, for Schmitt, carries no properly political content (Schmitt, 2007, p. 28). According to him, the political is constituted exclusively by public enmity (Schmitt, 2007, p. 28). The demise of politics defined so, coincides with symbolic changes. For instance, deprived of the public enemy that gave it meaning, the Moscow Kremlin, historically a defensive architectural form, a fortified seat of the sovereign with high walls, multiple towers, an armoury and churches, became, in this light, semantically empty, rather than a symbolically functioning site of political-theological power.

2.3 Body Politic and the Body of the Sovereign

Ironically, the practical impotence of the red citadel was instrumentalised to bring the disorder to an end. The story of Putin's service as a KGB officer in Dresden was turned into a parable of bravery and personal initiative against the backdrop of political paralysis in Moscow in the late 1980s.¹⁰ As Anton Shekhovtsov claims, the narrative about Putin as a contemporary Max Otto von Stierlitz (a publicly recognisable spy-series character) was significant for his first presidential campaign in 1999–2000 (Shekhovtsov, 2025, p. 105). The moment of indeterminacy of the central authority Putin faced must have functioned as a symbolic consolidation of the decade-long period of fragmentation discussed above. In Dresden, there was no one who could "decide on the exception" when the normal order was no longer adequate. The mythic retelling about an officer who invokes the rhetoric of armed self-defence and steps forward to confront the crowd (cast as an external enemy) threatening to storm the KGB headquarters (a symbolic stand-in for Soviet space) dramatises seizure of

⁹ While numerous manifestations of this "turn inward" have persisted to this day and even expanded in scale (e.g., persecution of opposition figures; use of KGB/FSB against domestic dissidents; employing political power for defending business interests), the argument here is that such practices were at the core of Russian politics in the 1990s. Now, by contrast, they are secondary to the politics along the lines of friend-enemy distinction, built on the public hostility towards external enemies. Hence the current framing of Russian opposition figures as "foreign agents" – signalling their unbelonging to the friend group.

¹⁰ As the legend goes, when pro-democratic protesters reached the Stasi headquarters in Dresden, where Putin was stationed, the mid-ranking officer called his command for backup but received no answer from Moscow. Left on his own and without necessary authorisations, Putin nevertheless faced the crowd alone and warned them that the personnel were armed and ready to apply force, if necessary, since the place in question was Soviet territory (which was not accurate). The protesters, intimidated, left.

the empty space of sovereignty: a move from paralysed legality to personalised decisionism. This reenactment and mobilisation of the Stierlitz archetype by Vladimir Putin was an early stage of the aestheticisation of sovereignty through the person of the future president. Instead of dysfunctional institutions and abstract constitutional norms, the authority of the sovereign is condensed into the recognisable narrative of the taciturn operative, solitary decision-maker, the man who can defy regulation when Moscow is silent.

This personification was gradually formalised and broadened. Moreover, Putin was increasingly described as the “national leader” (Lewis, 2020, p. 67), a title that signals a Schmittian fusion of representation and identity going beyond the mere constitutional role and entering the realm of identity-formation. As evidenced by Putin’s *chassé-croisé* with Dmitry Medvedev in 2008–2012, when the latter became president, the role of the sovereign leader followed the person and not the office. His eventual indispensability for the Russian state project can be encapsulated in Vyacheslav Volodin’s widely quoted formulation: “There is no Russia today if there is no Putin” (as cited in Bennetts, 2019). Such dependency of Russia’s existence as a political subject on the biological continuation of a single individual falls under Schmitt’s idea of representation not as technical delegation but as a formation of a quasi-mythical sovereign who “stands for” the political unity as its necessary condition.

