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Esoterics See Resurgence in Russia Amid War, Pandemic

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Petr Sidorov / unsplash

How long will Russia's war in Ukraine last? Will Kyiv regain its territories lost to Moscow under President Volodymyr Zelensky's leadership? What will trigger the end of Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko's rule?

Inquiring minds can find the answers to all these questions and more on Russian YouTube, where self-described "tarologists" give readings several times a day.

In one recent video with over 25,000 views, tarot reader AliSA assured her audience that "Russia will be victorious" in a session about the outcome of the war with Ukraine.

The conflict will end in January, she predicted, as she dealt tarot cards on a desk decorated with silver boxes, an hourglass and a container marked "divine doors."

A boom in such content is just one part of a resurgence in esotericism — a term loosely

encompassing occult and spiritual practices — that is taking place across Russia as war, economic crisis and the coronavirus pandemic uproot daily life.

Yelena Alexeeva, a tarologist and astrologist from the central Russian city of Yekaterinburg said she has observed people being increasingly drawn to alternative sources of information since the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

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"The level of chaos has increased. And not just in Russia, but in the world in general," said Alexeeva, who recently moved to the Armenian mountain resort of Dilijan with her boyfriend.

"When you can't rely on the familiar, you look for support everywhere."

But the unpredictability also means predictions are harder to make, according to Alexeeva.

"The problem is that because of the increased chaos, possibilities are also mixed up. So fortune-telling for the future, for example, becomes very ephemeral," she told The Moscow Times in an exchange of messages on Telegram.

Those practicing tarot reading, numerology, astrology and other such occult pastimes boast hundreds of thousands of followers on social media sites, where they offer predictions on everything from news stories to their followers' financial and romantic futures.

Videos published by tarot blogger AliSA, who joined YouTube in 2018, have been viewed almost 12 million times.

The popularity of spirituality and mysticism in Russia has a long history, but the economic collapse and societal chaos that accompanied the end of the Soviet Union cratered faith in government institutions as well as conventional science and medicine — leading to a boom in interest in the occult, esotericism and pseudoscience.

Self-styled psychic healers like Anatoly Kashpirovsky and Allan Chumak attracted huge audiences with hypnotic "teleséances" in the 1990s that claimed to cure viewers' ailments.

As the coronavirus pandemic swept across Russia, some of the popularity enjoyed by esoterics in the 1990s appeared to return.

Sales of books about fortune-telling, spiritual practices, mindfulness and positive thinking in Russia increased 53% last year, according to data from publishing giant Eksmo-AST. And demand for tarot cards on Russian online marketplace Wildberries rose 486% in the same period, business daily Kommersant reported in February.

Not only did Kashpirovsky come back to the airwaves during the pandemic, but cults gained popularity and new options for indulging in esoterics appeared on the market.

"Our coffee house has become very popular among Moscow residents," said a representative for the Coffee & Tarot shop, which opened in the Russian capital last year and offers tarot readings and fortune-telling services in a coffee shop setting.

“Everyone needed faith and positive emotions. And we were able to create a place where people can get help and support and believe in magic,” the representative told The Moscow Times in a message exchange on Instagram.

With the start of the war with Ukraine on Feb. 24, the outlook for many Russians appears to be wracked with uncertainty once again.

“It's obvious — [esotericism is] a departure from a reality in which everything is terrible. This is therapy, and autogenic training, and a denial of responsibility for reality,” said Andrei Kolesnikov, a Russia expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

In Russia, a belief in superstition often appears to overlap with religiosity.

A total of 71% of Russians follow the Orthodox Christian faith — but only about half of respondents consider themselves religious people, according to a May survey by independent pollster Levada Center.

”The share of Russians who believe in the ‘kingdom of heaven’ and ‘evil eye and corruption’ are approximately the same,” the pollster wrote in an accompanying report.

Nevertheless, some believe that a greater demand for esoterics in recent years is linked to changes in supply rather than greater uncertainty.

“This is more of a market, economic, marketing phenomenon,” Lida Pavlova, the owner of Moscow’s Modern Magic shop, told The Moscow Times in a message.

“People have always needed mystical ways of communicating with the world and themselves,” she said.

Instead, Pavlova is worried about whether international sanctions imposed as a result of the invasion of Ukraine will disrupt the supply of high-quality esoteric goods to Russia.

“By the early 2020s, we were finally provided with a variety of quality products. What will happen in Russia with this market diversity now... is not clear,” she said.

But at the Coffee & Tarot shop in downtown Moscow, there are no such fears.

“Tourists come to us from different cities, and people from other countries also order online consultations from our tarologists,” the representative of Coffee and Tarot said.

And the cafe is apparently seeking to expand its know-how across Russia.

“These are tools that help you achieve your goals, make the right decisions and choose your own path,” said the representative. “We’re now ready to... open franchises in other cities.”

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