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## The Concept of *Mladostarchestvo* as a Tool for Criticizing Religion in Modern Russia: An Analysis of Rhetorical Strategies

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the history of the term *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo* [young elder/young eldership], and at the same time classifies strategies of critical rhetoric within which it is used. The notion in question established itself as a particular type of “clerical” pejorative in the 1970–1980s in church circles in the Russian emigration. At the end of the 1990s, it gained popularity after Patriarch Aleksii II began to use it. Most worthy of note is the use of this term in the context of a *pastoral* rhetorical strategy, in which abuses in the practice of confession are exposed. Nonetheless, in the 2000–2010s *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo* began to be used in a series of other rhetorical strategies. Within the context of a socio-critical strategy in particular, this concept is used as a tool of criticism of post-Soviet religiosity as a social fact. In its contemporary phase, the notion is also included in an anti-hierarchical strategy, within which it is applied in a parodic vein. As a result, on the one hand, a sort of “oversaturation” of the term with meanings takes place, and, on the other, there is an intricate interlacing of intentions according to which it is used. The latter may indicate a kind of exhaustion of the semantic resources of the term.

### KEYWORDS

*mladostarchestvo*, young eldership, confession, religious leadership, rhetorical strategies, criticism of the clergy, anticlericalism

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The concept of *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo* [young elder/young eldership] is a rhetorical tool that is frequently employed in critical descriptions of various aspects of religious life within contemporary Russian Orthodoxy. The meaning of this term<sup>1</sup> is vague: those who use it rarely give it a definition, and if they do give one, then this is as a rule entirely determined by the logic of the critical statement; that is to say that, in essence, it does not go any way towards clarifying the situation. The combination of these two circumstances—uncertainty of meaning and demand for use—means that an analysis of the use of the term *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo* makes the problem of the employment of the notion *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo* significant for understanding processes in the sphere of religion: the question remains unclear who or what exactly is the object of a critical utterance each time one author or another uses the term in question as a tool. On the one hand, the very fact of the popularity of such an “indefinite” critical term to an extent characterizes discussion in the sphere of religion (or at least the current state of methods of its description), and is therefore in need of interpretation.

There are not many terms in the modern Russian language that may be referred to as professional clerical pejoratives, that is elements of critical rhetoric applied exclusively (or almost exclusively) to the priesthood. The term *mladostarets* [young elder] is one of the most notable and widely used of such terms. Rare is the public figure in contemporary Russian Orthodoxy who has not made statements using this word in one sense or another. *Mladostarchestvo* is a term used not only in the context of spoken language, journalism, and discussions on the net. The turn of the millennium was the moment when *mladostarchestvo* became an official term in church discourse: a close connection was established between a series of contradictory phenomena in church life and this notion. At the same time, discussions on *mladostarchestvo* clearly reached their peak during the 2000s; by the 2010s, a gradual decrease in interest towards this critical tool takes place. Here, an attempt will be made to explain the fall in “criticism of *mladostartsy*.”

## 1.

A study of critical rhetoric—and the term *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo* constitutes precisely a critical statement, for which it is almost impossible to discover a concrete social referent (nowhere in our sources is there any sort of concrete example of a *mladostarets*)—is significant for the study of any sphere of social relations. It is here that points of maximum tension are revealed between different groups functioning within a single social arena. Accordingly, a transformation of critical rhetoric—the emergence of new objects of criticism—testifies to a transformation of the boundaries of these groups or the appearance of new points of tension, which signals a development of the situation. This study is limited: it does not lay claim to being a general catalogue of critical tools that may be used to flag a situation of an unscrupulous attitude on the

<sup>1</sup> As with the meaning of many other “professional” clerical pejoratives: *pop* [priest (pej.)], *treboispolnitel'* [performer of religious rites], *sistemnyi* [a product of the clerical system], *kuteinik* [purveyor of kut'ia (a special dish commemorating the dead)], *batek* [little father], etc. To take a historical example see Zapalsky, 2021.

part of a priest towards his flock; on the contrary, its focus is on one particular term. In this regard, the article aims to reconstruct a history of this concept. The question of how to compile a history of this notion is solved by means of a classification of rhetorical strategies in which the term has been included at different stages.

This paper will adopt a methodological approach based on the study of rhetoric<sup>2</sup> and the functioning of concepts within it<sup>3</sup>. In the vast majority of cases, when using the term *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo*, our sources are expressing dissatisfaction with a certain situation that, in their opinion, is typical for one context or another. In connection with this, a methodological premise of this research paper is the assumption that the key “unit” for the definition of a *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo* as an element of critical rhetoric is not the archetypal image of a leader who has been unmasked as a *mladostarets*, but a rhetorical strategy whose analysis allows the author’s intention to be reconstructed—that is to say in fact the self-same thing against which the blade of criticism itself is directed.

## 2.

In all probability, the term *mladostarets* was born as an element of spoken language, “slang”: the layer of language that is most rarely reflected in the sphere of the written word. It is an element of “church jargon” used in an unusual play on words with the term *starets* “elder,” which acquired special connotations in the Russian language around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Possibly the first written source in which we encounter the term *mladostarets* are the memoirs of Metropolitan Evlogii (Georgievskii, 1868–1946), published shortly after his death:

Father Sergeenko works with enthusiasm. He has the gift of influencing people, which through his youth and inexperience causes him to lay claim to the role of *starets* [elder] One of the parishioners from Meudon calls him *mladostarets*[...] [young elder]. Father Andrei organizes meetings at his house, at which some of his female disciples are trained in meditation; they sit in silence, meditating on a subject that has been proposed to them, and do not dare move a muscle, “so as not to disturb father’s contemplation of the divine,” while he himself sits locked up in his office. (Georgievskii, 1994, p. 438; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

<sup>2</sup> The research into critical rhetoric will draw on the work of the Cambridge school, in particular K. Skinner. This method of research into political language presumes behind every (serious) public utterance the potential for a political statement. A political statement, in its turn, presupposes a definite strategy; the question of which is decisive—the statement itself or the strategy—is secondary for this research. It is on this basis that the notion “rhetorical strategy” is introduced here, which exists on an intersubjective level. Of lesser importance is the political or social ideal of any one particular public figure. On the contrary, what matters here is the fact that different people criticize similar church, political, or social realia. And, if they use the term *mladostarchestvo* in a similar sense, it is possible to say that this term has established itself firmly as part of a certain rhetorical strategy (see Skinner, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> The study of those contradictory phenomena of church life that became referents for the concept of *mladostarchestvo* in the 1990–2000s is a task for another piece of research on a larger scale. Nonetheless, it should be mentioned that approaches to the problem of *mladostarchestvo* as a social phenomenon do exist. For instance, I. Paert (2014) talks about it in an article dedicated to a discussion of eldership in contemporary Russia (see also Rotach, 2011).