Viewed from this angle, Putin’s obsessive preoccupation with his body and health becomes inseparable from the very logic of his sovereign status, which came into being through the USSR’s and Russia’s political weakness. According to Amy Randall (2020), the hyper-masculine, diligently selected imagery of Putin one can frequently encounter in Russian media is meant to contrast with that of late Communist leaders, as well as with the “flabby and weak” Boris Yeltsin (p. 860). Putin’s pictures riding bare-chested on horseback, demonstrating judo skills, or submerging in an Epiphany ice-bath, can all be perceived as “an important tool in legitimizing his rule, ‘remasculinizing’ the country internationally and domestically, and reasserting Russia’s strength” (Randall, 2020, p. 860). The body of the sovereign is no longer a private matter, and this performance of sovereign vitality, especially in the context of political unity emerging from disorder, becomes itself an argument for Putin’s political authority.

Yet such integral connection between the biological body and body politic has an anxious and insecure underside. The sovereign body, because of its indispensability for the political project, appears highly fragile. For instance, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Putin reportedly maintained a two-week quarantine requirement for anyone allowed to enter the same room as him, which continued for four consecutive years (Roth &

Sauer, 2023). Gleb Karakulov, an officer in the Federal Guard Service who defected in 2023, describes Putin as “pathologically afraid for his life” (as cited in Roth & Sauer, 2023). According to a 2026 report, the Russian leader has ceased using his established residences in the Moscow region, instead increasingly retreating to fortified bunker facilities, notably in the Krasnodar area of southern Russia, conducting state affairs from there over extended periods, while state-controlled media relies on recorded material to convey an uninterrupted illusion of his presence (Stognei et al., 2026). The preoccupation with bodily survival extends, however, beyond immediate threat-mitigation into something closer to a fantasy of biological transcendence. In September 2025, a hot microphone caught Putin assuring Xi Jinping that “human organs can be constantly transplanted so that people can live younger and younger, and even become immortal” (Guzman, 2025). This exemplifies the fusion of private and public domains of Putin’s sovereign decision on the exception: where the Schmitt’s sovereign stands outside the legal order to guarantee it, Putin attempts to escape the normal biological fragility of his body to protect the *civitas* for which it stands. As will be shown in 2.5, this quest for what Shekhovtsov (2025) calls “symbolic immortality” (p. 111) finds its manifestations in the much broader context of Russian political orientations.

For now, however, it suffices to say that the image of such sovereignty as the body politics’ semiotic foundation and the guarantor of its existential continuity, successfully anchored itself in the Russian social imaginary thanks to mapping itself onto the two dimensions of identity deficiency of the early post-Soviet chaos delineated in 2.2. As Lewis (2020) observes, in this context “identity could ... be constructed through a vertical connection with a charismatic leader, a president who represented the identity aspirations of different groups in the nation; and through a search of political unity, mobilised above all by the apparent threat from an external enemy” (p. 13). Translated back into the theoretical vocabulary of Chapter 1, Lewis’s two mechanisms correspond to the twin pillars of the Schmittian order that the 1990s had dismantled: *Repräsentation*, the sovereign’s capacity to “make present” the political unity of the nation in a single, recognisable person, and the friend-enemy distinction, whose restoration converts what Hobbes called “the war of all against all” into a clean, outward-facing opposition that alone makes a functioning political community possible. In this way, the administrative consolidation of power in Putin’s person is concurrent with, if not preceded by, the aesthetic and mythological formation of a collective identity through a single political figure.

This conversion resonates with the historical lineage of political theology analysed by Ernst Kantorowicz (2016). According to him, mediaeval and early modern sovereignty,

which Schmitt sees as a foundation for his own political theology, rested on the binary of mortal *corpus naturale* and immortal *corpus politicum*. Kantorowicz traces this doubling back to its explicitly religious origins: repeatedly citing a Norman Anonymous treatise, he shows how the king was understood to bear a “twin person, one descending from nature, the other from grace ... concerning one personality, he was, by nature, an individual man; concerning his other personality, he was, by grace, a Christus, that is, a God-man” (as cited in Kantorowicz, 2016, Chapter 3, para. 7).

