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The Ideology of Putinism

Is It Sustainable?

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Introduction

In the 1990s, Boris Yeltsin sponsored a search for an idea of what Russia could be. He never found it. When he became president in 2000, Vladimir Putin presented himself not as an ideologue but as a modernizer—neither anti-Soviet, as far as the past was concerned, nor anti-American or anti-European, as far as the future was. And yet, undercurrents of what we see today in Putin's Kremlin have long been visible in initiatives like the restoration of the Soviet national anthem, the creation of the patriotic youth group "Nashi," or the ever-expanding cult of the Great Patriotic War. Such initiatives, even when directed by the presidential administration, have not entirely been of the state's making. An important role has been played by the so-called ideological **entrepreneurs**, individuals operating in the gray zone of the Putin regime. Yet such initiatives have also been a response to popular demand for economic, political, and historical stability, linking continuity with the past to visions of cultural achievement and the image of a strong Russian state. Such patriotism has manifested itself in pride, grievance, and a nostalgia for the Soviet Union, much of it fueled by the repudiation of Russia's "Western experience" in the 1990s.

The use of ideology by the Putin regime admits several interpretations. One popular approach claims that contemporary regimes in the Putinist mold have **limited need** for ideology. An alternative argument is that the rudiments of an ideology have been consistently projected into Russian society for the sake of particular actions, as with the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine: the war has allowed Putin to enforce his ideological aims with the repressive apparatus of a police state. Yet another interpretation is that at some point something snapped in Putin, and he changed from being a self-dealing modernizer and cynical "political technologist" to a purveyor of ideology, convinced that Russia was encircled by the West and that it had to unite the peoples of Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia into a Slavic whole—or that he had to save some Russian essence from the decadence and foreign policy aggression of the West.

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This report argues that Vladimir Putin's regime does have an ideology. As the authors show, from the start of his rule over two decades ago, the Kremlin has made serious, consistent, and increasing investments in promoting certain values. Borrowing heavily from czarist and Soviet themes, as well as other intellectual sources like the twentieth-century radical right, Putinism elevates an idea of imperial-nationalist statism amplified by Russian greatness, exceptionalism, and historical struggle against the West. Notable throughout this period has been the Kremlin's attention to education and memory politics, accompanied by a **growing emphasis and reactionary in nature**, on what the Kremlin describes as traditional values. Since the mid-2010s this was followed by a shift in focus from narratives and monuments alone to establishing and funding public engagement with these narratives. Phases marked by the more active promotion of these ideas coincide with external and internal challenges to the regime, often triggered by color revolutions in Russia's "near abroad," domestic protests, or the wars Putin started. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and its radical break with the West have prompted the regime to mount a more sustainable ideology-building effort.

A common critique of the Putin regime's attachment to ideology is that Russian politicians do not live by the piety, collectivism, and traditional values they espouse. But ideologues can be hypocrites. One can use "ideology" in the Althusserian sense to denote the "imagined existence of things," meaning the ideologue need not believe the espoused ideas; the ideology is useful for the production of *practices and rituals*. Especially when viewed through the lens of its cultural and historical politics, the Russian government, is an excellent example of this theory. The Kremlin has established a wide range of government-organized nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to promote a presentist view of the past, in which Russia is always threatened by a nefarious West, internal enemies abound, and Russia's sacrifices and glories make it a global great power. Across after-school clubs, children's holiday camps with battle reenactments and historical disinformation lessons, Immortal Regiment processions, the wearing of St. George's ribbons, and "Victory Dictation," a range of initiatives has been designed to enshrine practices and rituals that are only superficially commemorative. In fact, they enforce a set worldview or ideology. Even if elites do not start as true believers, their heavy-handed inculcation, repetition, and blocking of other views over many years ensures that they absorb at least some of these beliefs.

Statism is a key pillar of Putin's ideology, which includes deference to a strong, stable state, allowing Russians to be Russians; such statism is based on exceptionalism and traditional values. Another pillar is anti-Westernism, when combined with Russian exceptionalism, promotes a messianic notion of Russia as a great power and civilization state, guarding a Russo-centric polyculturalism[1], traditional family and gender roles, and guarding against materialism and individualism. The needs of the state and the collective must come first. The plasticity of these narratives should not be confused for the malleability of the ideology's core elements. They are more a way of selling or packaging the policy to different audiences. New twenty-first-century ideologies are not so much focused on grand narratives or text-based worldviews. Instead, they reflect the fragmentation and eclecticism of the digital age. That this ideology is not spelled out in philosophical texts but most often absorbed through signs, symbols, and popular culture makes it both malleable and easily digestible for less-educated people.

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[1] Polyculturalism differs from multiculturalism in that it acknowledges that cultures are dynamic, interactive, and impure, as opposed to multiculturalism that treats cultures as static entities and emphasizes their differences.

The reigning ideology extends beyond memory politics, encompassing policies intended to protect religious believers from offense, to stigmatize regime opponents with Western connections as "foreign agents," and even to criminalize those who deny Russia's great power status by in any way tarnishing the Soviet victory in 1945. Russian doctrines and strategies are an official guidebook to this ideology and of its evolution into something more specific and more actionable. The Kremlin actively **promotes** the fundamental Russian identity of the nations of the Russian Federation, a historically rooted system that unites spiritual, moral, cultural, and historical values.

Will this ideology-building effort help keep Putin in power? This report suggests that it could. Conditions remain generally favorable for the Kremlin; large segments of Russian society **endorse** its narratives because they retain post-Soviet nostalgia, are convinced of their country's great power status, or are **responsive** to the socially conservative agendas of Putin's Kremlin. It is hard to see where challenges to the Putinist ideology could emerge in Russia. Societal resistance to Kremlin propaganda has remained marginal, even during more liberal periods. An alternative pro-Western identity able to challenge the Kremlin's propaganda has failed to emerge and is less likely following the massive exodus of Russian liberals as a result of the Ukraine war. The Kremlin has directed particular ideology-promotion efforts toward societal segments where it senses vulnerability, such as young people, who are known to be among the most pro-Western groups in Russia.

