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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mediums, Media, and Mediated “Post”-Truth: Baba Vanga in the Russian Imagination

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Abstract

It is impossible to understand the phenomenon of disinformation without unraveling the more perplexing notion of “truth.” This article explores how a Bulgarian psychic or prophet named Baba Vanga (1911–1996) became one of the most noteworthy mediums of “truth” in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Russian imagination. With Bulgarian-Russian transnational ties as context, we trace how belief in Baba Vanga’s abilities and prophecies was propagated by witnesses via word-of-mouth, newspaper articles, books, TV programming, and the internet. We periodize the ways Vanga secured a place in Russian “truth worlds,” drawing upon both science and religion or a conglomeration of both. We look deeper into the origins and more recent circulation of a purported Vanga prophecy from 1979: namely, that Russia would rise to be the ruler of the world. The dissemination of this message, we argue, is not a Russian state plot to bolster aspirations in Ukraine and its standoff with the West. Instead it has been transmitted in far more fragmented and mediated ways and even countered by the Russian Orthodox Church. A deeper pondering of these mediations of Baba Vanga can help us better understand what we call the “post”-truth world, in which truth is crafted by online “posts.” In contrast to the notion of “post-truth” that posits a dearth of truth, our concept of “post”-truth recognizes that truth is not just in unprecedented excess today but is built through a complex and participatory bricolage that uses science and religion to build shared realities as never before in history.

Keywords: Russia; Bulgaria; Baba Vanga; “post”-truth; science; religion; internet; Orthodoxy; communism; post-socialism

On 14 October 2022, Defense Intelligence of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine posted on its YouTube channel the audio of an intercepted phone call from a Russian soldier in Ukraine to his wife back in Russia.[1] The curated clip plays ominous music and then cuts to a conversation midstream that starts with the soldier arguing with his

[1]Defense Intelligence of Ukraine 2022. We want to thank Yuriy Loboda for bringing this post to our attention. For a tabloid post on this in English, see Sharman 2022.

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hysterical wife, who wants him to return home. He tries to console her, but also argues that they really need the money. On the verge of tears, his wife says, "F*k the salary"—she needs him to return home and not in a body bag like so many others. She then reveals the reason for her heightened concern: "According to Vanga's predictions, this will all continue until 2024!" Notably, the title of the post is the same phrase in Russian, rendered all in caps: "ПО ПРЕДСКАЗАНИЯМ ВАНГИ ЭТО ВСЁ ДО 2024 ГОДА БУДЕТ," indicating that this is the most important point of the conversation. In a "Russia, if you're listening" moment, Vanga—via the Russian wife—becomes a medium for the Ukrainian message: Go home, or you will not return alive! For the uninitiated, this post raises several questions such as, who is Vanga, and why does this woman seem so convinced of the *truth* of Vanga's "prediction"? More pointedly, why was the Ukrainian intelligence service compelled to use Vanga in such a post? That is, what is the meaning, resonance, or place of Vanga in the imagination of the Russian-speakers who are the presumed audience?

For most Russians and Ukrainians, Vanga needs no explanation. She was a blind Bulgarian psychic, medium, or prophet who became widely known for her paranormal abilities during her lifetime (1911–1996) and a media and internet sensation in the decades that followed. Baba ("Grandmother") Vanga came to be revered in her home country, but also well beyond it. According to a 2018 study by the Trend marketing and research center, 75 percent of Bulgarians believe in her "powers."[2] Beyond Bulgaria, similar surveys are lacking, but Baba Vanga (or just Vanga) has become a global internet phenomenon, as even a cursory Google search will reveal. She is particularly famous, however, in Russia and the Russophone world, where her posthumous presence has grown to extraordinary proportions in mainstream media and on the internet. As of March 2023, users on Yandex.ru, the most popular Russian-language search engine, were running searches for the combined search terms "Vanga" + "predictions" + "2023" more than seven hundred thousand times per month.[3] As a Russian colleague recently joked to one of the authors of this article, "Baba Vanga is the *only* Bulgarian that every Russian has heard of."[4] The same seems to be true of Ukrainians, and their encounters with Vanga are worthy of separate study but beyond this article's scope.

Instead, this article will trace the means by which so many Russians have come to know about Baba Vanga, and why many, though by no means all, *believe* in her? It will explore, periodize, and analyze how Vanga secured a place in the Russian imagination as one of the most noteworthy psychics or prophets of the modern era. Using memoirs, archival documents, tell-all books, documentaries, and online sources, we follow the trajectory of Russian contact with and interest in Vanga from the 1960s to the 2020s in the context of two political systems (communism[5] and capitalism), multiple forms of media, and the voices of witnesses, analysts,

[2]Нагласите на българите 2018. Another 14 percent of Bulgarians said they "didn't know," and only 11 percent said they did not believe.

[3]These searches are in Russian using the Cyrillic alphabet. 5 s—Impressions per Month," 5 Apr. 2023, https://wordstat.yandex.com/#!/?words=ванга. In comparison, "Кашпировский" [Kashpirovsky], one of the most famous Russian psychics, is searched around 150,000 times a month. "Yandex Keyword Statistics—Impressions per Month," 5 Apr. 2023, https://wordstat.yandex.com/#!/?words=Кашпировский.

[4]We thank Alexey Golubev for this useful offhand comment.

[5]The terms "communism" and "socialism" are used interchangeably throughout this paper to indicate the system, period, authorities, or other attributes of 1917–1991 for the USSR, and 1944–1989 for Bulgaria/

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influencers, intellectuals, politicians, scientists, Orthodox priests, and even Vanga's relatives. Specifically, we look at the origins and centrality of Vanga's purported predictions about the glorious future of Russia within the Russian-language media space, which have surged in the wake of the Russian invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. We are particularly interested in Baba Vanga's emergence as a voice of "truth"—witnessed, narrated, sought out, posted, and circulated by Russian speakers. Our concern is not whether Baba Vanga and her purported gifts and predictions were real or "true." Rather, we hope to contribute to a broader history of truth by exploring the complex and changing role of witnessing and verification, science and religion, media interpretation and mediation in the imagining of Baba Vanga as truth-maker. Most importantly, we look at how older media sources and forms on Vanga become transformed into a more chaotic and pliable "post"-truth on the internet, where Vanga not only lives on, but has become a potent avatar through which various actors circulate messages—political or mystical, hopeful or cataclysmic.

A small but rich body of academic work on Baba Vanga, produced mostly by Bulgarian scholars, explores her life and times and her relationship to Bulgarian state institutions and actors, especially Liudmila Zhivkova, the daughter of the late communist-era Bulgarian dictator Todor Zhivkov who ruled from 1954 to 1989.[6] But no scholarly work has offered in-depth analysis of Vanga's prominence in Russia, her place in Russian media over time, her relationship to the Russian Orthodox Church, or her complex afterlife on the internet.[7] Nor has any scholarship attempted to link the Bulgarian and Russian stories or to put them in the context of a history of truth that is attuned to changing forms of media, including the outsized impact of the internet. In terms of the latter, at least one author has posited a concerted Russian state online effort to direct or control the Vanga narrative.[8] This seems logical, given that Russian media have widely repeated Vanga's presumed predictions about the rise of Russia and the fall of the West. But even if ample media coverage of Vanga is clearly associated with Russian state-sponsored outlets, we are skeptical about the notion of a coordinated Russian state campaign to use Vanga to their advantage. In fact, Russian-language sources on Vanga are far from unitary or consistent, and she is openly impugned in online articles by the official Russian Orthodox Church. It may be impossible to untangle the kaleidoscope of motivations of the veritable army of Vanga-related media producers. What is clear is that Baba Vanga has become a convenient medium for a myriad of modern-day messengers and mediators, too, who filter, alter, or wholly invent predictions to conform to (or confirm) their beliefs or needs.

Belief and "Post"-Truth

Belief, we argue, is the bedrock of truth. Anthropologist Agustin Fuentes defines belief as "the ability to draw upon our social and cognitive resources, our histories and

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Eastern Europe. While the states of the region called themselves "socialist," they were also ruled by "communist" parties, and so both terms are used in scholarly parlance.

[6]See, for example, Valtchinova 2009; 2010; Ivanova 2017; and Iliev 2000.

[7]One notable exception, which does not deal with the internet and has a very different scope and conclusions, is Lesiv 2018.

[8]See, for example, ibid.