Such condensation finds a structural analogue in Victor Klemperer’s observations about National Socialism’s cult of Hitler. Klemperer (2013) records how the Nazi leader was staged as nothing less than a saviour-figure: touching consecrated flags with the *Blutfahne* (a blood-stained ceremonial Nazi flag) in “a mixture of religious and theatrical ceremony,” receiving the attribution “The Führer as the new Christ, a special German Saviour” (p. 118), so that political authority was rendered aesthetically through the grammar of religious apparition. In a similar vein, Russian political theology systematically fuses the sovereign body, ecclesiastical sanctification, and militarism into a single space. A striking illustration of this tendency is Putin’s 2025 appearance alongside Patriarch Kirill on Orthodox Christmas Eve. Putin asked Kirill to bless military crosses destined for Ukraine war commanders, crosses whose chains bore Putin’s own initials. In that single ceremony, three dimensions collapsed into one: the sovereign figure, materially inscribed on the objects themselves; the Church’s sanctifying power, enacted through Kirill’s blessing; and the martial context, with Ukraine as the constitutive external enemy. That Kirill has regularly referred to Putin as “God’s miracle” only renders explicit what the ceremony already performs: the sovereign is not merely endorsed by the sacred but identified with it (Quénelle, 2025).

The above similarity between the Nazi leader and the head of the nation, ostensibly fighting against neo-Nazis, is not accidental. As Timothy Snyder’s analysis shows, Putin’s ideological scaffolding is traceable directly to the Russian fascist philosopher Ivan Ilyin, whose *Our Tasks* (1956/1993), reissued and distributed among Russian senior officials at Putin’s personal direction (Baker, 2015), envisions Russia’s salvation through a national leader unbound by constitutional law, and whose *On Resistance to Evil by Force* (1925/2018) frames violent action against a morally designated enemy as a sacred duty. Putin gives every indication of having engaged with Ilyin deeply, and that engagement left clear marks on the legal architecture of his rule. After returning to the presidency in 2012, “every important measure brought to life an element of Ilyin’s constitutional texts”, enshrining a narrow, illiberal conception of democracy reduced to “ritualized support for his [Putin’s] person”

(Snyder, 2018, "Succession of Failure" section). Central to Ilyin's philosophy was the figure of the *spasitel*—a word that can be translated as "redeemer" or "saviour" and is comparable to *Sonderheiland* (special saviour) mentioned by Klemperer (1947, p. 177)—whose invocation "released a profound religious meaning into politics" (Snyder, 2018, "Individualism or Totalitarianism" section). Hence, what Klemperer identified as the defining pathology of Nazi political language, the elevation of a leader to the role of liturgical saviour/redeemer through the deliberate manipulation of religious vocabulary and ritual, mirrors what Ilyin had theorised as the proper form of Russian sovereignty, and what Putin, through deliberate adoption of Ilyin's framework, enacted (Snyder, 2018, Prologue).

Finally, the establishment of Putin's authority as the saviour required something from which the collective is to be saved: without the *hostis*, the liturgy of sovereignty has no congregation. Putin's crucial achievement in his campaign and early presidential years was the construction of this necessary enmity. As Medvedev (2023) observes, "Putin has given back to Russia one of its main archetypes: war. He came to power as 'the war president' and has not left the subject alone even for a single year of his rule" (Introduction). By locking the two elements of identity, which were lost as a result of the Soviet Union's collapse, around his figure, Putin constituted the political order anew, based on the only foundations Schmitt recognised as genuinely political: a sovereign who *represents* and an enemy who *defines*.

2.4 The Sovereign Word: Rhetoric and the Production of Enmity

The preceding discussions in academia have established Schmittian theory as a productive framework for analysing Russian politics. What remains underexplored, however, is the form-establishing dimension such politics necessarily demands, and it is here that Schmitt's attention to aesthetics and language proves particularly germane to the political theology that constitutes Putin's sovereign body. For Carl Schmitt, the political exceeds the merely legal: it is driven by an "expressive impulse" (Meierhenrich & Simons, 2016, p. 11), a force through which "real life" breaks through the mechanistic and torpid legalism of the norm (Schmitt, 2005, p. 15). In contemporary Russia, this logic finds its concrete expression in an aestheticised enactment of sovereignty and a mode of self-presentation that does not engage the world through dialogue, but rather through "explosive moments," as coined by Juri Lotman (2009).