The Rudiments of Soviet Ideology

In Russia, post-Soviet society did not start with a clean slate. Many Soviet citizens **embraced** ideas and beliefs as a collective body, which shaped their perceptions of themselves and of the world around them.[2] When the Soviet system collapsed, its ideological legacy lingered on.

This legacy included a sense of exceptionalism. The Soviet Union conceived of itself as a mighty superpower, a huge country with nuclear weapons that was globally feared and respected and with only one competitor, the United States. In the late Soviet Union, propaganda tended to portray the West (and the United States in particular) as "the Other" against which it built the Soviet collective identity, presenting the Soviet system as the most viable alternative to most things "Western" (or "capitalist"). A sense of belonging to a mighty superpower compensated Soviet citizens for the difficulties present in their daily lives. This stress on exceptionalism also borrowed from Russia's century-old tradition of paternalism and statism ("государственность"): belief in the supremacy of a unified state as the highest governing principle and the ultimate source of political authority coupled with opposition to any constraints on the state, whether through law, civil society, or formal institutions.[3] For the ethnic Russians at the core of the Soviet Union, a leading position within the system furnished an extra source of collective pride and self-respect, a substitute for other perks such as the republican level structures within the Soviet Union granted to other Soviet republics.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, defeat in the Cold War, and loss of Russia's superpower status led to a sudden and traumatic **disappearance** of many important composites in the Soviet collective identity.

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2 These ideas were further fueled by rather extreme nationalist views that had been simmering from the 1960s within parts of the cultural and state elite and which came into the open in the 1980s and 1990s.

3 As William Pomeranz **points out**, "The state occupies such a prominent place . . . largely because it remains the only institution that has traditionally held the country–and empire–together."

Particularly painful was a perceived loss of great power status. Post-Soviet Russia lost much of its influence on the international stage and faced economic misery of the 1990s. It even had to **accept** aid from its former enemy—the United States. For many, this was a national trauma. Most Russian respondents (about 70 percent) to a survey at the time **recognized** their country's loss of its great power status. A popular saying many people at the time repeated like a mantra expressed their frustration: "What a great country did we lose!" ("Какую страну потеряли!"). Widespread anxiety and resentment shaped post-Soviet Russian politics, in which Soviet elites and institutions **continued** to play a prominent role.[4]

Muscovites wait in line to buy bread amid the economic crisis that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, December 1993.

Photo: Michael Evstafiev/AFP via Getty Images

Even with the arrival of market economics, post-Soviet Russia failed to break with its Soviet past. Many grassroots movements that emerged in the new Russia **remained** retrospectively oriented, whether they were post-Soviet populists, left-wing movements passionate about egalitarian justice, or neo-Eurasianists and nationalists focused on Russia's past greatness. The same was true for the Kremlin. As liberals lost influence in the Russian government, emphasis fell on the Soviet legacy, sugarcoating the Soviet past and adopting more **imperial** conceptualizations of the new Russian **state**, which was increasingly characterized as a homeland for Russians and Russian speakers across the territory of the former Soviet Union. These factors provided fertile ground for Vladimir Putin's ideology building and for the assertive foreign policy that accompanied it.

Putinist Ideology in the Making

Until recently, the Kremlin's political legitimacy did not require a coherent ideology. A more sustained effort at developing one emerged after a surge in protests in 2011 and 2012 and suddenly increased with

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4 Maria Snegovaya, "Chapter 5: Who Are We? Russia's Identify-Building Failure," in *Failure. Russia under Putin* (forthcoming 2024).

the start of the 2022 war in Ukraine. However, since Putin's early days and throughout much of his rule, there has been a deliberate effort at a state-promoted vision of Russia rooted in Soviet and imperial Russian history.

THE 2000S: NATIONAL CONSOLIDATION AROUND A STRONG, STABLE STATE

For Putin, "**the history man**," the importance of history was apparent from the start. At first, the goal seems to have been primarily a means to an end. Reactionary and liberal groups clashed in their visions of what direction Russian society should take; Putin, once he took power, aimed to unite a divided and beleaguered country, offering a mutually agreeable interpretation of the end of the Soviet era and reasons for pride based on historical themes and motifs. This early emphasis on patriotism **lacked** strong ideological content. Beyond calling for Russia's stabilization and revival, the **invocation** of history as the basis for national identity in a culturally diverse country included ethnic and religious minorities, while still celebrating the dominant ethnic Russian (русский) and Orthodox Christian culture. As former minister of culture Vladimir Medinskii has **argued**, this was about the "identity of Russian [российского] society, in which respect for the heroic past . . . has played the part of a unifying force." Exemplifying this emphasis on unity, the Day of the October Revolution (November 7) was replaced with a new state holiday, the Day of National Unity, in 2004. Using cultural memory to bring a divided nation together, the government promoted a vision of Russia that most people could support and adopted a mélange of popular historical narratives. These narratives appealed to as many ideologies and political persuasions as possible: imperialists, Communist nostalgists, supporters of a strong state, and ethno-nationalists. This was further illustrated by the selective appropriation of Soviet symbols, such as the State Coat of Arms and the Soviet National Anthem, which Putin reintroduced in late 2000.

This vision of Russia was also soon reflected in history textbooks. In 2001, the Kremlin **convened** a government committee to analyze the content of textbooks and teachers' books recent Russian history. Its goal was to reassert control over the textbook market. The committee **ordered** that the "many negative descriptions that appeared in textbooks in the 1990s" be replaced by a vision of Russian history promoting "patriotism, citizenship, national self-consciousness, and historical optimism," and it removed several books from the officially approved list.