The priest Andrei Sergeenko (1902–1973) served in Meudon from 1929 to 1939. Overall, Metropolitan Evlogii gives this priest a positive write-up: “This inclination to mysticism does not prevent Father Andrei from being an active laborer” (Georgievskii, 1994, p. 438). “One of the parishioners from Meudon”—that is clearly one of Father Andrei’s own parishioners—also does not find anything worthy of condemnation in his specific practices, and it would seem that the words “through youth and inexperience” have to do with the critical attitude of Metropolitan Evlogii himself, evaluating from a distance the ministry of a priest under his jurisdiction. The hypothesis that the term *mladostarets* did not initially carry any negative connotations is confirmed by another early reference, to be found in the *Golden Age of Patristic Literature* (1967) by Archimandrite Cyprian (Kern, 1899–1960). Discussing St. Makarii of Egypt, he remarks: “His asceticism was so great that the skete-dwellers gave him the name παιδαριολόγων “*mladostarets*,” because he had progressed in virtue beyond his years” (Kern, 1967, p. 151).

It is essential to note that the term παιδαριολόγων already had a tradition of translation into Russian. For instance, in the same translation of *The Lausaic History* quoted by Archimandrite Cyprian παιδαριολόγων is translated as “boy-elder”<sup>4</sup>. This translation is closer to the original, and is based on the Latin tradition of translation παιδαριολόγων as *puer-senex* [child-old]<sup>5</sup>. Notwithstanding, in the arsenal of Archimandrite Cyprian, who taught patristics at the Saint Serge Theological Institute in Paris in the period from 1945 till his death in 1960, and who in all probability knew the above variation of the translation, the new, not entirely accurate, but nonetheless comprehensible word *mladostarets* was employed. Archimandrite Cyprian borrowed an already current expression from colloquial speech and used it to describe a situation with a specific source.

Lack of information makes it difficult to draw unequivocal conclusions on the existence of the term and the boundaries of its meaning up until the 1970s. It may be assumed that its original areal of diffusion was Russian Paris from the 1930–1950s. Where the etymology of the term is concerned, we may suppose that it was formed by analogy with one of two linguistic models within which the prefix *mlado-* was applied. Firstly, in the interwar period, the prefix/notion “*mlado-*” became fashionable at a socio-political level. An ethnonym preceded by the prefix “*mlado-*” meant a group of the most progressive representatives of the nation: those who felt a responsibility

<sup>4</sup> “First, I will tell of the virtues of Makarii of Egypt, who lived 90 years, of which he spent 60 in the desert. Having come to the desert at the age of 30, although he was younger than others, over the course of ten years he undertook ascetic labours with such courage that he was deemed worthy of a special distinction: he was called the “boy-elder,” because he excelled in virtue beyond his years. At the age of 40, he received power over spirits, the gift of healing illness and the spirit of prophecy, and was also found worthy of the estimable rank of priest” (Palladius of Galatia, 2015, pp. 60–61).

<sup>5</sup> On the topos of παιδαριολόγων/*puer senex* in late classical patristics (see: Giannarelli, 1988; Rotman, 2017). It should be noted that a corresponding topos, dating back to antique models, also exists in other European languages: “Knabengreis” in German, “enfant-vieillard” in French. It is noteworthy that in 19th century Greek, the term παιδαριολόγων referred not to a young monk who had achieved great heights of spiritual life, but on the contrary to an elder who demonstrated infantile irrationality (Korais, 1828–1835). In modern Greek, the term functions in a similar way to modern Russian, with the exception that it is not an exclusively ecclesiastical notion. See Παδαριολόγων, (2008).

for the political self-determination of their people. *Mladodvizheniia* [young movements] originated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the first of them started to appear in the Russian press only during the First World War—*mladoturki* [young Turks], *mladopoliaki* [young Poles], *mladolatyshi* [young Latvians]. A “young national” movement also emerged in the emigration—the *mladorossy* [young Russians]. It is possible that all of this gave rise to the formation and circulation of the neologism *mladostarets* in the *émigré* community, typically with a positive connotation: it corresponded to the meaning of “a young, ascetically inclined priest” seeking to revive, in the new context of the emigration, a specific format of spiritual nourishment. Just as in the emigration the *mladorossy* breathe new life into the Russian national idea, the *mladostarets* revives practices of pre-revolutionary spiritual eldership. This, however, is no more than a hypothetical reconstruction.

### 3.

In spite of the above, it should be borne in mind that the term *mladostarets* also had the potential for development in a negative vein. In this regard, it is possible that the model that gave rise to this term was a word in which the prefix *mlado-* initially carried a negative connotation. The archaic concept of *mladoumie* was one such word. The notion *mladoumie* [young mindedness] may be encountered in Russian ascetic literature with the meaning “immaturity of mind characteristic of youth,” and here the connotations are unambiguously negative (Filin, 1982, p. 187; Avanesov, 1991, p. 550). There is no doubt that in later interpretations of the terms *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo*, the prefix *mlado-* would have a similar semantic function.