2.4.1 Explosive Speech: Decisionist Rhetoric and the Crystallisation of the Enemy

As section 1.3 showed, Schmitt's concept of sovereignty remains structurally dependent on theatrical moments of intensification: a dramatic style that led commentators like Jürgen Habermas (1994) to associate his political writings with expressionism: "in the expressionistic style of his time, Carl Schmitt constructs a dramatic concept of the political in the light of which everything normally understood by the word must seem banal" (p. 129). This quality is manifest semantically in the absence of a middle ground and the imposition of an either/or condition (the discourse of "us versus them," for example, is normally presented in Russia as an existential choice without a space for compromise), finding its analogue in Lotman's "explosive moments"¹¹ – unpredictable interruptions in linear historical time that, in our context, re-establish the sovereign as a navigator of chaos. According to Lotman (2009), the tendency to carry out political transformation in this manner has been intrinsic to Russian culture which "realises itself in the categories of explosion" because of "the severe dictates of a binary historical structure" (pp. 173–174).

Putin's major programmatic addresses function as these explosive breakthroughs. They punctuate long periods of management and bureaucratic opacity with sudden, highly condensed acts of speech that retrospectively re-code entire stretches of policy and experience. The 2007 Munich speech, the 2014 annexation address, and, above all, the 24 February 2022 declaration of the "special military operation" are exemplary in this respect. The 2022 address presents the decision for war as a point at which all previous attempts at compromise have been exhausted and "the showdown between Russia and these forces cannot be avoided". Putin insists that "Russia cannot feel safe, develop, and exist while facing a permanent threat from the territory of today's Ukraine," and characterises the situation as "a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a nation" (Putin, 2022). Read through Lotman's lens, this speech goes beyond simply justifying a political decision. It is the explosion through which Russia's recent history is retrospectively re-coded as a prelude to an unavoidable confrontation with the West and with Ukraine. In Schmitt's terms, the speech stages the sovereign decision on the exception. It declares that the normal

¹¹ In *Culture and Explosion* (2009), Lotman distinguishes two modes of historical change: gradual processes, likened to "a river in spring with its powerful but directed stream," and explosive ones, resembling "[a] minefield with unexpected explosive points" (p. 8). If gradual history unfolds as directed continuity, explosion marks a moment "out of time" in which alternative futures briefly remain open before one contingent path is retroactively naturalised as necessity. In the Russian case, this explains how sovereign power manufactures crisis, converting rupture into a spectacle of destiny, order, and inevitability.

legal and diplomatic order no longer applies because the very existence of the state and its form of life are at stake. The decision appears as the moment at which a field of multiple possibilities collapses into a single path that is then narrated as both necessary and already implicit in the preceding sequence of NATO enlargement, “genocide” in Donbas, and “Western cultural decline”. This pattern fits the dynamic that Lotman identifies as an explosion: what was one of several possibilities is later narrated as the only possible outcome.

The 2007 Munich Security Conference speech provides an earlier example of the same logic. In this speech, Putin directly confronted NATO’s eastward expansion as a betrayal of post-Cold War assurances, constructing the risk of “a world in which there is one master, one sovereign” (Putin, 2007). What begins as a critique of unilateralism ultimately interprets the 21st century order into a binary choice: either Russia asserts its sovereignty or it submits to Western dominance. This reduction of international politics to an existential binary also recodified fifteen years of not-so-unambiguous diplomatic engagement as a prelude to inevitable confrontation – all under the framework of Schmittian decisionism when interstate legal norms are defective in protection of Russia’s existential interests, or, rather, are presented as such. As discussed in 1.3.2, such decisionism finds its concrete manifestation in the determination of the meaning of specific words by the sovereign.

An integral part of these discursual outbursts is therefore the use of vocabulary meant to shape specific images of enmity, for which the narratological elements of the war against Ukraine provide ample examples. As Schmitt observed, political concepts and images always carry a “polemical meaning” and represent a particular conflictual situation, which in turn produces a friend-enemy grouping; where that situation of enmity no longer obtains, the concepts become “empty and ghostlike abstractions” (Schmitt, 2007, p. 30).