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experiences … to develop mental representations in order to see and feel and *know* something—an idea, a vision, a necessity, a possibility, a *truth*."[9] As Fuentes explores, the human capacity for "shared reality," evolutionarily, historically, and today, has largely hinged upon religious experience, broadly defined.[10] Belief in prophets, seers, and mediums has been central to systems of constructing "truth" for most of human history, whether tied to religion or "folk" practices. Global histories of truth recognize this fact, but they also generally posit that scientists have largely replaced prophets as truth makers in the modern world.[11] In contrast, numerous philosophers and historians of science have productively argued that science and religion have long been competitors, but they have also worked in mutually reinforcing dialogues in constructing truth worlds.[12] Science as a "shared reality," like religion, relies on *belief* in concepts or facts that most of us have not directly observed. In many respects, "Scientism" or the belief in science as the only true means of knowledge production, can be thought of as a kind of religion that is both context-specific and volatile.[13]

At the same time, essentially all religions in the modern era use science or scientific methods for reinforcing their own claims to truth, even when they refute the notion of science as the preeminent source of knowledge. So-called "esoteric" religions, like theosophy, have most directly integrated science into their worldview, often in contradictory ways. Theosophical thinkers have both attacked and appropriated science or "scientism," refuting the notion that modern science holds the key to explaining the universe, while advancing claims to a more enlightened (and complete) science that draws on sources of ancient (and spiritual) knowledge.[14] In the abstract, science and religion can be seen as cut from similar cloth, especially in terms of human efforts to construct "truth," whose very definition tends to be circular, self-referential, and subjective. For example, consider two of the definitions provided by the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*: "the quality or state of being true" and "a fact or belief that is accepted as true." Both definitions merely tell us that truth is "true." In practice, understanding truth requires a deeper look at process, rather than product. In both science and religion, truth relies on trust and belief in designated "prophets" (or notable scientists), whose pronouncements are necessarily mediated and interpreted by legions of witnesses, disciplines, and "priests." It is this meditation, which has changed so dramatically in the contemporary world, in which information circulates so rapidly, creating new and powerful "truth worlds" or fracturing old ones. Science and religion, in whatever form, are an intrinsic part of these various intersecting worlds that are not necessarily philosophically or otherwise consistent but are nevertheless powerful.[15]

As this article explores, the Vanga phenomenon is woven into numerous truth and "post"-truth worlds, within which believers creatively and selectively draw upon religious and scientific evidence and logics to engineer powerful and often hybrid architectures of truth. While media and sources from the past provide scaffolding, the internet has created a kind of DIY information salad bar, in which figures like Vanga

[9]Fuentes 2019, ix (our emphases).
[10]Ibid., 192.
[11]Baggini 2018; Fernández-Armesto 2001.
[12]See, for example, Barbour 2000.
[13]On scientism, see Peels 2023. On science in context, see Kuhn 1996; and Barbour 1976.
[14]See, for example, Hammer 2004.
[15]For the concept of truth worlds, see Fernández-Armesto 2001.

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provide a flexible (and malleable) medium for "post"-truth to flourish. Here the use of quotes around the term "post" is deliberate. In the flood of recent writings on "post-truth," the "post" by definition means *after* truth. To be sure, the term has provoked a series of debates on how (or even if) we live in a world in which truth has been fragmented or eclipsed by partisanship, ideology, and/or emotion.[16] Given the role of new communication technologies in this perceived (and real) shift in the ways truth is produced and consumed, we would like to pose a new way of thinking about "post" truth. Namely, for us "post" means not *after*, but rather to *post* on social media, that is, to share ideas, materials, thoughts, or "truths" in an open forum for the world to see and respond. Significantly, posts can be shared not just through our own attributed identity, or voice, but through the voices of avatars or assumed identities. This kind of "post"-truth certainly includes the circulation of lies, in the form of dis- or misinformation, but even that can be understood as truth by those who crowdsource and circulate it. Baba Vanga has arguably become not just a *subject* for this kind of "post"-truth—that is, information *about* her; but also, a conduit or *medium* for "post"-truth—that is, information purportedly *from* her. Perhaps a deeper pondering of Vanga can help us reimagine our "post"-truth world, in which there is not a dearth but rather a surplus of truth. In the "post"-truth world, truth is not just in excess; it is built through a complex and participatory bricolage of science and religion that creates new possibilities for "shared realities" as never before in history, however problematic this might sometimes be.

Vanga's power and appeal for Russians is not limited to her role as a medium for the dead, angels, and aliens(!) that she displayed during her long life. Instead, it lies in the fact that she is a *flexible* medium, whose name and voice can be deployed for various purposes. If in the YouTube clip Vanga becomes useful to Ukraine as an "authority" or font of "truth" who can send a message to Russian soldiers, elsewhere she has served the convenient purpose of projecting Russia's desired image as a potent and resurrected world power. In fact, purported Vanga predictions scattered across the web in numerous languages proclaim that "Russia will rise" and "Vladimir will be lord of the world." *Which* Vladimir is unclear, since the name in Slavic languages means "ruler of the world." However, in the pro-Russian narratives invoking Vanga, this is presumed to be Putin. In more cases than not, Vanga's "truth" is convenient for Putin's regime, even if the form and source vary and are not wholly acceptable to the pro-regime Orthodox Church. At the same time, the varied purveyors of Vanga's messages on the internet are also out of Putin's control. Internet Vanga is crowdsourced, reimagined, mediated, and unpredictable—perhaps emblematic of "truth" in general: capricious and not always "true." Widespread belief in Vanga—in Russia, as in Bulgaria and beyond—has made her a potent source of malleable but *believable* "post"-truth, and thus a potential mouthpiece for mis- or disinformation.

Vanga and Bulgarian-Soviet Encounters

Needless to say, Vanga's Balkan story is exceedingly relevant to the Russian encounter with her. Bulgarian and Russian history, cultures, and "truth worlds" are connected in complex and asymmetrical ways that provide critical context for understanding the Baba Vanga phenomenon. Vanga's personal history forms a

[16]See, for example, McIntyre 2018. For a summary of debates through 2020, see Brahms 2020.

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colorful and even mythological backdrop that was often later deployed in media representations.

Vanga (short for Vangelia) was born in 1911 in Strumica, which is now in North Macedonia but at the time was in the Ottoman Empire. After 1918 she resided in the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia). Her "gifts" first emerged when, as a teenager in Yugoslavia, she was said to have been thrown into a field by a tornado. As a result, her sand-encrusted eyes became infected, and she was left blind.[17] At this point she purportedly began to inexplicably "see" or know things, mostly mundane but at times more momentous, such as foretelling the onset of World War II. Her name began to spread beyond her local village, under Bulgarian occupation during the war, as she located lost soldiers, predicted life and death, and healed the sick. In 1942 Vanga moved about 50 kilometers east into rural Southwest Bulgaria, where she remained for the rest of her life, first in the town of Petrich and later in the village of Rupite.

Vanga's fame spread within and well beyond Bulgaria under communism (1944–1989). Under Soviet influence, the Bulgarian state became the purveyor and arbiter of knowledge, and hence "truth," as the state imposed a monopoly on knowledge production, and religion was dubbed "false consciousness." Under socialism, science was meant to replace religion—that is, its patriarchs, priests, prophets, and "superstition" would give way to a materialist "scientific" worldview. This "transition," however, was more aspiration than reality, fraught with ambiguity and challenges. First, not all religions were outlawed. Instead, organized religions such as Orthodoxy, Islam, and Catholicism were coopted for state purposes and belief in religion persisted, particularly among the older generations. Throughout the period, esoteric thought and movements existed underground, and they grew more robust in the "thaw" of post-Stalinist intellectual and cultural life. It was in this environment that a broad interest in Baba Vanga surged and her stream of visitors increased. This concerned Bulgarian state officials, in part because she represented an alternative source of authority or "truth," but also because her following seemed to indicate the continued sway of religion or "superstition." Scientism, in a Marxist materialist form, clearly reigned in Bulgaria and the Soviet Union in this period, but in some respects this allowed free reign to scientists to pursue the unexplained, even when it pushed the boundaries of science into the realm of the paranormal.

Indeed, by the 1960s, Bulgarian psychologist Georgi Lozanov became interested in studying Baba Vanga, who was rapidly becoming a local and regional phenomenon. In 1966 Lozanov founded a state-supported "scientific group" in "Suggestology" to study Bulgarian psychics and the power of suggestion.[18] The group was upgraded to an "institute" in 1971, provided with ample staff and offices in downtown Sofia, as well as an office in Rupite, where Vanga lived. The Institute of Suggestology raised Vanga's visibility and legitimacy as a phenomenon worthy of scientific study, and a growing number of domestic and foreign visitors poured in, along with thousands of letters asking for information, help, and appointments with the famous seer. In addition to socialist Yugoslavia, word traveled fast within Bulgaria itself and select

[17]Stoianova 1997, 42.