The concept of *mladostarchestvo* (the subject of discussion was clearly already a certain phenomenon, rather than an individual *mladostarets*) first appears in the introduction to I. V. Kontsevich’s work *Optina Pustyn’ and its Time*:

Let us note one more occurrence of pseudo-eldership that may also be observed in contemporary reality: modern spiritual guidance, as will shortly be seen, grew out of ancient monastic eldership and represents a secondary form of this. Owing to the relationship between these two phenomena, spiritual guidance and eldership, inexperienced priests who are familiar with ascetic literature on a purely theoretical level may fall into the temptation of an “abuse of power”—of transgressing the boundary of spiritual guidance in order to play the spiritual elder [*starchestvovat’*]—without possessing even the faintest idea of the essence of true spiritual eldership [*starchestvo*]. This “*mladostarchestvo*” (according to one apt expression) introduces discord into the life that surrounds it. It also conceals within itself irreparable harm for the soul of the person receiving guidance. (I. M. Kontsevich, 1970/2019, pp. 255–256; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

Most probably I. M. Kontsevich (1893–1965), a graduate of the Saint Serge Institute in Paris, wrote his research on *Optina Pustyn’ and its Time* shortly before his death, when he was already living in the USA and working as a teacher of patristics at

the Holy Trinity Seminary in Jordanville. One may surmise that the “apt expression” was coined by him in the USA, although it is not fully clear when Kontsevich was working on the text of his introduction. Confirmation that an explicitly negative connotation of the term *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo* established itself not in Europe but in the USA may also be found in the fact that the next author to use it was Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann (1921–1983), who had also moved from Paris to the USA. In a note on Orthodoxy in Alaska, written in 1977, the following words may be found referring to Bishop Georgii (Afonskii, 1925–2008):

It did not occur to him to show off or flaunt his *tserkovnost'* [churchness]. For he had not read about it in books or learnt it by rote from some precocious *mladostartsy*, but it was in his “Levitical” blood, inherited by him from generations of simple and humble Russian pastors. (Schmemmann, 2009, p. 592; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

Bishop Georgii was a student of Father Alexander from the Saint Vladimir Seminary. The opposition between “Levitical blood” and the teaching of the *mladostartsy* that Schmemmann uses does not appear to offer a great deal in terms of clarifying the meaning of this term. What is being referred to is probably a sort of “studied” *tserkovnost'* [churchness], the “pharisaical spirit” that Schmemmann frequently denounces in his diaries. It is highly likely that what endeared itself to Father Alexander was the experience of a traditional priestly family received by Father Georgii in pre-war Kiev<sup>6</sup>, which could be juxtaposed to experience in the emigration and also to those who found their faith later on—neophytes. In any case, the term *mladostarets* here is not used in direct connection with abuse of priestly authority, that is not in that context in which the concept was subsequently to function.

Several years later, Schmemmann uses the term in question in his diary, but already in a fully modern sense:

*Wednesday, 2 December 1981* [...] The youth of today are above all unhappy. Unhappy because they live in a world in which there is one criterion—success. A result of this is the incredible proliferation of all sorts of impostors, people posing as teachers or “leaders.” In the Church this leads to ever increasing “*mladostarchestvo*.” [...] A few days ago, I had the opportunity to read a letter from one such *mladostarets*. A student who had received it gave it to me, in doubt as to I don’t remember what “teaching” of this 32-year-old teacher of spirituality. What astonishing self-confidence, what absolutely total self-identification with the truth. (Schmemmann, 2005, pp. 602–603; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

Here, for the first time, a coherent image arises corresponding to a series of stereotypical traits: youth, self-confidence, “self-identification with the truth.” It is noteworthy, nonetheless, that Schmemmann derives the genealogy of *mladostarchestvo*

<sup>6</sup> Bishop Georgii’s maternal grandfather was the priest-martyr Mikhail Edlinskii, executed in 1937 (Bozhko, 2021, p. 136).

from a specifically modern situation: a striving for leadership, at the base of which lies the cult of success among contemporary youth.

Hence, with regard to the concept of *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo*, the period between 1930–1980 can be named the time of, (a) its emergence, (b) its gradual transition from the sphere of church jargon to the sphere of church literature, (c) its gradual establishment in a prevalently pejorative usage; (d) after the concept stabilizes as a pejorative term, it becomes part of a rhetorical strategy within which an inexperienced priest is criticized who abuses his authority and, under the influence of ascetic literature, exceeds a permissible norm of influence on others. This rhetorical strategy may be characterized as *pastoral*. All the other strategies that will be discussed below will be directly linked to it.

#### 4.

A point of direct contact of discourse on *mladostarchestvo* with the Russian milieu that has been identified is a lecture by Metropolitan Antonii Surozhskii (Bloom, 1914–2003) on May 18, 1987 at the International Church Academic Conference on “Theology and Spirituality,” held in the context of the preparations for the celebration of 1000 years since the Baptism of Rus’:

A great danger run by a young inexperienced priest, full of enthusiasm and hope, consists in the fact that sometimes young people fresh out of theological schools imagine that ordination has endowed them both with brains, and experience, and “discernment of spirits,” and they become what in ascetic literature are called “*mladostartsy*”. (Surozhskii, 2017, p. 207; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)<sup>7</sup>

It is difficult to understand what exactly Metropolitan Anthony means when he speaks of “ascetic literature.” Possibly he is referring to Kontsevich’s work, which, however, constituted research into the history of monasticism, rather than an example of “ascetic literature” in a literal sense. As has been stated above, in this work the term *mladostarchestvo* is placed right at the beginning and appears as a key “programmatic” concept. Clearly, where Metropolitan Anthony’s lecture is concerned, a peculiar memory lapse has taken place: a term from the lexicon of a contemporary researcher has been attributed to the lexicon of his sources. Be that as it may, the *émigré* neologism, which Metropolitan Anthony may have heard in Paris (where he lived from 1923–1948), metamorphosed from Kontsevich’s “apt expression” to a testimony of “ascetic literature.” These factors—the authority of Metropolitan Anthony, and the authority with which he endowed the concept in question—have probably determined the nature of its further development in the Russian context.