The Ukraine war exemplifies the attempt to balance between such ambiguity and the moments of threat concentration. As Alexander Etkind (2023) notes, Putin tends to slide “from the idea of no difference between the Russian and the Ukrainian national patterns to the idea of polar differences between them” (p. 19). Mykola Riabchuk (2016) documented this as a historical tendency. According to him, the Ukrainians are considered through two distinct stereotypical lenses: one of the educated and loyal *Little Russian* (*maloros*), seen as “almost the same people”, and the second of illiterate peasant *khokhol*, subjected to harsher ethnic and social distancing and “negative othering” (pp. 77–78). This latter ever-present picture of Ukrainians allows Russia to imagine the nation as an existential threat whenever convenient: be it through their own ostensible self-imagination as the negation of the

Russians (the formulation “anti-Russia project” is repeated 6 times in Putin’s 2021 article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”), or as the “degenerate West’s” puppet. This construction of a neighbouring nation as potentially hostile has remained dormant and embedded in stereotypical language throughout decades, in line with Schmitt’s assertion: “the fact that the substance of the political is contained in the context of a concrete antagonism is still expressed in everyday language, even where the awareness of the extreme case has been entirely lost” (Schmitt, 2007). What matters in the Russian case is that, although the state of emergency with Ukraine might not have been pronounced all the time, the antagonism in language has been constructed deliberately throughout.

The periodic speeches by Putin function, within this system of sustained ambiguity and potential threat, as explosive moments of clarification. They are designed to temporarily delineate, however momentarily, the line of the friend-enemy distinction. Putin’s major addresses, e.g. on the “historical unity” of Russians and Ukrainians (now denying a distinct Ukrainian identity as such), on the “special military operation” of February 2022, operate along these lines: they constitute the enemy in a particularly charged, authoritative form, temporarily collapsing the ambiguity and the openness of options that the permanent apparatus otherwise sustains. The speeches are, in Schmittian terms, the moments when the abstract becomes concrete and when the floating vocabulary of enmity crystallises into a specific political decision that is now presented as inevitable.

2.4.2 Legislating the Friend-Enemy Line: Decree 809

In Putin’s current discourse, war appears as the normal condition of politics, framed as a permanent emergency in which “traditional Russian spiritual and moral values” are under attack and the very survival of the nation is at stake. The previously mentioned presidential decree no. 809 (President of Russia, 2022) situates culture explicitly within the field of national security and speaks of an urgent need to protect “traditional values” from “the actions of the United States of America and other unfriendly foreign states”, “transnational corporations” and internal enemies who spread “destructive ideology”. Following the discussed dichotomic logic found in Schmitt’s theory and Lotman’s ideas on Russian historical developments, the decree imagines a bifurcated future: a “positive scenario” in which state policy succeeds and a “negative scenario” where the hostile ideology spreads in consequence of a failure to ensure counteraction. Presented as society’s foundation, “traditional values” are seen as the precondition for sovereignty, which

authorises broad instruments of “monitoring,” “control” and “protection from external destructive information and psychological influence.” This results in a political situation where value dissent can be framed as a threat to the nation’s survival, and in which emergency becomes a structural feature of governance, perpetuating sovereign power. Such situation constitutes a conceptual paradox when measured against the self-limiting nature of the exception outlined in Section 1.2.3. Yet, as Decree 809 demonstrates, this permanence becomes systematic and is driven by the sovereign self-referential nature: if the emergency or the image of an ever-present possibility of such existential peril ends, the regime loses the justification to rule.