[18]Bulgarian Central State Archive, Sofia, f. 904, op. 1, a.e. 1, p. 2.

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parts of the Eastern bloc, and Vanga's admirers grew exponentially.[19] Most visitors simply showed up in Rupite, then waited for days, even weeks, outside her door in sometimes unruly crowds. Given this situation, the local municipality began to attempt some semblance of crowd control, putting Vanga on the payroll and charging an admission fee to her humble home, where she received between fifty and a hundred visitors daily. According to an institute document, in one nine-month period in 1968, the local municipality collected 44,560 lev, charging 10 lev for Bulgarians and 30 lev for foreigners.[20]

Under socialism, "scientific exchange" began to bring the Vanga phenomenon into view in both the Soviet Union and the West. The unfolding and metastasizing of Soviet/Russian interest in, knowledge about, and belief in Vanga was initially connected to exchanges between Bulgarian and Soviet scientists who were employed by their respective states to study paranormal phenomena. This might seem curious, given the fact that these states were technically atheistic and grounded in Marxist ideology, with its wholesale rejection of "superstition" in favor of science. But state-supported study of psychics and other paranormal phenomena had been carried out in the Soviet Union since the 1920s and continued clandestinely in the 1930s–1950s, increasing in scale, scope, and visibility by the 1960s.[21] In fact, Bulgarian scientists were undoubtedly emboldened by the Soviet example, which gave them the green light to pursue such research, which they shared with their Soviet counterparts. The work of American and Canadian journalists Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder constitutes an intriguing source on such contacts. Having been invited to Moscow for the First Moscow Conference on Parapsychology in May 1968, Ostrander and Schroeder were privy to the mushrooming Soviet work on ESP, telekinesis, and other para-phenomena. In their 1970 book *Psychic Discoveries behind the Iron Curtain*, they describe this conference in detail and report the presence there of a large Bulgarian delegation of parapsychologists—the largest foreign group in attendance.[22] Although we lack more information on papers presented and other details of said conference, Vanga was the jewel in the Bulgarian parapsychology crown, and she was most likely an important topic of discussion, even if documentation and study of her abilities was still in its infancy. Ostrander and Schroeder also reported on the lively setting at the institute in Sofia, in "a country wise enough to appreciate her," where people "talk of things like psychic ability, naturally, and with more unconscious ease that we've met anywhere else."[23] If this was the case, it was not reflected in Bulgarian media at the time. There were few publications about or media representations of Vanga behind the Iron Curtain, and those that existed were generally negative or duly ambiguous.[24] In contrast, *Psychic Discoveries* was a best-seller in the West, where it was translated into numerous languages (including French, Spanish, and German), and as such it played an important role in spreading Vanga's name beyond Bulgaria. Not surprisingly, the book was not published in Russian or Bulgarian, but a translation into Bulgarian can

[19]Tosheva 2006, 123.

[20]Bulgarian Central State Archive, Sofia, f. 904, op. 1, a.e. 15, p. 8.

[21]See, for example, Kernbach 2022; Maire and LaMothe 2009; and Lemon 2017.

[22]Ostrander and Schroeder 1971, 221.

[23]Ibid., 225.

[24]The best-known article that came out in Bulgarian, which is skeptical but not totally dismissive, is Khristov 1966.

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be found in the archives of the Institute of Suggestology. Presumably a Russian translation was also made available to select Soviet scientists at the time, but it is unclear which, if any, Soviet scientists made the trip to Bulgaria to see Vanga for themselves.

Nevertheless, Soviet scientists had a range of other opportunities for exposure to Vanga. Many were apparently audience to a 1976 Bulgarian documentary film about her. Aptly named *Феномен* (Phenomenon) and directed by Bulgarian anthropologist Nevena Tosheva, it had only one showing on Bulgarian national TV and two screenings in Sofia, one of which was at the Soviet Cultural Center. But as Tosheva noted in her later tell-all book *Ванга автентично* (Authentic Vanga), she also screened the film in Moscow, where it "played from morning to night for 4–5 days," eliciting a huge amount of interest in Vanga among Soviet viewers.[25] Interestingly, *Феномен* is rife with ambiguity about Vanga, neither promoting nor disputing her. It begins with a montage of unruly crowds waiting to see her, and then provides an unscripted patchwork of her psychic readings and interactions with ordinary visitors and a prominent Bulgarian psychiatrist, Nikola Shipovenski, who proposed and supported the making of the film. The last third of the film shifts to an apparently unscripted discussion by mostly skeptical Bulgarian scientists who call the Vanga phenomenon a "mass psychosis." But the film ends with a short scene of Georgi Lozanov sitting at his desk surrounded by documents, proclaiming that 70 percent of Vanga's prophecies had come true according to his institute's carefully gathered data. In *Authentic Vanga*, Tosheva relates her concerns about making the film, which she knew could have "ideologically questionable context."[26] But she pressed on, as the project, after all, was being funded by the state.[27] Scientific study of Vanga and other psi phenomena behind the Iron Curtain was meant to explain (and debunk) it's "paranormal" properties, and hence decouple it from "superstition." In reality, however, it conferred a kind of legitimacy to Vanga—even amid continued skepticism—and created a lasting point of reference to "scientific" studies and "proof" of the veracity of her predictions.

If "scientific exchange" justified the spread of information on Vanga to the Soviet Union, she also began to draw interest from other select Soviet intellectuals who were more inclined towards the esoteric. The activities and relationships of Liudmila Zhivkova are critical to understanding what emerged as a backchannel for Vanga access. This was all the more necessary as the waiting crowds and "reservations" made it difficult to get an audience with Vanga. Zhivkova, who became the de facto Bulgarian minister of culture, with vast resources at her disposal from 1973 until her untimely death in 1981, played a role in the continued funding of the Institute for Suggestology—which was under siege from skeptical mainstream Bulgarian scientists. In the course of the 1970s, Zhivkova rocked the official boat with her grandiose state-funded projects, her bizarre speeches, her unusual habits of dress (she often wore a kind of turban), and her alternative spirituality. For spiritual inspiration she looked to India, but also to pre-communist Russian thinkers who tapped into Eastern philosophies, including the émigré mystic, medium, and self-proclaimed psychic Madame Helena Blavatsky (1831–1892), who co-founded the influential

[25]Tosheva 2006, 7.
[26]Ibid., 9.
[27]Tosheva 1976.

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Theosophical Society in New York in 1875. She was an even more avid follower of Agni Yoga and the neo-theosophical teachings of Helena and Nikolai Roerich (1879–1955 and 1874–1947, respectively).[28] In a sense, Zhivkova contributed to the lack of clarity, if not a healthy dose of chaos, regarding the parameters of science, religion, and Marxism itself in late socialist Bulgaria.

This was in line with what was happening within the Soviet Union in the same period, where there was an even longer and more robust history of attraction to the esoteric ideas of Blavatsky, Roerich, and the occult. "Spiritualism" and contacting the dead through mediums had been all the rage in late nineteenth-century Russia, echoing similar developments in the UK, Germany, and the United States. In many cases these movements were connected, and in some cases even defined, by global outlooks and transnational ties, linked through the theosophical movement.[29] Significantly, this movement, and the nineteenth-century interest in mediums, were distinguished by their attempts to connect or explain the spiritual via science, or to create new kinds of "truth" from a patchwork of spiritual and scientific claims. As scientists began to study psychic and other paranormal phenomena in the late nineteenth century, theosophists attempted to integrate science into their open-ended and transcendent religious practices.[30] In the Soviet Union, science also provided a sense of grounding for intellectuals who were attracted to theosophical or other alternative spiritual currents. If some of the members of such circles took ideas about the "Russian soul" in more nationalistic—even, arguably, fascist—directions, others sought to tap into the universal and cosmological, which was more in line with Blavatsky's and Roerich's ideas and thought.[31]

Zhivkova became particularly close to a number of Soviet cultural figures with shared interests in these spiritual-scientific realms. Most important in this regard was Valentin M. Sidorov, a well-known Soviet/Russian writer, poet, and intellectual, whose early work was banned in the Soviet Union as "revisionist" and ideologically problematic. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, he was a prolific author who was openly inspired by the esoteric ideas, art, and poetry of Nikolai Roerich. In fact, he published a collection of Roerich's poetry and followed his tracks through the Himalayas. He also came to know Zhivkova quite well and journeyed to Bulgaria several times between 1979 and her death, meeting not only with Zhivkova in her private residence, but also with Baba Vanga—who was frequently brought to Sofia to give private sessions for top Communist Party elites.[32]

Sidorov chronicled the trips in his book *Людмила и Ванга* (Liudmila and Vanga), which was published in Bulgarian translation in 1995, just a year before Vanga's death. This was, of course, after the collapse of communism in Bulgaria (1989) and then the Soviet Union (1991). The dramatic political change offered Sidorov an opportunity to frankly discuss his experience with the two women, which had clearly made a huge impression on him. In *Людмила и Ванга*, Sidorov starts his discussion of Vanga by underscoring his initial skepticism about the abilities of psychics and their supposed access to "astral information." Upon meeting Vanga, however, he quickly jettisoned all incredulity, declaring his belief in Vanga: "And [now] only one

[28]For more on Zhivkova, see Atanasova 2004.
[29]See, for example, Lavoie 2012.
[30]Rawson 1978; Carlson 1993.
[31]See Laruelle 2015.
[32]Ivanova 2022.