<sup>7</sup> The effect of this lecture on the listeners may be judged from the following statement of a member of the audience: “The listeners literally held their breath. From out of the multitude of to some degree interesting, but nonetheless purely academic propositions, far from the real problems of the Church, suddenly a live and exceptionally honest word had been pronounced on a longstanding problem that had for some reason never been spoken out loud. With his typical fiery temperament, Archpriest Vitalii Borovoi then suggested the church hierarchy immediately be asked to publish the lecture as a brochure to be handed out on a signed-for basis to all priests entrusted with confessing the laity” (Balashov, 2006).

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## 5.

To all appearances, in the 1990s the concept of *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo* spread not only in exclusively church circles and not only in its “pastoral” interpretation. One of the earliest mentions was B. Liubimov’s article, “There is no prophet...,” dedicated to the work of Ion Druță and published in *Literaturnaia Gazeta* in 1996.

Ion Druță chose an inauspicious moment to write and publish a chronicle of early Christianity [...] The long-bearded *mladostartsy*, with no theological education and busy in their search for all sorts of heresies not only in works by people of equal rank to themselves, but even in the writings of hierarchs, will take umbrage at the very possibility that a layman might encroach on their own interpretation of Sacred History. (Liubimov, 1996, p. 4; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

Apparently, the dissatisfaction present in this text is connected with public/printed statements by church figures which started appearing after 1991, directed not only against “non-Orthodox” theological texts but also against a series of cultural and social phenomena. Similar pathos may be found in a letter by Iu.I. Maletskii (1952–2018), also published in 1996 in another literary journal:

In any case, it is not for our *mladostartsy*, in their call for a rejection of wilfulness, to wilfully and short-sightedly take from a person the freedom with which God has endowed him, and endlessly to blame the intelligentsia for everything, who, not in the slightest out of malicious whim or empty caprice, but by their very nature live by free thought. (Maletskii, 1996, p. 377; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

Both of the aforementioned sources postulate *mladostarchestvo* not as a pastoral, but rather as an ecclesial-societal problem. Here, a principally new rhetorical strategy emerges: a particular church leader is criticized for making a public statement aimed at limiting freedom of expression in the context of the ecclesial-political, political, social, or cultural spheres. But this statement is understood as a pastoral action, which indeed is what allows the term *mladostarets* to be used. This corresponds not to a presence or absence of pastoral experience, but represents an attempt to teach people how to live on the basis of dilettante knowledge in the field of asceticism. The exceeding of pastoral prerogatives, the most important factor in the *pastoral* rhetorical strategy, is not excluded in this view of the problem, but retreats into the background. This rhetorical strategy may be called *emancipatory*, as what is central is an intention of liberation from the power of a pseudo-spiritual leader.

The sources at our disposal do not present a clear conclusion on whether the above authors knew of Metropolitan Anthony’s lecture, or whether they drew their idea of *mladostarchestvo* from ecclesial or para-ecclesial jargon, which this concept became part of. An alternative genealogy may also have taken place; after all, the same Kontsevich’s works may have been available in the USSR even before 1987. Whatever the case, *mladostarchestvo* publicly condemning theological literature or

criticizing the intelligentsia became a new and creative reading of a notion which had previously had an exclusively pastoral character. The language of the 1990s was flexible: the emergence of a large quantity of new social and political phenomena called new concepts into being, as well as new readings of concepts whose meaning had not yet stabilized.

## 6.

The moment when *mladostarchestvo* began to be spoken about at the highest level was in a speech by Patriarch Aleksii II (1929–2008) on December 23, 1998 at the Moscow Diocesan Assembly. Here is how the patriarch introduces this concept:

A true *starets* [spiritual elder], above all owing to his great spirituality, approaches each individual person with great care. In virtue of his experience and gift of grace, he reveals the image of God in a person by means that harmonize with their spiritual disposition and age. A number of modern “*startsy*” [spiritual elders] (or rather it would be more accurate to call them *mladostartsy*), without possessing spiritual discernment, place on those entering into the Church burdens which they cannot bear (Luke 11: 46), apply to their pastoral activity *clichés* destructive to spiritual life, unreasonably apply to members of the laity who have for the most part not yet attained spiritual maturity forms of spiritual guidance that are only appropriate in monasticism. (Aleksii II, 2000, p. 76; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

On the one hand, here is a clear example of the *pastoral* rhetorical strategy. Patriarch Aleksii II definitely uses the term *mladostarets* exclusively in a parish context: at one point he even introduces a distinction between *mladostartsy* and “the monastic clergy” (Aleksii II, 2000, p. 80). On the other hand, the genre of a New Year’s Eve, summatory speech itself did not presuppose a focus on any one problem; what was important was to present a spectrum of deformations of church life, against which the forces of the Church should be sent into battle. In this situation, the scope of critical statements using the concept of *mladostarets* widens. Thus, the Patriarch also has recourse to it when criticizing drawn-out confession:

These days many so-called *mladostartsy*, not having a proper understanding of the Sacrament of Repentance, turn confession either into a torture of the penitent, or into a conversation sometimes lasting up to an hour with each person, regardless of the fact that there is a whole mass of people wanting to confess. Consequently, as a rule the beginning of the Divine Liturgy is delayed, and many of the people who have come for confession leave without it. (Aleksii II, 2000, p. 79; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

Another sad consequence of *mladostarchestvo*, in the opinion of the Patriarch, is a distortion of ecclesiological perspective within the worldview of the congregation. “People go to church in order to meet with their *batiushka* [father, priest], and not with

Christ.” The self-isolation of such communities leads to their “left-wing” or “right-wing” political orientation, which is also a problem for the Church (Aleksii II, 2000, p. 78; our translation—E. L., & A. C.).