Apart from pinpointing the danger, the decree lists the said 17 values, including “patriotism”, “collectivism”, “service to the Fatherland and responsibility for its fate,” as well as liberal-sounding “dignity” and “human rights and freedoms.” Beyond enumerating them, the document does not establish a hierarchy or provide detailed definitions, which becomes problematic as the values can be read as mutually contradictory. This vagueness functions as an instrument which allows “patriotism” and “human rights”, the Orthodox canon and civic duty, to stand as interchangeable symbols of one Russian whole. In sum, the heterogeneity leads to the situation where the idea of protecting the values (to which much of the decree is dedicated) appears more substantial than the values themselves. In a way, this collective combat becomes the ultimate value. It is then not accidental that, answering a question about the “*skrepy*”—spiritual or value bonds, resembling, according to Medvedev (2023, Introduction), Italian *fasci*—the head of a federal youth policy centre Elena Belikova stated that freedom is a “controversial value” (Agentstvo, 2025).

While the self-image constructed through the discussed values remains unclear, the 1990s crisis of missing imperial hierarchy has been addressed. Decree 809 defines traditional values as the bedrock of an “all-Russian civic identity” yet also singles out the “Russian language as the language of the state-forming people” that requires special “protection and support.” This asymmetry re-hierarchises the multiethnic federation around an ethnically coded core. Lewis (2020) describes this hybridity as “a conservative, hierarchical relationship, which respects the cultural and religious diversity of non-Russian groups, but does not afford them law-based rights as ethnic minorities in the liberal sense” (p. 91). In this way, the state encodes an ethnic hierarchy while avoiding the destabilising risks of overt ethnic nationalism. Similarly, a single religious denomination of Orthodoxy is highlighted as having “a special role in the formation and strengthening of traditional values”.

2.5 Sacred Architecture as Sovereign Act: The Cathedral of the Armed Forces

As Henri Lefebvre (2013) writes,

each monumental space becomes the metaphorical and quasi-metaphysical underpinning of a society ... by virtue of a play of substitutions in which the religious and political realms symbolically (and ceremonially) exchange attributes ... in this way the authority of the sacred and the sacred aspect of authority are transferred back and forth, mutually reinforcing one another in the process. (p. 225)

This reciprocal transfer between the sacred and the authoritative mirrors the structure Carl Schmitt identifies as the foundation of modern sovereignty where the political is inseparable from the theological. This section examines a quintessential piece of contemporary Russian architecture as a condensation of aesthetic and theological practices underpinning the Kremlin's Schmittian model of politics. Before this, however, one contrasting example is worth considering.

Following the illegal occupation of Crimea, Russian authorities embarked on “restoring” the world’s only surviving example of Crimean Tatar palace architecture: the Khan’s Palace in Bakhchysarai, which served as the political, religious, and cultural centre of the Crimean Khanate (Haring, 2018). This project, launched in 2016, proved to be a slow and careless destruction under the guise of restoration: an irreplaceable sixteenth-century fresco was ruined by negligence, and the structural integrity of the building was compromised beyond repair. As of 2026, according to the Crimean Tatar Resource Centre (2026), the works remain ongoing and “have nothing to do with restoration, but actually lead to the destruction of a unique historical monument of the indigenous Crimean Tatar people” (para. 1).

This unmaking of minority heritage, stretched over a decade, contrasts with the speed with which the Kremlin erected its own piece of sacred architecture from the ground up: the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces. While the aesthetic value, memory, and representational presence of those who fall outside the friend group (in this case, Crimean Tatars) is withdrawn from the national landscape by norm, through the deliberate negligence of routine administration, the cathedral is a sovereign act of cultural concentration. Consecrated in June 2020, it had been constructed in just 598 days. The very act of deciding to rapidly build the cathedral, and of directing towards it resources on a scale that defies the logic of ordinary budgetary procedure, is itself an instantiation of the exception. Initiated by Defence Minister Shoigu, sanctified by Patriarch Kirill, and endorsed by Putin, the Cathedral became the physical embodiment of the trifecta of military, religious, and presidential authority fused into a single monument. At the same time, the intended scheme of its financing entirely with popular donations – even though eventually nearly half the funds

were taken from the public budget (RFE/RL, 2020) – served to connect the eclectic historical and religious symbolism, the sovereign decision, and the people: ultimately making the invisible unity visible and material, offering everyone what Lefebvre (2013) calls “an image of his or her social visage” or a “collective mirror” (p. 220).