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psychic … did not cast for me the slightest shadow of a doubt. This is a Bulgarian clairvoyant who is called 'Baba Vanga' in her homeland and throughout the world."[33] Sidorov describes his meetings with Liudmila and Vanga as intimate: "We talked with Baba Vanga as if in a kind of conspiracy, completely isolated from the outside world. Nobody interfered with our conversation. Nothing limited our time." He listened in wonder as Vanga mysteriously divulged every detail about him, his family, his hometown, and his life, as well as world events such as the Russian election and death of Indira Gandhi.[34] Vanga visits became entwined with Sidorov's growing collaborations with Zhivkova, which in part revolved around their mutual admiration for the works and ideas of the late Nikolai Roerich, and personal interactions with Roerich's son Svetoslav (1904–1993). But Sidorov was also a fan of Zhivkova's ideas, which he had published in Russian in the magazine *Огонёк* (Spark) and later in a book from the same publishing house. The book, entitled *По законам красоты* (By the laws of beauty), appeared in the Soviet Union in 1979 and reportedly a hundred thousand copies sold out instantly.[35] Through Zhivkova's writings and people's exposure to Vanga by various other means, at least some Russians in esoteric (or parapsychology) circles had a growing sense of Baba Vanga, if not Bulgaria, as a potential spiritual (or cosmic) headwater.

It goes without saying, however, that the Bulgarian-Russian cultural and political relationship was always asymmetrical. Russia's "liberation" of Bulgaria from the Ottoman Turks in 1878 and its championing of the Bulgarian cause in European circles had cemented its place as "Diado Ivan" (Uncle Ivan), political savior and Orthodox Christian spiritual guide. Bulgarian Russophilia, albeit in competition with Western-looking Russophobia, has been a powerful and consistent force in the popular imagination for at least 150 years. For Zhivkova and Sidorov, Slavic (and broadly defined "spiritual" and political) brotherhood was part and parcel of their connection. Significantly, Sidorov's book counters any claims that Zhivkova was looking to break with the Soviet Union, or even with Marxism. Rather, as he notes, "For Liudmila, Roerich's Russia was a symbol of faith, which she would not renounce under any circumstances."[36] In line with *Psychic Discoveries*, Sidorov also states with interest, "In Bulgaria a paradoxical situation has arisen: here it has become profitable to be considered an occultist, to flaunt, on occasion, a quote not from Marx and Lenin, but from Roerich and Blavatsky."[37] The foregrounding of Russian mystic figures is telling, perhaps tied to the assumption that it was okay to espouse esoteric ideas as long as they came from Russians—even ideologically problematic ones. But to be clear, neither Sidorov nor Liudmila ever lost faith in Marx or Lenin; if anything, they attempted to harmonize esoteric ideas with "scientific" Marxist thought. In fact, after the collapse of communism, Sidorov founded the Novaia Strana (New Country) movement, which was based on a synthesis of peace, international harmony, and Russian spiritual leadership, with a reverence for Lenin and Soviet ideals.[38] Like Zhivkova, Sidorov openly revered Lenin, on whom he conferred the title of

[33]Sidorov 1998, 7.
[34]Ibid., 25–32.
[35]Ibid., 13.
[36]Ibid., 18.
[37]Ibid., 20.
[38]See Sidorov and Strana 2013.

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"Mahatma" in a speech at a conference on "Lenin and Roerich" in 1994, several years after communism's collapse.[39]

While Sidorov was certainly not the only Russian to visit Bulgaria and Vanga under communism, he became a critical early witness and even apostle for her power and "truth." His words would later be amplified through a wide variety of media. Perhaps more importantly, his Vanga encounters were of a *spiritual* nature which resonated with the post-socialist milieu in which it was published. In large part as a result of Sidorov's writings, Vanga became a potential medium for amplifying Russian authority both within and outside of Russia. In fact, the most important and later widely cited passage of Sidorov's book is the following direct quote from Baba Vanga: "Everything will melt like ice; only one thing will remain untouched—the glory of Vladimir (meaning the prince who once baptized Rus'), the glory of Russia. Too many sacrifices have been made.… No one can stop Russia now. Everything will be swept away from its path, and it will not only be preserved, but will also become the ruler [or lord] of the whole world."[40]

As Sidorov interprets, "Of course, for Vanga the word 'lord' had a spiritual, not a political, meaning." Vanga, he argued, had predicted that "Old Russia would return," but not the tsarist order. Rather, the new Russia would represent a return to the "innermost spiritual beginning.… As an eagle, Russia will soar above the earth—the literal words of Baba Vanga—and overshadow the whole earth with its wings. Its spiritual primacy will be recognized by everyone, including America." Finally, as he relates, Vanga predicted that the process would not be immediate, but rather would happen in sixty years, preceded by the rapprochement of Russia, China, and India.[41] Vanga's words, filtered through Sidorov, were sufficiently vague as to be open to future misinterpretation. Sidorov's book would become one of the many key Russian touch points to Vanga, an important direct witness to not just predictions of the mundane order, but of "prophecy" of a new world order.

Vanga on the Russian Market

Even before the collapse of communism opened the floodgates to publications as well as other media on Vanga in Russia, cracks had appeared in the edifice of state censorship. While the post-Stalinist thaw had eased censorship on taboo topics, not until the last years of Soviet rule and Mikhail Gorbachev's famous *glasnost* (openness) did one find articles on Vanga. As communism was being dismantled in a slow domino effect across Eastern Europe in 1989, an article appeared on Baba Vanga in the Soviet journal *Наука и религия* (Science and religion). This self-avowed "atheistic" journal devoted to the popularization of science and the debunking of "superstition" also offered access to texts, historical information, and semi-academic studies of religion, broadly defined. The fall 1989 issue includes an article written by Elena Ivanovna Andreeva, who had traveled to Bulgaria in 1963 on a work trip as an engineer for Soviet TV. The article was a follow-up to Andreeva's recent appearance in Moscow's Sokolniki Park for an "Evening of Mysteries of the 20th Century." Andreeva positioned herself as a witness to the powerful predictions of Baba Vanga,

[39]The speech was later published in Sidorov's book *Рерих и Ленин* (2013).

[40]Sidorov 1998, 40.

[41]Ibid., 41.

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which she had seen firsthand before Vanga was known to others in Russia. She proclaims in the article that "many now speak and write about Vanga" and "it is good that we have lived to see the day that this phenomenon has come to interest our scholars."[42] Even more remarkable than the article were the "mountains of letters" that it generated from Soviet citizens desperate to meet Vanga or to have their personal problems and queries relayed to her. In a 1990 article, Andreeva addresses readers en masse, suggesting that Vanga might be too old now to receive visitors, but that they should try and write her directly, addressing letters simply to Bulgaria, Petrich, and marking them "For Baba Vanga."[43] This was a harbinger of what was to come, that is, a surge of interest in Vanga along with a wide range of literature and other media on the paranormal, spiritual, or "esoteric" in Bulgaria and Russia, and across the post-socialist space. A slowly gathering avalanche of witnesses —or apostles—came forward to divulge the "truth" about Vanga in tell-all books in Bulgarian, Russian, and other languages. It was in this period that the need to foreground "scientific" interest in Vanga's "psychic" predictions gave way to openly spiritual reverence for her presumed powers.