The emphasis on unity, continuity, and pride crystallized around the value of "thousand-year-old" Russian statehood, a central element of national identity, and around the idea of a "strong state" as the source of Russia's past and future greatness. Already in late 1999, Putin published an article "**Russia at the Turn of Millenium**," where he laid out his vision for the country. Rejecting both the dogma of Communism but also Western-style democracy, he **offered** that Russia would seek a third way that would rely on its traditions of a strong state. "For Russians, a strong state is not an anomaly which should be got rid of. Quite the contrary, they see it as a source and guarantor of order and the initiator and main driving force of any change." Putin further articulated these themes in his 2003 presidential address to the Federal Assembly. Warning about the threats of state disintegration, Putin **stressed** the "truly historic feat" of "retaining the state in a vast geographic space" and of "preserving a unique community of peoples while strengthening the country's position in the world." Moving away from Yeltsin's portrayal of the Soviet disintegration as the "foundational act" of the new Russia, Putin presented it as a sudden "catastrophe," a disruption of Russia's "great power" status and the "thousand-year-old" Russian strong state. Also reflective of this growing emphasis on the role of statehood in

Russian history was the 2008 state TV show "Name of Russia," launched to determine the most notable figure in Russian history through a nationwide vote. Of the twelve historical figures selected to be voted on, nine were statesmen, ranging from Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great to Lenin and Stalin. The winner of the competition was Alexander Nevsky, a prince who battled against European invvaders for the sake of preserving Russian statehood and the Orthodox Christian faith.

This move from repentance to pride, from division to unity, and from the birth of a new democratic Russia to the portrayal of Russian statehood as a millennial tradition explains the mythic place of the Great Patriotic War, as the Soviet fight against Nazism from 1941 to 1945 came to be known in Soviet history books. It would become the keystone of the Putinist ideology. The sole truly unifying element among the many polarizing chapters of Russia's history, the Great Victory is one of the few topics on which most Russians (about 80-90 percent) have consistently **felt** pride over the years. Most political actors, from liberals to Communists and nationalists, agreed on the significance of the victory in Russian history. The Kremlin **used** a triumphalist narrative of the Great Patriotic War to create a post-Soviet Russian identity. The 2005 Victory Day parade, when celebrations reached a previously unseen scale, was a turning point in this regard.

In the mid-2000s, a series of color revolutions shook the post-Soviet space (Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005). The remarks of President George W. Bush—who welcomed color revolutions—and U.S. initiatives in support of popular movements against authoritarian regimes suggested that a country like Belarus could be next. These developments convinced Putin that the United States actively promoted regime change across the region, including in Russia. By 2005, state-linked media openly **claimed** that Russia was the target of a new Cold War, waged "by political provocation, played out with the help of special operations, media war, political destabilization, and the seizure of power by an aggressively activated minority . . . with the help of velvet, blue, orange, etc. revolutions."

> *The Kremlin used a triumphalist narrative of the Great Patriotic War to create a post-Soviet Russian identity.*

These concerns **added** a "Thermidorian" dimension to the evolving statist narratives Putin was promoting, a growing anti-revolution orientation and a focus on deepening the state's hold over society. Putin's chief political strategist, Vladislav Surkov, developed the notion of "sovereign democracy," which made the correct use of Russian history (including in education) a matter of vital national interest, aimed at fostering anti-Western sentiment through an increase in state propaganda and the repression of NGOs and human rights activists. Common themes included the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in unifying the Russian people and the vision of Russia as a "besieged fortress" historically under attack by the West. Kremlin policies increasingly **promoted** Russia's national interests as the main "standard of the truth and reliability of historical work"—to cite one of Russia's main pro-Kremlin officials. The 2009 National Security Strategy **warned** against "attempts to revise the history of Russia, her role and place in world history," which could negatively influence the country's national security. "**Securitization**"—a process of aligning Russian culture and history with "security" matters—was proceeding apace. One example is the **emergence** of the St. George's ribbon as a commemorative symbol of the Great Patriotic War in reaction to the 2003-2004 Orange Revolution. Since 2014, it has denoted support for Russian aggression against Ukraine.

A shop window is decorated with a sticker reading "May 9" in the colors of Saint George's ribbon ahead of the Victory Day in Moscow, May 2023.

Photo: Kirill Kudryavtsev/AFP via Getty Images

The color revolutions of the mid-2010s, which featured active youth protest participation, also drew the regime's attention to the indoctrination of youth. This resulted in Surkov launching a number of pseudo-grassroots youth movements such as Nashi, the "Democratic Anti-Fascist Youth Movement 'Ours!'," and the Molodaya Gvardiya) aimed at co-opting young Russians. The focus on youth drew more attention to education. By 2005, the standardization of education had become one of the four national projects overseen by Dmitry Medvedev, then one of Putin's key allies and subsequently the Russian placeholder president.[5] A number of new movements were established, such as the historical memory project (which lay dormant until 2012). In 2007, a new teacher's manual created by order of the presidential administration presented Russia as having to retain its sovereignty against a predatory West, urging teachers to interpret Stalin's repressions as a necessary evil, and portrayed the Soviet collapse as a tragic mistake that hindered Russia's progress. The teacher's manual was soon followed by a controversial history textbook, which **justified** Stalin's purges as "the requirements of modernization in a situation of scarce resources."