Finally, the passages of the Patriarch’s speech adjacent to those where the term *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo* is used are also significant. In particular, one excerpt is aimed at protecting the church hierarchy from inappropriate criticism from certain “*startsyy*” [spiritual elders], who “criticizing the church hierarchy [...], in contrast to the spirit-bearing fathers of the past and present, by their criticism attempt to attract attention and thus to create authority for themselves” (Aleksii II, 2000, p. 76; our translation—E. L., & A. C.). The term *mladostarets* appears in the speech a little later on in the context of a smooth transition to problems of the abuse of confession. Nonetheless, the above quote seems very close to the emancipatory rhetorical strategy: the “*startsyy*” [spiritual elders] attract attention to themselves (obviously as a result of public statements) through criticism. If, in the first examples above, what was at issue was criticism of cultural and social phenomena, then here it is the church hierarchy which is the subject of the same criticism.

Hence, although in the Patriarch’s speech the concept of *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo* is used within a basic pastoral rhetorical strategy, it was nevertheless projected onto a whole set of different church contexts. Possibly this circumstance became a sort of “trampoline” which allowed this notion to “leap into” social discussion, where it would be employed for argumentation within different strategies of critical rhetoric.

## 7.

The earliest reaction to the Patriarch’s speech and the resolution of the Synod that followed it was an interview with Metropolitan Anthony (of Sourozh) conducted at the beginning of 1999 by Hieromonk Ilarion (Alfeev)<sup>8</sup>. In this interview, Metropolitan Anthony elaborates the pastoral rhetorical strategy and makes an attempt at a rationalization of the phenomenon of *mladostarchestvo*, developing his own argument from 12 years previously.

Of course, it is not a question of distinguishing between young and old madmen. The point is, as far as possible, to assess the spiritual maturity of a person, his ability to be a leader for someone else [...]. It seems to me that there are three degrees of confessorship. There is the parish priest, whose role is to perform the sacraments of the Church [...]. There is another degree. This is a more experienced or older priest who has greater knowledge and a vocation to give instruction on how to progress from earth to heaven [...]. And there is a further third level. This is spiritual eldership [*starchestvo*], a level for people who, so to

<sup>8</sup> On 29<sup>th</sup> December, literally six days after the Patriarch’s speech, the Holy Synod passed a resolution on the of late increasingly frequent number of cases of abuse by some pastors of the authority entrusted to them by God “to bind and to loose” (Mt. 18: 18) (Opredelenie Sviashchennogo Sinoda, 1999). The concept that is the subject of this research does not figure in this ruling, however unofficially in church circles it was called the “*mladostarchestvo* resolution.” (see further: Surozhskii, 2017, p. 219).

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speak, have almost completed the whole journey to the doors of the Kingdom of Heaven, perhaps, but have not entered, or maybe would have been allowed in, but were sent back to the earth, to us, in order to guide us to this Kingdom. (Surozhskii, 2017, pp. 219, 223, 225; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

The distinction proposed by Metropolitan Anthony had great significance for discussions on the Orthodox clergy, as can be seen from the number of publications in the media referring to the 1999 interview<sup>9</sup>. The Patriarch himself indirectly quotes Metropolitan Anthony in a report to the Council of Bishops in 2000, emphasizing the inherent impossibility of linking *mladostarchestvo* with age:

The problem of so-called “*mladostarchestvo*” remains serious: a phenomenon not connected with the age of the clergyman, but with the absence in him of a sober and wise approach to spiritual practice. (Sbornik dokumentov, 2001, p. 15; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

This highlighted indifference with regard to age was both a strength and a weakness of Metropolitan Anthony’s argument: in the past, age had been the only means of objectivizing a priest’s unreadiness to give confession. Now, the situation could be solved only in a process of interaction between a priest and a lay person. The priest and lay person should themselves be able to adequately distinguish the threat of *mladostarchestvo* as the non-correspondence of a priest to his “pastoral function.”

This final removal of objective markers, turning the problem of *mladostarchestvo* into an abstract theological schema, gave rise to an attempt at a “systemic solution” to the problem in question: “There is a root independent from our human sins and weaknesses—a root, so to speak, which is inherent in our very system itself” (Ozolin, 2009, p. 246; our translation—E. L., & A. C.). This is how Archpriest N. Ozolin speaks about the problem of *mladostarchestvo*, in defence of young priests who are obliged to hear confession in accordance with an established, flawed tradition. Taking his cue from the words of the Patriarch, he proposes that the office of special “ordination as a confessor” be reinstated in Russia:

to be performed by a ruling bishop on a priest possessing the gift of grace-filled pastorship; a tradition which was generally accepted in Rus’ in ancient times and is practised to this day in the Orthodox East. (Ozolin, 2009, p. 249; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

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<sup>9</sup> According to a search on Yandex, a minimum of 270 publications quote Metropolitan Anthony’s words “there are three degrees of confessorship.” Such publications may be found on key portals devoted to Orthodoxy: Pravmir, Foma, Pravoslavie.ru, among others. One of Moscow’s oldest priests, Archpriest Vladislav Sveshnikov gave the following answer to the question, “What is a *mladostarets*?”: “I do not want to answer this question, only because this is wonderfully described by Metropolitan Anthony of Surozh in one of his brilliant lectures where he speaks about *mladostarchestvo*. I simply agree with every word he says.” (Sveshnikova, 2020; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

The use of the term *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo* in the context in question was part of a different rhetorical strategy. To be precise, the author appears to combine two critical strategies within his statement: *pastoral* rhetoric against *mladostarchestvo*, and criticism of an ecclesial structure whose foundation went back to the Synodal period. Criticism of this structure began even before the Revolution<sup>10</sup>. Here, the object of criticism were the church authorities for permitting inexperienced priests to hear confession, and thereby giving rise to a situation where every priest became a “*mladostarets* by profession” (as follows from Ozolin’s argumentation). This rhetorical strategy may be termed as *anti-systemic*.