The first and most prolific of these witnesses was the Bulgarian Krasimira Stoianova, Baba Vanga's niece, whose long-term intimacy and interaction with Vanga afforded her a privileged role as a source of inside information. As early as 1989, Stoianova published a tell-all book in Bulgarian entitled simply *Ванга* (Vanga) that detailed her seemingly miraculous power to predict.[44] By 1990–1991, multiple Russian-language editions of the book were available in the Soviet Union, with the text having first appeared in serial form in the journal *Дружба* (Friendship). In the Russian-language editions, the book was published with more explanatory titles, such as *Болгарская пророчица Ванга* (The Bulgarian prophet Vanga) and *Ванга, исповедь слепой ясновидящей* (Vanga, confessions of a blind clairvoyant). Stoianova would go on to write numerous books about Vanga and became the most cited authoritative source on her. Not only did she draw upon her own experience, but she had a direct line of contact to another key source, her mother, Liubka (Vanga's sister). It was Stoianova's books, in Bulgarian and Russian translation, that laid out many of the threads connecting Vanga with a number of prominent Russians, including the actor Viacheslav Tikhonov, the writer Leonid Leonov, and Svetoslav Roerich. Valentin Sidorov's name surfaces only in Stoianova's *The Truth about Vanga* (1997)—published just after Baba Vanga's death—in which Stoianova divulges his famous conversations with Vanga about Russia. Notably, this was one year after Sidorov's own book was published in Bulgarian, and his book likely served as her source of information on this point.

By the mid-to-late 1990s, however, Stoianova's books in translation faced stiff competition from a wide range of books on Baba Vanga by Bulgarian and Russian authors. In terms of Bulgarian authors, Zheni Kostadinova's 1998 *Ванга* [Vanga], in Russian translation, lays out all of Baba Vanga's predictions about Russia in a special "On Russia" subsection that is dominated by citations of Sidorov's books.[45] As Kostadinova notes, there were more than seven hundred Bulgarian-language books about Vanga as of 1998, but only a select few were in Russian translation.

[42] Andreeva 1989, 42.
[43] Andreeva 1990, 21.
[44] Stoianova 1989.
[45] Kostadinova 1998.

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Meanwhile, other books appeared in Russian, many of which linked Vanga with Russian psychics and faith healers, such as *Джуна, Ванга и другие* (Dzhuna, Vanga, and others) (1995), and *Большая энциклопедия ясновидящей Ванги и народного целителя Дениса Дорофеева* (The big encyclopedia of the clairvoyant Vanga and folk healer Denis Dorofeev) (1998). That is to say, her fame spread along with a general surge in interest in—and a new market for—media on spiritual and/or esoteric figures of interest, many of which were Russian. In general, these books were intended to inform, titillate, or even entertain, and generally lacked the *direct* witnessing and "authority" of Stoianova or Sidorov. Nevertheless, they spread the word of Vanga, not just as a psychic of mundane personal facts and fates but also as a "prophet" of world events. Most notable, perhaps was the prediction which spread in the Russian media beginning in 1999 about the "flooding of Kursk," which seemed to come true in the 2000 sinking of the Russian Kursk submarine in the Barents Sea. This prediction, notably from a Russian witness—Vasiliy Varlamov, a student of herbal medicine, who lived in Bulgaria and interacted with Vanga in 1990—began to circulate widely on (and off) the internet. It made a deep impression on the Russian public, often coupled with the prediction that "Russia will become ruler of the world."[46]

In the early 2000s, Russian interest in Baba Vanga continued to grow, with the continued release of books in the Russian language and the spread of her fame on the internet. Sidorov's book *Vanga i Liudmila* was finally released in Russian in 2009 (more than ten years after its release in Bulgarian) under the title *Vanga: Rossiia, 2010, 2012, 2019, 2039* (Vanga: Russia, 2010, 2012, 2019, 2039).[47] The list of dates in the new title presumably refers to Vanga's future predictions for Russia, with 2039 coinciding with the prediction of Russia's "rise." In line with theosophical tendencies to dovetail science and religion, from the outset Sidorov grounded his work in both religion, citing miracles from the Bible, and science: "Thank God that modern science no longer ignores or questions the existence of such phenomena, and even tries to classify it."[48] In the years that followed, Sidorov's book was posted online, and his Russia-related passages came to be widely quoted or used openly, both with and without his name, in a wide range of media.[49] Sidorov's words became an important part of an emergent online collage of "facts" that entwined religion and science, to construct the more complex and messy space of Vanga as a subject and source for "post"-truth.

Within this new space, in which crowdsourcing brought a new kind of chaos, "traditional" forms of media were still exceedingly important. Indeed, they often acted as a buoy or source of legitimacy for offline and online messaging. By the 2000s, as Vanga was posthumously becoming a star in the off- and online space, the internet served as a platform for the circulation of books, TV programs, and films. Beyond their importance to people who were not online (e.g., those who were older or who lacked internet access), books and films in their original formats continued to maintain a certain weighty authority. In the era of "post"-truth, however, the fact

[46]See, for example, Ванга предсказала 2003.

[47]Sidorov 2009.

[48]Ibid., 1.

[49]For a full online version, see https://litresp.ru/chitat/ru/%D0%A1/sidorov-valentin-mitrofanovich/vanga-rossiya-2010-2012-2019-2039-2009.

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that they could be posted online for fast and immediate consumption broadened their reach.

By the 2010s, Vanga's life and times were also getting detailed coverage on Russian TV, as evidenced by a flood of documentaries that can now be found on YouTube. Three (somewhat similar) documentaries appeared in 2010 and 2011: *О чём молчала Ванга* (What Vanga was silent about), *Ванга: Мир видимый и невидимый* (Vanga: the seen and unseen world), and *Великая Ванга* (Vanga the Great), on RTV, TV Centre, and NTV, respectively.[50] The first begins with a retelling of Vanga's life story accompanied by eerie music and a montage of black-and-white stills. Early on the audience is introduced to Krasimira Stoianova, whose authority is established by her nametag, "Vanga's Niece." Stoianova and the narrator list Vanga's prophecies that have "come true"—for example, the beginning of World War II, the end of the USSR, the death of Indira Gandhi, the election of Boris Yeltsin, and, of course, the sinking of the submarine Kursk. Having "confirmed" Vanga's powers, Stoianova turns to the 1979 declaration of Valentin Sidorov that in sixty years Russia would unite with China and India and then experience a "spiritual rise" and "influence the whole world." Interestingly, the Russian overdubbing of Stoianova begins this segment with, "I remember a conversation of Valentin Sidorov," implying that she directly witnessed said conversation. But in the original Bulgarian, which is difficult to hear under the dubbing, Stoianova's clip appears to start midsentence with "a conversation," and not with "I remember." Notably, Sidorov is very clear in his book that his meetings with Vanga were held behind closed doors in Sofia in the Zhivkov residence with only Liudmila Zhivkova present. It is therefore more than likely that Stoianova was relaying what she had read in Sidorov's book, which she later repeated in her own book. She was not a direct witness. In the documentary, this slippage seems far from accidental, since her purported witnessing is important for the veracity of the claim. Still, Stoianova's authority in the film is important, but not singular.

Instead, she is followed by a steady stream of mostly Russian witnesses confirming their belief in Baba Vanga's abilities. Some of them are well-known Russian journalists, like TASS correspondent Andrei Smirnov and *Огонёк* (Spark) correspondent Sergei Vlasov. The well-known Soviet/Russian scientist and forensic psychiatrist Mikhail Vinogradov (1938–2021) offers perhaps a weightier endorsement. According to the documentary, Vinogradov "studied parapsychology in the Secret Laboratories of the Institute of Military Intelligence and KGB units. A secret scientific center was created specifically for his research. In the post-Soviet period, he rose to fame as a criminal psychologist, but also as an expert on, believer in, and promoter of psychics. He was the founder of the so-called League of Psychics of Russia in 2009, and he regularly appeared as an "expert" on Russia's popular TV show *Bitva ekstrasensov* (Battle of the psychics). Vinogradov's "scientific" opinion is backed up by details of the work of Georgi Lozanov and the Institute of Suggestology, which, as the documentary reports, distributed questionnaires to six to seven thousand people who visited Vanga, with 70 percent of respondents reporting that she had been correct in her predictions. Science provides ballast to the Vanga story, which is also clearly framed in the context of Baba Vanga's religious convictions. In addition to the otherworldly music and shots

[50]чём молчала Ванга 2010; Kunitsyn 2012; and Pavlov and Kruglikova 2011.