THE 2010S: THE CONSERVATIVE TURN AND DEEPENING ENGAGEMENT

Despite the Kremlin's best efforts at offering a unifying narrative for various social groups throughout the 2000s, liberals proved disloyal to Putin. Among Russian middle-class urbanites, counterstreams

5 Dmitry Medvedev was subsequently the president of Russia from 2008 to 2012. He is largely believed to have been appointed for this position temporarily to hold office until Putin could run again in 2012.

and ongoing modernization in Russian society led to a growing dissatisfaction with the lack of political change, culminating in pro-democracy protests that spread in major Russian cities through 2011 and 2012. This brought **ideology building** to the forefront, as the government needed new means of political legitimization to justify its increasingly authoritarian style of governing. But contrary to the 2000s, when Surkov's eclectic approaches flirted with various societal groups, the "betrayal" of the liberals made Putin turn to his more conservative political base. This conservative shift was expedited by a drop in foreign direct investment and energy prices, as well as by the general knock-on effects from the 2008 global financial crisis, which engendered a shift away from the earlier paradigm of economic openness, encouraging the regime to shore up its domestic legitimacy by leaning further into an ideological project.

Having realized that there were limits to how much Western-themed modernization Russia was able to achieve without reforming the existing political arrangements, the Kremlin looked more and more to the past—and "tradition"—for inspiration about what Russia was and what it should be. The Kremlin based its arguments on conservative Christian values in opposition to the overly liberal and morally decadent West, with its emphasis on issues of gender and sexual minorities' rights. The so-called conservative turn seen from 2012 onward drew on preexisting initiatives, bringing them from the background to center stage. The emphasis on national identity became much more pronounced. Putin began his third term in 2012 with a long **essay** on the "national question," claiming that Russia-ness is a cultural identity derived from the civilizational greatness of the ethnic Russian people, whose mission is to unify the rest of society around its historical values.[6] Since 2012 the frequency of the term "morality" ("нравственность") and of the adjective "spiritual" ("духовный") in Putin's speeches has **spiked**.

The Russian Orthodox Church played a more **prominent** role by being increasingly present at state ceremonies at all levels, and in ever-closer interactions with state structures. Patriarch Kirill's concept of traditional values guided the Kremlin's "conservative turn" and its search for a new Russian identity. Patriarch Kirill even **described** Putin as being a "God's miracle," and the World Russian People's Council, linked to the Russian Orthodox Church, **gave** its first award to the Russian president for the preservation of Russia's "great power statehood." The Russian Orthodox Church gained access to the prisons and to the army, and it tried to access the school system. Yet apart from the growing role of the Church, state discourse on these topics **mostly echoed** Soviet approaches. The conservative "turn" co-existed with a "re-turn" to many Soviet practices.

Due to the perceived failures of Surkov's "managed democracy," Vyacheslav Volodin— who had "**a reputation for a more heavy-handed approach**"—succeeded him as deputy chief of staff. Sophisticated boutique projects were replaced by increased repression.[7] The focus on "foreign agents" and "defending Russian cultural traditions," prominent in the 2012 Pussy Riot case for instance, sought to **delegitimize** liberal political opposition by rendering it not just wrong but foreign, Western, un-Russian. By casting all uprisings or popular revolutions as geopolitical interference, officials and state media embraced the narrative of external actors interfering in Russia's internal affairs and claimed

6 Putin wrote: "Our country—where for many people the civil war still isn't over and the past is extremely politicized—needs some careful cultural therapy. [It needs] a cultural policy that, on all levels from school materials to historical documentaries, would mould an understanding of the unity of our historical process." Translation by authors.

7 Nashi's front man Yakemenko resigned, and his movement subsequently died an inconspicuous death.

that protesters were being paid by Western institutions. In response to these trumped-up threats, the Kremlin expelled the U.S. Agency for International Aid, passed a law demanding that entities receiving foreign funding register as "foreign agents," and added **new restrictions** on protest participation and freedom of speech—including repressive blogging laws, restrictions on media ownership, and legislation banning "extremist" views and the perceived rehabilitation of Nazism. In 2013, the Kremlin replaced the news agency RIA Novosti with Rossiya Segodnya, headed by Dmitrii Kiselev; sacked Galina Timchenko, the editor of the independently minded Lenta news portal; attacked the opposition TV channel Dozhd; and pressured advertisers to pull out and rendered the channel unviable on television. The 2013 law **banned** the promotion of "non-traditional relationships" to minors; its deliberate vagueness ensured its potential for wide applicability.

The government's grip on the interpretation of history and the educational system also deepened dramatically. The State Program for Patriotic Education budget is indicative of these changes: between 2011 and 2016 it more than doubled, reaching 1.67 billion rubles. Furthermore, the salaries of state officials and administrators working in the cultural sphere almost tripled. In 2012, Putin founded the Russian Military Historical Society, which spent a lot of time and funds on **commemorating** Russian soldiers who served in the First World War—a sign of militarism spreading beyond just the cult of the Great Patriotic War. The Russian Historical Society, headed by Sergey Naryshkin, now head of foreign intelligence, embarked on the creation of a new "rethought" unified history textbook to substitute for the 65 official high school textbooks on Russian history. It developed a unified Historical and Cultural Standard and Concept of Teaching History at School, with which all history textbooks would have to **comply**, and released three official lines of history textbooks. The **updated editions** published in 2016 were even more explicit in their anti-Western and anti-revolution orientation, **portraying** Russia as rebuffing past assaults from the aggressive West—whether from thirteenth-century Teutonic knights, from forces defeated by Russian prince Alexander Nevsky, from German fascists, or, more recently, from "the U.S.-led united anti-Russian front aiming to punish Russia" for "defending" Ukraine. Due to the Kremlin's fear of anything involving revolutions, even the 1917 October Revolution now tended to be presented as being partly the product of Western interference. In a 2017 state TV series, Russian revolutionaries were shown to have the backing of German financiers.