As Shoigu announced before the construction, the plan was “for every square meter of the cathedral to be symbolic” (as cited in Wesolowsky, 17:21:39Z). This symbolic plan was realised to the full extent. Numerically, war is encoded in the most minute architectural details, sometimes to millimetre: the main dome, which is designed in the shape of a helmet, has a 2.43 m diameter corresponding to the time when Germany’s capitulation act was signed at 22:43; the 14.18 m smaller dome symbolises the 1,418 days of the ‘Great Patriotic War’; the belfry’s height of 75 m references the 75-year anniversary of the end of the war; the mandorla’s side of 11694 mm matches the number of the war’s participants who received the title of Hero of the Soviet Union, etc. In terms of Christian iconography, each of the four chapels is dedicated to a patron-saint of one of the four branches of Russia’s Armed Forces. Notably, the cathedral holds an icon of Christ with a sword – a rare, distinctly Orthodox motif with the weapon symbolising combat, contrasting with the Catholic tradition where it is sometimes featured as a symbol of eschatological judgement and never of an active fight. The very steps leading to the building are made using German hardware captured during the Second World War. As Shoigu commented, “We believe that when we climb up the steps of the cathedral, we are treading upon the weapons of a vanquished enemy” (as cited in Griffin, 2023, p. 80).

This declaration could not serve better to illustrate one of this thesis’s main arguments: the negative self-imagination through enmity paves the way for the positive identity, largely encapsulated in Russian Orthodoxy. As Schmitt plainly stated, “Tell me who your enemy is and I will tell you who you are” (as cited in Lewis, 2020, p. 102). The combativity discourse, apart from semiotically occupying the building’s measurements, starts from its name: the cathedral is also known as the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ. Resurrection is the exemplary miracle (the suspension of death, the most absolute of natural laws) and the miracle is exactly the theological category Schmitt secularises in his political theory: “the exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology” (Schmitt, 2005, p. 36). In this case, like God’s interruption of the natural order that suspends the laws of nature, the sovereign suspends the legal and, ironically, normal religious order: the whole architectural structure is about circumventing the “Thou shalt not kill” commandment by presenting killing in war not as a transgression but as a sacred moral and

legal obligation. The soldier who kills, or at least is willing to die, is drawn into a Christomorphic logic. In the Russian Orthodox Church's theology, such death can be, according to nineteenth-century theologian Ioann Vostorgov, a "second baptism, washing away all previous sins" (as cited in Suslov, 2025, p. 14). Killing in war can thus "acquire profound religious significance, likened to Jesus Christ's ultimate sacrifice for humanity" (Suslov, 2025, p. 2). In the discussed cathedral, where the icon of sworded Jesus shares space with multiple mosaics depicting Soviet and Russian soldiers, this affinity is institutionalised: the exception of waging a war becomes a norm of salvation.

Lefebvre (2013) captures this architectural logic sharply: "To the degree that there are traces of violence and death, negativity and aggressiveness in social practice, the monumental work erases them and replaces them with a tranquil power and certitude which can encompass violence and terror" (p. 222). The normalisation of enmity and "the combative order of the state" organically hidden within this ecclesiastical structure are truly a societal practice: the entrance to the cathedral (itself holding up to 6000 visitors) and the surrounding park themed around the 'Great Patriotic War' is free, with about 1.5 million people visiting yearly. In this way, the cathedral materialises a permanent war-temporality: its entire symbolic programme keeps the moment of existential peril and mobilised enmity ever-present, so that the stable situation is always already framed as fragile and conditionally granted. The Cathedral of the Armed Forces thus expresses what Schmitt sees as essential for all political order: the quasi-theological power of the sovereign, the presence of an enemy, as well as the public making-present of the two elements.