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of bright flashing lights and gathering clouds, the audience witnesses Vanga on her proverbial deathbed with three icons on the wall beyond her. As Stoianova narrates, Vanga had told her that angels were descending from heaven to greet her. In a sense, Vanga's Orthodox belief (and perhaps her saintly potential) is not in question, except by the Orthodox Church itself, which, as the film notes, has a "difficult relationship" to Vanga. After a shot of an Orthodox priest blessing Vanga's grave, the film's narrator informs viewers of the official church's rejection of the church that was built and consecrated at Vanga's behest in 1996, paid for by her foundation. As shown in the film, a large number of Bulgarians and others revere Baba Vanga as a kind of holy figure and flock to her church, which contains a picture of Vanga reminiscent of an icon. But the Orthodox Church has held this church—and Vanga herself—at arm's length. In the words of Russian Hieromonk Dimitri, who is put forward by the film as an authority on the matter, "For many it is a great honor to have Vanga in the Orthodox Church, but theologians unequivocally classify Vanga's actions as serving the forces of evil."[51]

The tropes, themes, and general thrust of the 2010 documentary were reinforced in the 2011 Russian documentary "Vanga: The Seen and Unseen World." While this episode of the *Тайны века* (Secrets of the century) series features a different cast of mostly Russian witnesses and authorities, it arrives at the same general conclusions. The narrator is Sergei Medvedev, a well-known Soviet and then Russian Federation journalist who served as press secretary for Boris Yeltsin in 1995–1996. While recounting Vanga's biography and explaining her extraordinary "gifts," he also retells his own story of visiting her in 1995 at Yeltsin's behest, at which time—after touching a sugar cube that belonged to Yeltsin, who was not present—she predicted Yeltsin's win in the contentious 1996 elections. This is just one of the many Vanga predictions that Medvedev marvels at, while rolling out a who's who of Russians who visited her, including the famous writer Leonid Leonov, the journalist Sergei Kostornoy, the actress Alla Demidova, and the composer of the Soviet national anthem, Sergei Mikhalkov. A number of Bulgarians are also mentioned, most notably Georgi Lozanov and Nevena Tosheva. Again, scientific scaffolding is provided or implied by the array of witness accounts. Those who met Vanga, the narrator notes, "saw for themselves." Interestingly, Sidorov is wholly absent from this account, but a similar prediction about Russia is outlined—this time by Vanga herself. After the over-narration claims that she "loved Russia" and "saw a great future for it," we cut to Vanga, who pronounces simply, "Russia will rise."[52] The absence of Sidorov as witness is perhaps telling. Was he a potential liability as a witness for some, given his esoteric views?

These documentaries were followed in 2013 by the airing on various channels of a high-production-value twelve-part miniseries entitled *Вангелия* (Vangelia), followed by a book of the same title based on it.[53] The 2011 documentary seems to have provided a partial foundation for the plot, as it is set in 1996 with Sergei Medvedev as one of the principal characters, retelling his encounter with Vanga and her prophecy about Yeltsin. Most of the key characters are Russian, with a number of fictionalized Russian characters whose presence provides confirmation of

[51]чём молчала Ванга 2010.

[52]Ibid.

[53]The miniseries, *Вангелия*, was directed by Sergei Boruchkov. The book and screenplay are by the same authors: Berseneva and Sotnikov 2019.

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Russia's deep ties to Bulgaria in general, and Vanga in particular. These ties are not just through individuals, but through a robust interest on the part of the Russian state. Not only were officials like Medvedev sent to see Vanga, according to the series, but the KGB and one of its intelligence successor agencies the FSB kept close tabs on her and those who visited her—and not just in the 1990s.[54] The series traces this interest back all the way to World War II, showing a young Vanga meeting her first (fictional) Russian characters, and working with other Bulgarians in the interest of "brotherly" Russia. The World War II flashbacks serve to further validate Vanga's abilities and importance as she is visited by none other than Hitler, Bulgaria's Tsar Boris, and a panoply of Russians, including Soviet state representatives.[55] When Tsar Boris visits Vanga incognito, he tells her about his plan to break ties with Nazi Germany, which she encourages. Never mind that some of these "visits" (including from Hitler and Tsar Boris) are largely unsubstantiated myths. In the series they contribute to the drama, and the lines between fact and fiction are successfully blurred. Over the course of the series, all of Vanga's Russia-relevant prophecies are revealed—from the 1953 death of Stalin to the 1996 election of Yeltsin and the 2000 sinking of the Kursk. Through the series, as through the above-noted documentaries, now posted on YouTube for all to view, Vanga's place in the Russian imagination was secured as a powerful source of "truth" and "post"-truth, grounded in both science and religion. This power was bolstered by the new post-socialist marketplace of ideas, in which the paranormal was a hot commodity, but in which scientism still held sway. If a turn to spiritual pursuits was a clear backlash to almost seventy-five years of Soviet rule, a reverence for science was still embedded in truth-making. While by no means all Russians *believed* in Vanga, they were certainly fascinated by her.

"Post"-Truth and Vanga Online

In the 2020s Vanga's name and fame have continued to grow unabated on (and off) the internet. The verb *ванговать* (*vangovat'*), meaning "to predict," even made its way into the Russian language at some point in the early 2000s, indicative of the ways in which Vanga has seeped into the popular lexicon and consciousness. While the term itself is often used with a distinct bit of irony, particularly in youth slang, it nonetheless is indicative of widespread knowledge about Vanga, her talents, and her legacy. In contrast to this irony, the words and works of Bulgarian and Russian witnesses continue to circulate, providing weight to online books, internet sites, and web posts that "confirm" Baba Vanga's powers in a variety of ways, some of them inadvertent. In the more dynamic environment of "post"-truth, Vanga is also easily unmoored from the witnesses and their works: her messages can be taken out of context as free-floating "truths" with no apparent source—except, in theory, for Vanga herself, or those who try and mediate or become mediums for her knowledge.

While it is not the focus of this article, it is important to note that Vanga's fame has understandably brought with it critics and naysayers—Bulgarian, Russian, and otherwise. Vanga has long been accused of being a charlatan, an agent of the Bulgarian communist state, or of the KBG: charges that have been refuted by

[54]Ibid., episode 5.

[55]See ibid., episodes 7–9.

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"witnesses" at every turn.[56] Perhaps more relevant to this article are the recent accusations by the official Bulgarian and Orthodox churches that have percolated on and off the internet throughout the 2000s. In a 2006 online forum on the official Russian Orthodox website *Pravoslavie.ru*, Hieromonk Iov Gumerov answers questions on the general topics of "Are Vanga's gifts real?" and "What is the church's relationship to Vanga?"[57] The answers are unequivocal, and perhaps surprising. Drawing on a number of sources to offer his own analysis of the known "facts," Gumerov concludes that Vanga's gifts are indeed real and her knowledge is otherworldly; however, the source of her power is *demons* or fallen angels rather than the divine. The carefully cited source for this conclusion is mostly Krasimira Stoianova, who believed Vanga to be holy. But here Gumerov argues that clues provided by Stoianova reveal that Vanga is a medium not for divine power, but rather for dark spirits. He cites examples such as her ability to communicate with the dead, her speaking in other voices while in a trance, her claims (since 1979) of seeing and receiving information from aliens from Vampiria, and her visions of a "mysterious horseman."[58] Also provided as "proof" of Vanga's occult leanings is her presumed reverence for Nikolai Roerich and her "contact with the long-dead clairvoyant Helena Blavatsky," which, according to Stoianova, took place in the presence of the Russian writer Leonid Leonov.[59] Gumerov notes that both Blavatsky and Roerich were excommunicated by the Council of Bishops in 2000, and that they, like Vanga, were "false prophets." With the Bible as final proof, he draws from John and Matthew to explain that "the Lord judged us to live in a time when many false prophets appeared in the world who come to us in sheep's clothing, but inside they are ravenous wolves."[60]

This view of Vanga as a devil in disguise seems to have dominated Russian and Bulgarian Orthodox thought by the 2000s, at least in publications and official website posts. In "Кто такая Ванга" (Who is Vanga?), a 2013 post on *Pravoslavie.ru*, which appeared after the series *Vangelia* was released, there are links to Gumerov's above-cited post, but also to posts from a number of Bulgarian clerics, including Hieromonk Vissarion, who both echoes and contributes to Russian Orthodox arguments and claims about Vanga.[61] Vissarion's book based on his thesis, *Петър Дънов и Ванга: Пророци и предтечи на Антихриста* (Petŭr Dŭnov and Vanga: prophets and forerunners of the Antichrist), was translated into Russian and released in 2011. It triangulates "evidence" mostly from Stoianova's writings and the Bible—echoed in the 2013 "Who is Vanga?" post—to prove that "the devil speaks through Vanga." Elsewhere in the book, Vissarion laments that the bulk of other books on Vanga are based on the assumption that her "gift is from God" or that she is a "saint" and "prophetess" in spite of all the "evidence," in his view, to the contrary.[62] Vissarion's writings on Vanga, as well as those of other Bulgarian priests and monks, are cited or drawn upon elsewhere in a wide range of Russian Orthodox sources, such as the 2008 book *Была ли Ванга православной?* (Was Vanga an Orthodox Christian?) by

[56]See, for example, Petkova 2006, 25–26.
[57]Важно знать ваше мнение 2006 (over eighty thousand views).
[58]Ibid.
[59]Ibid., cited in Stoianova 1997, 191.
[60]Важно знать ваше мнение 2006.
[61]Кто такая Ванга 2013 (over a hundred thousand views).
[62]Vissarion 2011, 5–7.