## 8.

In the 2000s, a whole stratum of literature emerges where, in one way or another, at the basis of a critical-rhetorical apparatus the notion of *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo* is to be found. One of the most prominent critics of this phenomenon was the priest Vladimir Sokolov. His text, “*Mladostarchestvo—a temptation typical of our time*”<sup>11</sup> defines *mladostarchestvo* (although this contradicts the title of the article) as an absolute: “The temptation of *mladostarchestvo* has existed in every age” (Sokolov, 2005, p. 17; our translation—E. L., & A. C.). It is important to note that, starting from the middle of the 2000s, the term in question is ever less frequently placed in quotation marks, which appears to signal a new phase in the existence of the concept<sup>12</sup>. While pointing out the unoriginate nature of *mladostarchestvo*, Sokolov does nevertheless give an account of its genealogy, explaining why especially modern Russia is a fertile breeding ground for this phenomenon:

It is not so long ago that the Church was subject to persecution. Her destruction was promised: churches were closed; the clergy were executed and exiled; the faithful were harassed in all sorts of ways; “godless five-year plans” were even carried out for the final destruction of religion [...]. But today all this has changed: the front lines have become fluid, and in some places disappeared altogether. It has become impossible to tell where the rear-guard is and where the vanguard, who is an enemy and who a friend, because attacks have begun to come from all sides. It has even become impossible to tell whether to defend or attack: does one have an enemy or an ally in front of one? Everything has become confused. A time of temptation is upon us. The enemy has changed his tactics; he has started to come in “sheep’s clothing” in the guise of a “good shepherd”. (Sokolov, 2005, pp. 9–10; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

<sup>10</sup> See especially one work that Ozolin refers to—Smirnov (1913).

<sup>11</sup> This material became a central element of two books: *Iskusheniia Nashikh Dnei. V Zashchitu Tserkovnogo Edinstva* [Temptations of our time. In defence of church unity] (Dobrosotskikh, 2003) and his own, which came out two years later (Sokolov, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Referred to here are specifically Orthodox media and publications.

*Mladostarchestvo* is thus incorporated into a global history of the conflict between good and evil, itself representing a manifestation of the latter on the historical stage as part of a specific historical situation. Sokolov does not appear to construct a new rhetorical strategy, taking to its most detailed a description of what is criticized within the *pastoral* strategy. Nevertheless, in his wide-ranging analytical article an attempt is contained at examining the situation from another angle. Taking as his starting point Kontsevich's argument, mentioned in passing above, on the responsibility of the pastorate for pastoral abuses, he develops this idea:

The first reason for the emergence of such confessorship is the psychology of the pastorate. Not wishing to change, we wish to transfer responsibility for everything that happens to us onto the pastor. Such flight from freedom and responsibility is sometimes expressed in a readiness to do anything at all. (Sokolov, 2005, pp. 22–23; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

In Sokolov's work, a new configuration of critical argument is set out, in which *mladostarchestvo* obtains a fundamentally different interpretation. To start with, this has a very general form, but as it progresses attempts are made to historicize *mladostarchestvo*, understood as a characteristic predisposition of the pastorate towards a faulty type of obedience, and to root it in the specific social experience of the Soviet era. One of the first people to speak of this, A. Agadzhanian, called *mladostarchestvo* a "psychological syndrome of *homo sovieticus*" (Agadzhanian, 2011, p. 21)<sup>13</sup>. This argument is elaborated in an interview with A. Desnitskii:

It is no coincidence that all this *mladostarchestvo* flourished in such glorious technicolor specifically in the nineties. A huge number of people came to the Church at this time who had never heard anything about the Church before, and, most importantly, were used to the idea that the things that were most important would be "communicated" to them by the *partorg* [party worker, organizer] at a meeting. They rejected Soviet ideology (or rather, as experience has shown, laid it aside for the time being), but they still held on to a Soviet way of thinking and called this Orthodox: we are surrounded by enemies; we are the bearers of the one true, progressive doctrine and so on. (Desnitskii, 2015; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)<sup>14</sup>

Hence, the concept of *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo*, to the degree of its infiltration into church discourse, becomes a tool for criticizing things that are different and even directly opposed to its direct referent—the priest/clergy. *Mladostarchestvo* is

<sup>13</sup> Later on, the link between *homo soveticus* and *mladostarchestvo* was also articulated by B. Filippov (2019, p. 39).

<sup>14</sup> Abbot Petr (Meshcherinov) adopts a similar position in a multitude of texts and lectures on this topic. Later on, B Knorre (2018, p. 10) was to examine *mladostarchestvo* in the same manner as an example of "a flight from freedom," a concept E. Fromm uses to describe the phenomenon of the passive reaction of the masses towards the rise of the totalitarian regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Archpriest Georgii Belodurov (2019) states directly: "*mladostarchestvo* is an error of the laity" (p. 345; our translation—E. L., & A. C.).

used as part of another rhetorical strategy that may be called *socio-critical*: the term itself leads us to a false *piste* that does not enable us to penetrate any deeper into the essence of the phenomenon. In actual fact, the above-mentioned trait of Soviet social policy (or even the specific nature of the political culture of Modernity, to use E. Fromm's argument) led to the degradation of the individual, who lost the ability to resolve his spiritual and practical problems independently, seeking a universal leader capable of giving an answer to all his questionings. Within the framework of this rhetorical strategy, the notion of *mladostarchestvo* visibly leaves the realm of the specifically clerical and becomes part of the toolkit of critique of post-Soviet religiosity as a broader phenomenon.