The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and aggression against the Donbas region accelerated the militarization of Russian society. The idea of Russia being surrounded by enemies like the West on the outside and by a "fifth column" on the inside has been increasingly **filtered** through national institutions like schools, the military, the media and the Russian Orthodox Church, **fostering** a sense of living in a "besieged fortress" among Russians.[8] More assertive international stances in Ukraine and Syria brought a shift in the "memory discourse" at home, moving it from defensive to more offensive framings. Where previously Russia had been defending its historical memory at home or in lands it thought it was entitled to influence (the "Russian world"), it now revived the Soviet claim to great power status, returning to being a global player and a competitor against the United States. From this juncture, an emphasis on Russia's great power status featured prominently in the Kremlin's official narratives. This period saw the emergence of a cultural decolonization narrative, which argued that Russia was defending not just itself but others from being colonized by Western "militant secularism" or alien values and worldviews with no respect for tradition.

8 This concept refers to a group of people who undermine the country from within, usually in favor of an enemy group or another nation.

The first attempts at codifying an official ideology were beginning. The 2014 Information Security Doctrine sparked numerous discussions of how to defend the Russian information space against historical falsification, including raising a battalion to defend history. Also in 2014, the Kremlin **introduced** the Fundamental Principles of Legislation of the Russian Federation on Culture, which set out the next stage of Russian cultural policy: broadly, what to promote, why, and how. Originally, the Ministry of Culture, with personal input from Medinskii, wrote the first drafts of the principles, the text boldly declaring that "Russia is not Europe" and asserting that only cultural products that were politically useful should and would be supported. It abounded in historicism, arguing that the purpose of promoting cultural education was to create a common worldview among the Russian people. Its second aim was to create a spiritual-cultural matrix for the nation, a "cultural consciousness." Despite the Ministry of Culture having liberally sprinkled the text with quotations from Putin, the president's team blocked and disowned the draft. A presidential administration working group eventually rewrote the principles from scratch, producing a more sober and less politicized view of Russian cultural policy. Yet Medinskii had the last word. The **updated** version, released in 2023, is essentially what he wrote in 2014.

In 2014, the Kremlin floated the notion of "Novorossiya," a term associated with the reign of Catherine the Great and the extension of Russian control to southern Ukraine. This marked a departure from the previous focus on "gathering the Russian peoples" abroad. For example, after uniting overseas and domestic Russian Orthodox Church, the Kremlin established the ***Russkii Mir*** ("Russian World") foundation in 2007 to propagate Russia's worldview and appeal to those with cultural, religious, ethnic, even intellectual ties to Russia. The Kremlin also toyed with political conceptions of Eurasia, as evidenced by the establishment of the Eurasian Union in 2011. In 2014, there was a shift, as the Kremlin hoped that ethnic Russians in that region, as well as Russian speakers or others presumed to feel closer to Russia than to Ukraine, would warm to a twenty-first century Novorossiya, facilitating the Crimea-style incorporation of Ukrainian territory into the Russian Federation. None of this came to pass, and at the time the notion of Novorossiya could have been dismissed as extremist fantasy, especially as the intervention in Syria saw a return to Kremlin conceptualization of Russia's role as that of a culture with global reach, rather than anything defined in purely ethnic terms. Novorossiya was, however, an ideological experiment to which Putin would return in 2022, once the initial plan to capture Kyiv failed. The exact territories designated as Novorossiya in 2014 would be illegally annexed in September 2022, though only parts of them were under the control of the Russian military. The ideological fantasies of 2014 had a shaping influence on Russia's policies—actual and aspirational—in 2022 and 2023.

Another important development around this time was the shift in focus from narratives and monuments to funding and setting up (often stealthily) movements, initiatives, clubs, camps, **battle reenactments**, and historical tourism to encourage engagement with these narratives. These **included** the reintroduction of patriotic activities at schools and in extracurricular activities for children and teenagers, as well as the propagandist effort to revalorize the military services and the army, granting greater rights to Cossacks, who formed vigilante militia groups to patrol Russian towns. Spending on events that required public engagement, such as "mobilization" and "competitions," more than tripled since 2016. One example is the emergence of a system of multimedia historical parks entitled "Russia - My History," which showcase a Kremlin-friendly take on all of Russian history—from ancient times to the present. The first park opened in Moscow on November 4, 2013, and by 2023, there were 24 parks, spreading from the North Caucasus to the Far East. One of the key **messages** promoted by the exhibits

is that Russia is strong when it is united around a powerful leader, and when it is not, it is vulnerable to external manipulation and aggression. A particularly large section is devoted to Putin's presidency.

> *The ideological fantasies of 2014 had a shaping influence on Russia's policies—actual and aspirational—in 2022 and 2023.*

As discussed above, the Kremlin has also become more vigorous in its efforts to form and influence a younger audience, which it has often struggled to convince of its vision of Russia—particularly after Surkov's dismissal and the ensuing disappearance of Nashi and other state-sponsored youth movements. Whereas earlier budgets privileged commemorations and monuments, the 2016 plan allocated more than a third of the State Program for Patriotic Education budget for "youth military preparation" (such as the Young Army Movement), reflecting a broader shift toward mobilizational activities in which the state's role was less overt. The Kremlin had learned to tap into organic apolitical everyday forms of patriotism, imbuing them with a politicization they did not previously possess.

THE 2020S: CONSOLIDATING THE IDEOLOGY

Under Putin, the Kremlin's history and memory politics evolved in response to internal and external challenges but remained somewhat malleable. In the 2020s, Putin's decision to stay in power indefinitely and Russia's 2022 war in Ukraine necessitated a more systematic approach to ideology promotion. For years, the regime prepared the ground, after which it made its move.

The 2020 revision of the Russian constitution through **amendments** extending Putin's term limits until 2036 (essentially making him a lifelong ruler) deepened the trend toward traditionalism by formally incorporating new ideological dimensions into the constitution. These dimensions included the mention of trust in God, transferred by ancestors; the importance of memory politics, revering the Fatherland defenders' memory and protecting a Kremlin-approved version of the historical truth (i.e., one that opposed the European convictions that the Soviet Union was one of the initiators of World War II); and repositioning Russian from a national language to "the language of the state-forming nation, being a part of multi-national union of equal nations of Russia" in an appeal to Russian nationalism. The 2021 National Security Strategy **focused** even more insistently on "the defence of traditional Russian spiritual-moral values, culture and historical memory" as a national priority.