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Igumen N.[63] Calling Vanga a "false prophet," the author noted with alarm that even many Orthodox priests were calling for her canonization, in spite of her presumed "contact with aliens" and spiritual ties to the occult via Roerich and Blavatsky.[64] Notably, if and when Valentin Sidorov is mentioned in these sources, he is also connected to the occult, and his predictions about Russia and its future are notably absent.

The proliferation of such books and posts by Orthodox "experts" has created a conduit for cross-pollinating conversations addressed to the Russian and Bulgarian populations and priests—meant to "save" them from Vanga as part of a chain of occult thinkers and pretenders to the faith. But by not mentioning Sidorov's predictions, the Orthodox churches in a sense also do not undermine them. Nor, arguably, do they wholly undermine Vanga herself, as her name is nevertheless circulated widely, and belief in her powers is left intact if not unintentionally reinforced. Finally, the Orthodox authorities do not have the final word on the beliefs and practices of their flock or even their clergy, who are known to have more syncretic beliefs and practices that are often in contrast to those of the establishment—whose credibility is fragile given its long-standing relationship to the state, which continued under communism. Such posts do not seem to have shaken belief or interest in Baba Vanga and are arguably drowned out by the cacophony of online and offline media on her in Russian. In addition, if Vanga is being used to project pro-Russian narratives, as some assume, then why would the Orthodox Church throw a wrench into the works?[65]

Even if the Russian state is directly or tacitly involved in supporting the use of Vanga as a medium for "projecting power," it is not doing a thorough or consistent job of it—if that is even possible. Online demand for Vanga is astounding, and those who seek her out will find a veritable sea of media and posts on her, both in Russian and in Bulgarian, English, and other languages, from a dizzying variety of sources. As noted above, there are searches for "Vanga" + "predictions" + "2023" on Yandex more than seven hundred thousand times per month.[66] By comparison, "war" + "Ukraine" is searched for around 2.9 million times per month.[67] Recent results on English and Russian search engines show that "Vanga" in this domain is out of Russian state control, and also that interest in her is not solely focused on the issue of Russia and its place in the world.[68] If Russian state actors were trying to control the Vanga narrative, one might expect carefully crafted geopolitical uses of Vanga to

[63]Igumen N is the pseudonym of Igumen Efrem (Vinogradov-Lakerbaia) from the Spaso-Preobrazhenski Monastery.

[64]Igumen N 2008, 1–2, 19. This book was also incorporated into a larger collection: Igumen N 2014, 103–4, 122.

[65]Lesiv 2018, 31.

[66]"Yandex Keyword Statistics—Impressions per Month," 5 Apr. 2023, https://wordstat.yandex.com/#!/?words=ванга.

[67]"Yandex Keyword Statistics—Impressions per Month," 5 Apr. 2023, https://wordstat.yandex.com/#!/?words=украина%20%2Bвойна.

[68]The search engines we used were Google and Yandex. Yandex.ru is one of the largest search engines serving primarily the Russian Federation and many of the former Soviet republics (if not *the* largest). "Average Daily Search Engine Queries March 2023," *Liveinternet.ru*, 31 Mar. 2023, https://www.liveinternet.ru/stat/ru/searches.html?date=2023-03-01&period=month; "Search Engine Market Share Russian Federation Apr 2022–Apr 2023," Statcounter Global Stats, https://gs.statcounter.com/search-engine-market-share/all/russian-federation (last accessed 4 May 2023).

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dominate search results, particularly on the first page of results, which generates 92 percent of all traffic for a specific search.[69] But the first page of search results in both English and Russian demonstrates the ways in which "post"-truth operates. The many sites and posts on Vanga range from links to digitized or streamed pre-internet Russian media sources, to newly created and posted e-books, articles, and social media that amplify past or newly revealed predictions of Vanga.[70] Vanga on the internet is indicative of a "post"-truth world, formed through a bricolage of scientific and religious "evidence" and logic that contributes to a veritable glut of "truth."

One place where such "post"-truth is evident is the standalone site dedicated to Vanga, *Vanga.ru*, created in 2004 and heralding itself as the "big encyclopedia of Vanga."[71] It bills itself as the online extension of an eleven-volume Russian-language magazine by the same name that ran from 1998 to 2002.[72] This site claims that it is the only online publication about Vanga with legitimacy, as "in recent years, many new dubious and even unimaginable Vanga predictions have begun to appear." But *Vanga.ru* is more than just an online version of Vanga's greatest hits. It synthesizes the foundational sources from the 1990s and other legitimizing non-internet sources with more esoteric users' interpretations of Vanga. For instance, one can find accounts of Vanga's meetings with Russian writers and government officials alongside explanations of how to decode what it means to see an anthill in your dreams.[73] As with past sources, the site uses science and religion in a mutually reinforcing way. On a page titled "Science about the Phenomenon of Vanga," the site lists three works that use science to "prove" the Vanga phenomenon. Interestingly, one of the works is Stoianova's aforementioned book *The Bulgarian Prophet Vanga.*[74] Although her book is not what many would consider to be "scientific," the site puts it in this category based on the "reliable, authentic testimony of Krasimira Stoianova."[75] This interpretation of witnessing or testimony as "scientific" in the *Vanga.ru* domain is emblematic of the ways in which popular understandings of "science" can mingle with and reinforce belief in paranormal phenomena like Vanga's gifts, providing a more intricate foundation for "post"-truth.

At the same time, "post"-truth on Vanga is extremely eclectic, often with a complete disconnect between Vanga's message and her sources of Bulgarian and Russian witnesses or authority, both scientific and religious. Search results of such sites and posts still populate the first page of both English and Russian search engines, and the website for an Indian company, Vizag Chemicals International, includes a

[69]Value of Google Result Positioning 2013.

[70]It should be noted that our method for obtaining search results on Google and Yandex was to use both a United States IP address and a Bulgarian IP address in a Chromium-based browser in incognito mode. Incognito mode allows us to eliminate the possibility that search history or site cookies will affect results. While the Bulgarian IP address's geolocation does change the Google searches in English, it only appears to interlace results for Baba Vanga with results for a bird species known as *vanga.*

[71]Domain Information, *Vanga.ru*, Whois, 4 May 2023, https://www.whois.com/whois/vanga.ru.

[72]Bogdanovich n.d.b. As of March 2023, the site's backend database has been unable to serve pages. See https://web.archive.org/web/20120219064624/https://vanga.ru/about.html or ask the authors for an offline copy.

[73]For an example of government officials, see Bogdanovich n.d.a. For the anthill in your dreams, see Bogdanovich n.d.c.

[74]Stoianova 1990. This is the Russian translation of the book we mentioned in note 40.

[75]Bogdanovich n.d.d.

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page that lists Vanga's predictions from 2010 to 5079, beginning with a nuclear war in the northern hemisphere, followed by a takeover of Europe by Muslims, and concluding with the "end of the world."[76] This site, which appears to be AI-generated, lacks both witness testimony and sources of authority. The same is true of a number of Russian web articles, including one entitled "10 Important Vanga Predictions for 2023," which includes a minor biography of Vanga but no references to Bulgarian or Russian sources.[77] In other Russian sources, one can find Sidorov's famous passages that quote Vanga as saying "Russia will spread its wings," but there is no mention of their origin other than Vanga herself.[78] These myriad sources make clear that "post"-truth can be totally unmoored from the past, witnesses, religion, and science. Perhaps it is the case that once Vanga's authority has been established elsewhere, such references are not always necessary.

And yet, frequent references to preconstructed, shared understandings of Vanga still abound. This is especially so when it comes to discussions about old and new Vanga predictions that relate to current events and the future of Russia. A recent first-page search result on Vanga, for example, guides inquiring minds to an article entitled "Зелёный господарь страшное сделает: Ванга предсказала начало СВО на Украине и заключение мира" (The green master will do a terrible thing: Vanga predicted the beginning of the special military operation in Ukraine and the conclusion of peace).[79] The article relies on the claims of journalist Sergei Kostornoy, mentioned above as a visitor and direct witness to Vanga, who was featured in the documentary "Vanga: The Seen and Unseen World." Kostornoy was presumably witness to this particular prediction in 1995 when he visited Vanga, though he seems to have "recalled" it only in 2021.[80] Just as the article relies on his authority, Kostornoy has used this recollection and others to bolster his status as a Vanga insider on his TV talk show *На самом деле* (As a matter of fact) and elsewhere. According to the article, the "green master" is Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy (presumably because of his signature green sweatshirt), who "will lead the people almost into slavery […] and tear his homeland to pieces."[81] With Kostornoy as witness, this prediction seems to have gone viral; it can be found in a wide range of online Russian language articles.[82]

If Kostornoy has used his past proximity to Vanga in a self-serving way, others have connected Russian politicians to Vanga as a way of elevating their status to "prophets" of politics. A variety of Russian online sources began to circulate a video, meme, and article that referred to Vladmir Zhirinovsky, the right-wing populist leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), as "Вованга" (Vovanga).[83] On a literal level, this terminology can mean directionally moving *towards Vanga*, or in this case Vanga-like, to confer on the politician—who died in 2022—the status of a

[76]At http://www.vizagchemical.com/blog/list-baba-vanga-predictions-info-chemical-man.