## 9.

Throughout the 2000s, Patriarch Aleksii II mentioned *mladostarchestvo* on a number of occasions in public appearances<sup>15</sup>. This, among other things, contributed to the development of a certain "theory of *mladostarchestvo*" that may be found in the article of the priest V. Sokolov, as well in both anthologies where this article was published during the 2000s. Here, *mladostarchestvo* finally becomes a fundamental category for describing church reality in ultra-critical tones. In the absence of precise criteria for distinguishing between a spiritual elder, an ordinary priest, and a *mladostarets*, such an element of critical rhetoric could be "wielded like a bogeyman by saying that everything everywhere was *mladostarchestvo*" (Kozlov, 2012, p. 491; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)<sup>16</sup>, as Archpriest Maksim Kozlov remarked, who was perhaps the first to draw attention to this problem:

*Mladostarchestvo* is a term currently much in vogue and which, aside from its own meaning, is often used as a label. Much as people have started to say "fascist" whenever they want to say something nasty about someone, in just the same way people have begun to say, "That is *mladostarchestvo*." A terrifying portrait has been painted of some sort of crazy priest, chewing sunflower seeds and handing out sweets, hitting people on the head, pulling them by their pony tails, saying to one person, "You marry that chap," and to another, "Off with you tomorrow to a monastery." (Kozlov, 2012, p. 489; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

It is important to point out that Archpriest Maxim is describing abuses connected precisely with the use of the term in question. What he is after is an adequate vision of the problem, which, in his opinion, is distorted by a ubiquitous and inappropriate use of the pejorative *mladostarchestvo*. Further on in his presentation, he embarks on an analysis of pastoral abuses, mistakes at confession, and so on, but without mentioning *mladostarchestvo*: that is, in essence, he removes the concept

<sup>15</sup> Starting with a report to the Council of Bishops in the year 2000 (see, for example: Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchate, 2007; The press office of the Moscow Patriarchate, 2006; V Monastyr' Ne Ukhodiat, 2019).

<sup>16</sup> Included in Father Maxim's presentation was in particular his earlier text (Kozlov, 2008).

being researched here from the *pastoral* rhetorical strategy. *Mladostarchestvo* is removed from the argumentation because it impedes a “serious” consideration of the problem.

Judging from this strategy, at a certain point an ironic use of the term *mladostarchestvo* as something that it is obviously a clear exaggeration becomes part of the colloquial rhetoric of the white (non-monastic) clergy, who meet with accusations of exceeding their pastoral prerogatives with a certain degree of regularity. This colloquial rhetoric finds its way into the public sphere whenever there is an opportunity. Here is how the priest Dimitrii Terekhin uses this rhetorical device, polemicizing at a distance with his diocesan administration:

I know a great deal about our Nizhni-Novgorod “ecclesiastical courts.” The same courts that, in their view infallibly, decide which of our brethren “has a devil,” who has “got the wrong door,” who is an “idiot,” and who is “psychologically ill,” who is in a state of “*prelest*” [spiritual delusion], who is a “*mladostarets*.” (Terekhin, 2017; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

According to this logic, the “system” sees a *mladostarets* in every to some degree active parish priest. What is more, having the support of the parish is the most reliable sign of the truth of an accusation of *mladostarchestvo*: “These speculators on the system have long since learnt to pass off the voice of the people, crying to heaven, as a broadcast of the opinions of their “disgruntled pastor- *mladostartsy*” (Terekhin, 2017; our translation—E. L., & A. C.). It is hard to say how widespread this type of critical rhetoric is, however one may make a judgement from the words of N. Skuratovskaia, a psychologist who helps clergymen in difficult situations, especially in situations of a sudden transfer from a parish. Speaking on potential conflictual developments, she remarks:

In such cases it happens that a priest is accused of gathering a sect around himself, that he is a *mladostarets*, and on this basis he can be denied the right to serve until he shows repentance, which finds its expression in the fact that all his spiritual children are dispersed. (Volianskaia, 2018; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

Thus, one may speak of the incorporation of the concept in question into yet another rhetorical strategy, in which the blade of criticism is twisted in the very direction that earlier had acted as a conduit for the traditional *pastoral* strategy: the church hierarchy and officials, for reasons unrelated to the essence of the matter, place limits on the pastoral activity of a clergyman using the “bogyman of *mladostarchestvo*.” This rhetorical strategy may be termed *anti-hierarchical*.

As J. Agamben remarks regarding the existence of monastic rules in Early Modern society, where they are subjected to parody by “secular” authors, “the complete comprehension of a phenomenon is its parody” (Agamben, 2013, p. 18). To paraphrase this statement with relation to the *anti-hierarchical* rhetorical strategy, it

may be said that parody of an element of criticism destroys its critical potential. In this situation, the concern of the church authorities and experienced pastors for priests and lay people who have fallen into the “trap of *mladostarchestvo*” is not so much parodied as “made fun of”: the category of *mladostarchestvo* itself is placed within an opposite rhetorical context of hierarchical arbitrariness.

## 10.

Before concluding this research paper, one more traditional usage of the notion *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo* should be mentioned that clearly differs from the rhetorical strategies described above. This particular tradition testifies to the extraordinary distance of the “horizon of expectation” relating to the term *mladostarets* after the patriarch’s speech in 1998, and how global the phenomena could be that were encompassed by this element of critical rhetoric.

One of the earliest reactions to Patriarch Aleksii’s speech was an article by Natalia Babasian published in the *Russian Journal* in January 1999. It proposes an original connection between *startsy* [spiritual elders], who were the object of the Patriarch’s criticism in the section of his speech preceding the use of the term *mladostarets*, and abuses in parish life (discussed further on, where the Patriarch mentions *mladostartsy*):

Many *startsy* in the *lavras* keep in strict obedience—up to and including the complete deprivation of their freewill—not just future monks, for whom such a trial is appropriate by virtue of their rank. The same principal is applied to ordinary believers, who for the purpose of the salvation of their souls are literally turned into slaves, carrying out any whim of their *starets*. Moreover, the *startsy* have passed on this art to a whole generation of young priests, who have gone out into parishes and begun to integrate these principles into parochial practice, for which they have earned the nickname *mladostartsy*. (Babasian, 1999; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

*Startsy* and *mladostartsy* are thus presented as two elements of a single milieu, where the pastoral abuses of *mladostartsy* represent direct consequences of the activity of *startsy*. Combined they constitute what may be termed a “political opposition movement”: “[...] in recent years *startsy* and ‘*mladostartsy*’ have gained in strength and become kinds of informal church leaders” (Babasian, 1999; our translation—E. L., & A. C.).