Yet it was the 2022 war and subsequent radical break with the West that triggered the most dramatic shift toward systematic ideology building. In an effort to justify Russia's confrontation with the West, conservative themes (as evidenced by explicitly homophobic and transphobic rhetoric) **have taken** a more central position in Putin's statements leading up to and in support of the war. Since early 2022, Russian officials, realizing the need to offer a coherent explanation to **justify** Putin's perpetual hold on power and to sustain the war and associated costs, repeatedly offered to **remove** the constitutional ban on state ideology. A special presidential **decree** introduced in January 2022 listed the country's main traditional spiritual and moral values: patriotism, service to the fatherland and responsibility for its fate, high moral ideals, the priority of the spiritual over the material, collectivism, historical memory, and the unity of the peoples of Russia.

Since the Kremlin views Russian youth as a vital part of this effort, it has massively increased its patriotic education campaigns since 2022. For high school students, a new **state-organized** movement

for children, mimicking the Soviet Pioneers, has been established. New legislation **requires** every school in Russia to have a counselor to facilitate the "civic" and "patriotic" upbringing of students. In September 2022, all schools were instructed to begin holding a flag-raising ceremony every week. Simultaneously, high schools also **introduced** a new extracurricular class called "Conversations about Important Things" designed to promote "traditional" and "patriotic" values (such as "national consolidation," self-sacrifice and heroism, solidarity, and authority of the state) and boost national pride among the students. The first in the series of these "conversations" was symbolically taught by Putin himself on September 1, 2022. To ensure **standardization** of the content, the Ministry of Education publishes a list of themes for each week of the school year with suggested lesson plans, including videos and slides. Lectures available online show teachers how to conduct the classes.

Starting in September 2023, high school history classes will be taught using a single standardized textbook with the Crimean bridge on its cover[9]—authored by presidential aide Vladimir Medinskii, who some have **described** as a "nationalist enamored of classicism and traditional values," and rector of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations Anatoly Torkunov. In this book, all of Russia's contemporary history since the Stalin period has been rewritten to fit the official line. For example, the book describes the Brezhnev era of stagnation as the "**welfare revolution**" and blames Gorbachev for the collapse of the Soviet Union; its last chapters devoted to the events in Ukraine are **titled** "The U.S. Pressure on Russia," "Opposition to the West's Strategy toward Russia," "Falsification of History,"

Russian schoolboys parade a Russian flag during a state-wide ceremony marking the beginning of the school year in Moscow, September 2023.

Photo: Yuri Kadobnov/AFP via Getty Images

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9 The Crimean or the Kerch Bridge is the bridge connecting Crimea to the Krasnodar Krai in Russia, which Putin built after the 2014 annexation of Crimea.

"Revival of Nazism," "Ukrainian Neo-Nazism," "Coup in Ukraine 2014," "Return of Crimea," "Ukraine is a Neo-Nazi State," "SMO and the Russian Society," "Russia is a Country of Heroes," and so on.

The Kremlin actively engages with youth at the university level. The Ministry of Education has introduced a new concept of teaching history in universities effective September 2023. Covering ancient Russia to modern Russia, it ends with the 2022 war and promotes a pseudo-history, projection of current politics overtly onto the distant past. One of the **goals** is to indoctrinate students with the idea that "throughout Russian history, a strong central government has been of paramount importance for the preservation of national statehood."[10] Another university-level course, "Fundamentals of Russian Statehood" is offered beginning in September 2023, which is designed by a specially launched group, "Russia's DNA," led by presidential administration-linked political technologist **Andrey Polosin**. Analogous to the Soviet ideology-building course "Scientific Communism," this course is meant to determine those "**value constants**" that are characteristic of Russia as a unique civilization. It includes four sections: "history" (memory politics based on a mythologized official version of history); "cultural codes" (cross-generational transfer of "spiritual and moral" traditional values); "Russia in the world" (stressing isolationism, anti-Westernism, and national superiority); and "vision of the future" (in light of the above). These four sections are developed by Vladimir Medinskii, Mikhail Piotrovsky, Sergey Karaganov, and Mikhail Kovalchuk, apparatchiks notorious for embracing Kremlin thinking.[11]

The effort to foster an official ideology goes beyond school textbooks and extends to culture more broadly—as reflected in the **rewritten** principles of Russian State Cultural Policy. It depicts the need for culture to serve as an instrument of the state and for the furtherance of state power at home and abroad. Since May 2023, the state has held twice as many military-patriotic events as in the previous year, totaling **1.5 million** in one year. These include festivals, historical reenactment clubs, military history tours for children, student discussion societies, and more. The state is also actively funding pop culture films, TV series, and books, as well as **presidential grants** to promote certain patriotic initiatives. These are complemented by omnipresent propagandistic coverage on prime-time political shows, for which the presidential administration often delivers guides and talking points.