Conclusion

The thesis has shown that contemporary Russian politics is best understood as a Schmittian politics of sovereignty in which the friend-enemy distinction is not only structurally central but is actively sustained through aesthetic practices that shape how power is embodied, narrated, and spatially inscribed. The first part of the argument established that Schmitt's conceptual apparatus (the political, sovereignty, the state of exception) carries an irreducible aesthetic dimension. These concepts do not operate through rational or legal mechanisms alone; they require embodiment, narration, and public form in order to become politically effective. Consequently, (personified) representation, rhetoric, and other modes of aestheticisation have been proved to be the conditions under which Schmitt's categories can actually function.

The second part of the argument demonstrated that Russian politics is indeed organised along these lines. The 1990s served as a condition of perceived chaos, which enabled a founding myth of the subsequent sovereign power as establishing order. The consolidation around Putin functioned not only as an administrative recentralisation but as an aesthetic refoundation: the continuity of the body politic in the body of a single sovereign figure whose presence came to stand for national existence itself. Major speeches, from Munich in 2007 to the declaration of February 2022, were shown to operate as Schmittian exceptional moments, rhetorically collapsing the range of political possibilities into a single, historically inevitable decision while monopolising the language of threat and self-defence. Decree no. 809 extended this logic into the domestic legal domain, constructing a deliberately vague framework of "traditional values" that renders any development permanently available for recodification as existential danger. The Cathedral of the Armed Forces materialised the same structure in monumental form, fusing the Orthodox political theology with sovereign power, based on the staging of enmity.

Together, these cases confirm that contemporary Russia goes beyond invoking Schmittian categories rhetorically by enacting them through concrete aesthetic mechanisms. The state's coherence rests on sustaining a negative collective identity through enmity, while projecting a positive one through the language of sacred mission and sacrificial continuity. This configuration accounts both for the internal normalisation of emergency rule and for the external willingness to wage aggressive war: in each instance, the political community is summoned to affirm its unity against a threat it has itself helped to stage.

The thesis has also addressed two gaps in the existing scholarship. Schmitt's cultural and aesthetic writings have been shown to be indispensable rather than marginal, since they illuminate the representational mechanics without which his legal and political concepts would remain inoperative. Accordingly, analyses of Russia that draw on Schmitt while setting aside the aesthetic dimension miss the layer at which the friend-enemy distinction is made visible and convincing. The argument advanced here is not confined to the Russian case: wherever a politics of sovereignty is articulated in Schmittian terms, close attention to its aesthetic structures is necessary to understand how such a politics secures its hold.

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Abstract

This thesis examines contemporary Russian politics through the framework of Carl Schmitt's political theory, arguing that the friend-enemy distinction structures Russian sovereign power not only conceptually but through concrete aesthetic practices. It contends that Schmitt's core concepts (sovereignty, the state of exception, and the political) are inseparable from an aesthetic dimension: they require public embodiment, rhetorical staging, and symbolic form in order to become politically operative. This constitutive role of the aesthetic has been largely neglected in existing Schmittian analyses of Russia, and the thesis addresses the gap directly.

Applying this expanded framework to the Russian case, the thesis analyses three sites of aestheticised sovereignty: the mythologisation of Putin's sovereign body as the visible embodiment of political unity; the rhetorical crystallisation of the friend-enemy line in key speeches and legislative instruments, most notably Decree no. 809 on "traditional values"; and the condensation of political theology in the Cathedral of the Armed Forces. Together, these cases demonstrate that the Russian state does not merely invoke Schmittian categories but enacts them, sustaining a permanent state of exception and legitimising wars of aggression through the staged production of existential enmity.

Annotation

This thesis argues that contemporary Russian politics is structured around Carl Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction and sustained through aesthetic practices. It demonstrates that Schmitt's core categories require public embodiment and rhetorical staging to become politically operative, before applying this framework to three case studies: the mythologisation of Putin's sovereign body, the crystallisation of the friend-enemy line in speech and legislation, and the Cathedral of the Armed Forces as monumentalised political theology. Russia's permanent state of emergency and its wars of aggression are shown to be structurally necessary to a regime whose legitimacy depends on the continuous aesthetic production of existential enmity.

Keywords: Carl Schmitt, sovereignty, aestheticisation of politics, state of exception, political theology, contemporary Russia, Vladimir Putin.

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