Babasian’s line of argument was continued and developed by V. V. Pribylovskii (1956–2016), who simultaneously introduced it into scholarly discourse:

The Patriarch came down on so-called “*mladostarchestvo*” with unexpected vehemence. Aleksii II spoke of the way the new *startsy* unjustifiably subjugate the wills of their spiritual children, place demands on lay people that are applicable only to monks, frequently politicize their activity, sharply oppose themselves to

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the church authorities, form closed, almost sectarian communities. It was clear to everyone that what was at issue was a wave of fundamentalism in the Church, but even in this case no names were named. (Verkhovskii et al., 1999, p. 100; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

V. V. Pribylovskii paints (or even “constructs,” as may be asserted based on the absence of any sort of references other than to N. Babasian) a genuine ecclesial-political confrontation of different church groups:

Cut to the quick by the speech on “*mladostartsy*,” the leaders of the Union of Orthodox Brotherhoods could not help approving the Synod’s resolution, but immediately retaliated by accusing liberal journalists of attacking monasteries and demanded that, as a symmetrical response, measures be taken against “general confession,” baptism without immersion and other deviations from tradition. (Verkhovskii et al., 1999, p. 100; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

N. Mitrokhin develops the argument on the equivalence of *startsya* and *mladostartsy*. He reproduces Babasian’s idea on the genesis of *mladostartsy* almost word for word:

In the second half of the 1990s, the growing influence of *startsya* began to worry the hierarchy and parish priests. In imitation of well-known spiritual fathers, many priests, especially priest-monks, started setting up their own communities of disciples. (Mitrokhin, 2004, p. 103; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

According to Mitrokhin’s interpretation, *mladostartsy* are a peculiar type of agent of “eldership opposition”: by denouncing inexperienced pastors, the patriarch was in actual fact striking a covert blow at church fundamentalists:

At the Moscow diocesan assembly, the patriarch made a long programmatic speech against a phenomenon that he characterized as *mladostarchestvo*. He denounced young priests who were copying their teachers badly or had taken on a task that was not for them. Notwithstanding, what was cast doubt on was essentially the entire activity of *startsya*. (Mitrokhin, 2004, pp. 103–104; our translation—E. L., & A. C.)

In all likelihood, what may be seen here is a development of the *emancipatory* strategy. Nevertheless it is clear that, if the intention of the latter consisted in unmasking the obscurantism of pseudo-spiritual religious leaders, then here there is a different intention: before us is a desire to denounce a large, poorly controlled fundamentalist network that apparently exists within the Russian Church; it is coordinated from the monasteries, but its adherents are ordinary priests; it is not subordinate to the authority of the patriarch and practices total control in relation to its flock. This rhetorical strategy may thus be labelled *denunciatory*.

Incidentally, the authors who had recourse to this strategy were shortly afterwards to reject using the term *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo* altogether. This may be explained by the fact that the use of this notion as part of the *pastoral* strategy becomes routine and ceases to be of interest for a *denunciatory* strategy<sup>17</sup>.

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The history of the concept of *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo* may be summed up as follows. It emerged in an *émigré* context. It was there that it became an element of a *pastoral* rhetorical strategy aimed at combatting abuses in the practice of confession. The specific religious situation in the 1990–2000s in Russia gave rise to its adoption and introduction into active circulation. As an interesting neologism and a tool for criticizing undesirable ecclesial-social phenomena, it was espoused by part of the intelligentsia: the appearance of the notion in question as part of an *emancipatory* rhetorical strategy may be interpreted in this way. In the 2000s, in the process of a rapid growth in use of the term *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo* in public discussion, it was integrated into a series of other rhetorical strategies directed at criticism of problems in church life. These were, in the first instance, *anti-systemic* criticism of the practice of confession, which was entrusted to young priests, rather than to experienced clergymen. Within the context of a *socio-critical* rhetorical strategy, criticism was transferred from the clergy to the pastorate, or more precisely to the nature of religiosity in post-Soviet Russia, which as a result of various factors created preconditions for flawed relations between the pastorate and the clergy. An *anti-hierarchical* rhetorical strategy resorted to parody of hierarchs, employing the pejorative *mladostarets* with the aim of limiting the independence of parish clerics. Finally, at the beginning of the 2000s the term *mladostarets* was also used in a *denunciatory* strategy, whose aim was to expose internal struggles within the church organization.

In the period from 1980–2010, a continuous “growth in demand” for use of the term *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo* may be observed, which was incorporated into ever more new strategies of critical rhetoric. Furthermore, the role of the concept itself changed from one critical argument or another, depending on the context: authors tried to identify different objects of criticism that might either be hidden behind the phenomenon of so-called *mladostarchestvo*, or conceal the intention of those using this term. Consequently, on the one hand, a sort of “oversaturation” of the term with different meanings takes place, and on the other, there is an intricate interlacing of intentions according to which this notion is used. The fact that, in its final stage, the term is used with parodic intention within an *anti-hierarchical* strategy may bear witness to a kind of exhaustion of its semantic resources.

This problem is most relevant today to the basic *pastoral* rhetorical strategy, incessantly in search of ever more objects of criticism from the area of parish life, which

<sup>17</sup> N. Mitrokhin (2006) indirectly testifies to this in a later text: “General reflections on the inadmissibility of *mladostarchestvo* that have been heard in the last six years from part of the episcopate (especially permanent members of the Holy Synod) do not single out *startsy* (*staritz*) who are not priests as a separate phenomenon” (p. 127; our translation—E. L., & A. C.).

itself grows ever more transparent and minutely scrutinized in public discussion. In all probability, it is precisely the inability of the concept of *mladostarets/mladostarchestvo* to reflect abuses in the parish context with its former force and urgency that has given rise to a new pejorative—*dukhovnyi ab"iuz* [spiritual abuse] (Slovokhotova & Shchedrin, 2021), which may be found with increasing frequency at the spearhead of critical rhetoric.

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