The Tenets of the Ideology

By 2022, Putin had been in power for over two decades. What had emerged both in foreign policy and in domestic politics was a system—less orderly and structured perhaps than in Soviet times, and more dependent on the personality of the autocrat, but a system, nevertheless. Apart from the security services, the army, the regular doling out of financial privileges to elite actors, and the Russian Orthodox Church, Putin's system has not been codified in institutions; much of it depends on proximity to Putin and on patronage networks within the government. To this unsystematic system, ideology is essential. It provides a sense of meaning, of continuity, and of ritual to Russian politics—not just a way of making sense of the world, which was a strong point of Marxism-Leninism, but a way for Russians to make sense of Russia. In the absence of political parties, of real elections, of a political order grounded in procedure and constitutionalism, ideology is the connecting link. This ideology is not spelled out

10 Translation by authors.

11 Reference Andrey Kolesnikov's forthcoming report in 2023: Андрей Колесников [Andrey Kolesnikov], *Истоки и смысл русского национал-империализма. Исторические корни идеологии Владимира Путина* [The Origins and Meaning of Russian National Imperialism. Historical Roots of Vladimir Putin's Ideology].

in philosophical texts as Marxism-Leninism had been. It can be absorbed through signs, symbols, and popular culture, making it malleable and accessible to less intellectual and less literate individuals. This population need not give its complete assent to the ideology cobbled together in Putin's two decades of rule. They can give it partial assent, or simply live in its ambiance. Its very pervasiveness, much like the slogans and language of Soviet communism (in the early Soviet Union) or the iconography of czarist Russia, imply that the ideology is too widespread to be untrue.

> *Putin's system has not been codified in institutions; much of it depends on proximity to Putin and on patronage networks within the government. To this unsystematic system, ideology is essential.*

Rather than representing an organic whole, the Kremlin ideology originally came together as bricolage, taking relevant parts from different movements like the communist and far-right heritages, while subordinating them to imperial-nationalist statism. While condemning anything related to revolution and not explicitly endorsing Stalinism, Putinism gradually rehabilitated Stalin as a "state-builder": concepts like the "fifth column" were borrowed directly from the Stalin-era Great Terror period. During the so-called Russian Spring of 2014, the Kremlin borrowed some ideological currents from imperial nationalists, particularly with its tales of restoring Novorossiya, the areas of Ukraine conquered by Catherine the Great. It also incorporated **elements** of Eurasianism, Sovietism, anti-Westernism, and **subversive** takes on the liberal Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine. This ideology's eclecticism mirrors the fragmentation of the digital age.

However, the malleability of these narratives should not imply a malleability of the core elements of the ideology. They are more a way of selling, or packaging, the policy to different audiences so they accept the dogma. While there is no single idea that unites the Kremlin ideology (though statism comes close to being one), a set of core underlying elements has been maintained and reinforced over time through a series of patriotic organizations, initiatives, and youth movements. In other words, these are consistent ideological tenets used to make sure that the narrative reflects the meaning the Kremlin wants to put forth. As Mikhail Suslov, a professor of cross-cultural and regional studies, puts it: "Such ideas as a strong state, anti-Westernism, vulnerability of the "us-community," the concept of strong ties between the ruler and the "grassroots" are inscribed into the general communitarian assumption, that different communities have different, historically unchangeable sets of values, which define our individual identities."[12] Accordingly, even if Putinism is not a monolithic and systematic ideology, there is no major discrepancy among its central elements.

The domestic component of this ideology comprises six key tenets. First is the imperative of a *strong, stable state* that allows Russians to be Russians (based on exceptionalism and traditional values), to preserve their unique or exceptional way of life (whatever that might mean) and to live out their patriotism, whether it extends back into the past or is a matter of celebrating contemporary Russia. At its core is statism, a tenacious attachment to statehood. According to the dominant ideology, Putin did

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12 Authors' email exchange with Mikhail Suslov on September 9, 2023.

not build the state, nor is it a foundational constitution or set of institutions. Instead, the state is the physical form of Russia's "historical essence" which has persevered for over "a thousand years." Putin restored the state that has brought peace, prosperity, and harmony to Russia.

This claim can be seen as analogous to the state construction in which Stalin was engaged during the first half of the twentieth century. It also parallels the powerful empire assembled by the Romanov dynasty over the course of three centuries. This is the pedigree Putin has accorded himself in a political order increasingly obsessed with historical precedent and historical narrative. Since the people seek a strong state–in this ideological schema–they provide the popular will and popular consent with which Putin governs Russia. Central to this presentation is the use of more extreme voices and a view of Putin as a moderator between conflicting positions–Putin as the common-sense voice. All this frames a self-reinforcing popular sovereignty of a kind that did not exist in the 1990s.

Second, Putin tends to present *Russia as under threat*. The most potent threat is chaos: a potential for dissolution that, historically speaking, is not a figment of Putin's imagination. Twice in the twentieth century, the Russian or Soviet state collapsed. When the Russian empire fell apart, years of civil war ensued. The Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991 led to anarchy and impoverishment for many Russians, a view of the 1990s that is fundamental to the Putin myth. Despite being handpicked as Yeltsin's successor in 1999, Putin has fostered an image of the so-called "wild" 1990s as a dark and disastrous period for Russians. The propagandists, many of whom were among the main proponents of Russia's liberal path in the 1990s, have conflated the humiliations felt by ordinary people with those felt by the state. By losing a viable state, the Russian people were at sea–and subject to outside intervention in their economy and culture. Foreigners came to steal what they could steal, forcing their foreign ways onto unsuspecting Russians. In these difficult years, the loss of statehood was alleged to be equal to the loss of cultural selfhood. The consistent emphasis on Russia being besieged and in a permanent state of war with the West allows the Kremlin to instill a sense of existential urgency to justify the need to foster national unity.

The sense of threat ties deeply into the third tenet of official Russian ideology, *anti-Westernism*. Here the West occupies a paradoxical position. It is an object of desire and contempt. Very much the legacy of the Soviet period, the West plays the role of "other" in this version of Russian identity. Key to this attitude is the contention that the West (often embodied by the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or Anglo-Saxons) wants to destroy Russia. Yet in this narrative, the West is both menacing and declining. The United States is divided, because elites have taken over the country, because these elites have embroiled it in one unnecessary foreign war after another, and because an unstable madness lies at the heart of both the American economy and the American body politic. Europe may be less unstable and less mad, but it too is worthy of contempt because of its slavish adherence to the United States. Europe is nothing more than a cover for U.S. power and it would have a better future if it would break free from its American overlords. If it does not, it will go down with the American ship.