[77]Stoianova 1997.

[78]"Россия расправит крылья" 2022.

[79]Зелёный господарь 2022.

[80]Alperina 2021.

[81]Зелёный господарь 2022.

[82]Kostornoy also claims to be the godfather of Vanga's goddaughter Lilia, affording him authority, as well as reason to believe in Vanga's powers. See, for example, Guliaikina 2022.

[83]Shchigareva 2022.

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"prophet" of world events.[84] While this could simply mean someone who is informed about world politics and good at understanding them, videos of Zhirinovsky predicting the war in (and fall of) Ukraine and the West juxtaposed with images of and questionable "quotes" from Vanga have gone viral in the online space.[85] However the term is more likely a neologism combining Vova, a familiar form of Vladimir, and Vanga. Zhirinovsky is sometimes called a political "clown," and it is possible that this connection of him to Vanga is purely a particular mode of Russian humor called *stiob*—in which it is unclear what is serious and what is parody. Nevertheless, the Zhirinovsky-Vanga connection seems to have been made by others both within and outside of the genre of *stiob*. Zhirinovsky purportedly visited Vanga in 1994, and his friend and associate Kostornoy claims to have passed on his knowledge of Vanga and her predictions to Zhirinovsky in the 1990s.[86] Moreover, Zhirinovsky's message was hardly prophetic, since the war in Ukraine has been going on since 2014, and his attacks on the West had long been baked into his political posturing.[87] Presumed Vanga predictions have also been used to elevate and reinforce his message, in a way that serves a pro-Putin Russia and anti-Western agenda that run counter to the parody archetype of the *stiob*.[88] Indeed, various actors in the online space have connected Zhirinovsky to Vanga as a way of elevating his status as a source of knowledge and power even after his death. On 6 April 2023, the LDPR leader Leonid Slutsky announced that they would be creating a generative neural-network language model based on Zhirinovsky.[89] As Slutsky asserts, Zhirinovsky was a "patriot, prophet, [and] teacher," or as others have claimed, "Vovanga." Undoubtedly, AI Zhirinovsky will provide the producers of pro-Russian narratives with a tool that is a more programmable and hence predictable source of "truth" than Vanga, who has been coopted by so many online content creators. This generative model might be christened with same the title as a recent Russian book about Zhirinovsky, *Пророк 2.0* (Prophet 2.0).[90] This book was likely titled this way because it is the second book about Zhirinovsky by the same author with the title *Пророк в своём Отечестве* (Prophet in his own country).[91] While Zhirinovsky was seen as a "prophet" in his own right by many, he also profited in this regard from his proximity to Vanga, whose status as prophet is far more widespread in and beyond the Russian language space.

While Vanga is by no means the first psychic or prophet to inhabit modern Russian cultural imaginings, she certainly has come to occupy a privileged place.[92] In a sense, she overshadows most (if not all) of the pantheon of psychics and prophets that haunt the contemporary Russian media space, particularly in terms of predictions of world events: first among them currently is the war in Ukraine. This

[84]For an explanation of the term in relation to Zhirinovsky, see the entry "Вованга" on the wiki "ALL," https://allll.net/wiki/Вованга.

[85]Ванга и Жириновский предсказывали гибель 2022.

[86]Lylain 2022.

[87]Jaroszewicz 2019.

[88]Ванга и Жириновский предсказывали гибель 2022.

[89]Ukrainska Pravda 2013.

[90]Degtyarev 2021.

[91]Ukrainska Pravda 2013.

[92]For an analysis of the famous late Soviet TV psychic Anatoly Kashpirovksy, see, for example, Huxtable 2017.

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is not at all to say that every Russian believes in Vanga. There are certainly detractors, like the Orthodox Church, and large numbers of skeptics and people who are indifferent—how many, it is hard to say. Nevertheless, Baba Vanga's ubiquitous place across various forms of Russian media, both online and offline (the two are hard to separate), is certainly a phenomenon in and of itself. Consider, for example, the paper and e-book published on 3 May 2023, by Igor Bessonov entitled *Традиция пророчества о противостоянии России и Запада: Попытка научного взгляда* (The Tradition of prophecy about the confrontation between Russia and the West: An attempt at a scientific view).[93] Bessonov clearly positions himself as moving beyond "popular" studies to offer a more authoritative, if not scientific, analysis of "prophets" with the most relevance to contemporary Russia—namely Nostradamus and Baba Vanga. These prophets, he explains, are not chosen at random; rather, "The predictions made by these historical figures arouse the greatest interest among the modern Russian audience, and finally, we have good reason to believe they are *true*."[94] Bessonov makes clear from the very beginning of the book that the current war in Ukraine and Russia's bigger confrontation with the West are front and center in his effort to help Russians see the future. To accomplish this, he turns primarily to Baba Vanga—for whom he supplies all available evidence, scientific and otherwise. In the end, however, his main source is Sidorov, whom he quotes and analyzes at length. He embraces Sidorov's spiritual interpretation of Russian ascendance, but also insists upon the political implications of quotes from Vanga about Russia's future:

> Vanga foreshadowed a great future for Russia, both spiritually and politically. Secondly, she symbolically connected this future with Vladimir, who can be understood as both the past leaders of Russia (Prince Vladimir and Vladimir Lenin) and the current president of Russia, Vladimir Putin. Third, Russia's future grand rise must be preceded by an alliance with India and China. As you can see, historical events are clearly developing in the direction where all these predictions made in 1979 can become a reality.[95]

In the end, Bessonov puts forth the claim that Baba Vanga is the most important prophet for Russians to look to in this contemporary moment of crisis and uncertainty, which he claims portends a glorious victory and a new beginning. Bessonov's book provides an important contribution to Russian "post"-truth, in which Vanga has become an essential medium.

Conclusion

The Baba Vanga phenomenon in the Russophone world offers an important window into the complex ways in which information exchange and constructions of "truth" change over time. Vanga's authority is grounded in "witnesses," who drew upon scientific and/or religious logics—as well as their own proximity to and intimacy with Vanga—to affirm her presumably extraordinary powers. In the course of the communist period, Vanga became widely known in Bulgaria and well beyond as a result of a growing flood of witnesses, many of whom believed her "gifts" to be a

[93] Bessonov 2023.
[94] Ibid., 1.
[95] Ibid., 91.

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religious or spiritual phenomenon. At the same time, Vanga was arguably legitimized (even if she was also questioned) by the scientific study of her by the Bulgarian Institute of Suggestology, in a period when science was the only officially sanctioned form of knowledge production and therefore truth. Witnesses from this period spread the word on Vanga mostly via word-of-mouth, as she remained a taboo subject in the public sphere—even if she was embraced by communist elites who were attracted to esoteric spirituality. Knowledge and belief in Vanga spread from Bulgaria to Russia during this period, tied to Bulgarian-Russian scientific and intellectual exchange that built upon Slavic and socialist "brotherhood," and even a rethinking of Marxism under late socialism.

In the immediate post-communist period, these witnesses and interpreters and proxies told the tale of Vanga in an explosion of tell-all books, and other media that spread her name into the Bulgarian and then Russian language space. Russian witnesses were especially important in the bevy of new Russophone sources (books, documentaries, and fiction) verifying Vanga's truths as grounded in science, but also tied to religious or transcendent experience. These "verified" sources would remain important on the internet, where a new kind of crowdsourced "post"-truth emerged in the 2000s, even when they were misquoted or taken out of context. But the original witnesses and mediators at times could just "melt like ice" (to quote Vanga) in this arguably novel "post"-truth world. Vanga, whether tethered to consistent or patchworked scientific and religious logics or totally unmoored, offers a medium for the seemingly infinite possibilities for mediating, but also undermining, "truth." In the Russophone imagination, this offers the possibility of bolstering the often competing and contested Russian narratives about Russia's place and power in the world.

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