The anger at the United States is long-running, with roots in the Cold War. More recently, it was a response to U.S. involvement in the Balkan wars since the early 1990s and in particular to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's decision to bomb Yugoslavia in 1999, frequently called the "first color revolution." Evgeny Primakov, whose tenure as foreign minister foreshadowed much of the discussions around multipolarity common to Kremlin discourse today, famously performed a U-turn in his plane

over the Atlantic when he heard of the decision. In this narrative scheme, the "last" color revolution was Euromaidan in 2014, when Russia finally responded to the years of Western interference in its self-proclaimed sphere of interest.

Cultural conservatism, the will to avoid a hedonism that is Western in origin, is the fourth tenet of official ideology. Russians are conscious of their own cultural roots, the argument goes, whereas some Europeans have lost theirs, as reflected by their embrace of homosexuality, feminism, trans rights, multiculturalism, and "militaristic secularism," not to mention their subservience to the United States. Russians are different, proponents of the ideology argue, or at least they should be. They may not be churchgoers, but they would like to think of themselves as churchgoers. They do not subscribe to a nontraditional understanding of gender or sexuality, seeing the heterosexual nuclear family as the norm. Putin speaks for these Russians. He also speaks for their patriotism and their love of country, whether this love is rooted in the Russian language, in Russian culture, or in Russian (and at times Soviet or neo-Soviet) historical memory—the narrative of victimization and heroism that is presumed to describe modern Russian history. A doctrinal assertion of these reactionary sentiments is contained within the Russian National Security Strategy. It affirms the importance of resisting cultural colonization, which is presented as a grave or even existential threat to the Russian nation. The threat can only be resisted by preserving and strengthening Russian identity.

From this doctrine stems the emphasis on Russia's exceptionalism and an argument that Russia is, in fact, a civilization-state. Superficially integrating elements of "Clash of Civilizations" **argument**, this point relates directly to racial and fascistic thinking that was propagated since the 1920s via the teachings of Ivan Il'in, Alexander Dugin, Eurasianists, and interwar emigre thinking resurrected in the 1990s. The title of the group, "Russia's DNA," developing the course on "Fundamentals of Russian Statehood," points to national or even racial thinking connected to the ostensibly "cultural" notion of civilization. This civilizational thinking is highly important for Russia's current war in Ukraine, as it helps justify the human sacrifice for the sake of something higher—like the state or civilization.

The final core tenet is the cult of the *Great Patriotic War*. Politicians' uses and abuses of the Great Patriotic War as a talking point are rooted in its sincere resonance and emotional power among ordinary Russians. The Kremlin has spent billions of rubles convincing people of the relevance of the Great Patriotic War to Russia's current political identity and its right to great power status. Since 2014, a preoccupation with the Great Patriotic War and the war against Ukraine have been deliberately conflated, through the combined use of the St. George's ribbon. It was worn on Victory Day to remember veterans, printed on the Luhansk and Donetsk "people's referenda" in 2014 and tied onto the helmets of the Russian soldiers who attacked Kyiv in 2022. Anyone who doesn't agree with the Russian view of World War II or with Russia's right to a sphere of influence similar to that which the Soviet Union had after 1945 is dismissed as a Nazi, since they "wish to overturn" the results of the Great Patriotic War. Underpinning the Kremlin's actions and propaganda in relation to Ukraine since 2014 is the assertion that Russia must control Ukraine—because Nazis will return, because of its historical right endowed by 1945, because of the West using it to destroy Russia again. These narratives persevere to this day and have become an anchored frame through which many Russians understand, or at least justify, the carnage and destruction in Ukraine.

Sources of Ideological Resilience and Weaknesses

As shown above, the Putinist ideology is essentially in place. The 2022 effort was an intensification of the Kremlin's two-decade-long piecemeal endeavor to promote specific narratives in Russian society. Will the 2022 war undermine or deepen Putin's ideology building?

> *Underpinning the Kremlin's actions and propaganda in relation to Ukraine since 2014 is the assertion that Russia must control Ukraine—because Nazis will return, because of its historical right endowed by 1945, because of the West using it to destroy Russia again.*

FACTORS HELPING PUTIN'S IDEOLOGY-BUILDING EFFORT

First, Putin's ideological effort is successful because it relies on deeply *entrenched cultural tendencies* in Russian society. In Russia, coming up with an alternative notion of identity has proved an impossible task, as shown by the **failed** liberal effort in the 1990s. Instead, Putin chose an easy route by promoting many quasi-Soviet and even pre-Soviet czarist narratives and themes. Moreover, the state has **co-opted** (often in a disguised manner) genuine grassroots patriotic initiatives. As a result, Russians often saw these initiatives as coming from the people, rather than state-originated (e.g., the Immortal Regiment). This effort—a project of over 20 years—is unlikely to face serious resistance now.

Reinforcing this is Russians' predisposition toward justifying some or all of the narratives propagated by the state, in no small part because of their near-ubiquity and the cognitive dissonance required to live in Russia while going against the mainstream worldview. Polls show that while Russians are unexceptional in terms of benign patriotism, since the 1990s (well before Putin) they have been outliers in terms of "**blind and militant**" patriotism: the belief that one should support one's country even if it is wrong and that one's country should follow its own interest even if harms others. Under Putin, this has been reinforced by constant securitization of pro-Kremlin narratives, portraying any questioning of them as a threat to Russian traditions and national identity, and shifting the perspective from one of Russian aggression to one of preemptive Russian defense.[13] That is how the "**let there be no war**" narrative—one of the most common toasts at family parties—became a justification for starting a war.

Second, the *flexibility of Putin's ideology-building effort* helps it accommodate change and appeal to different constituencies. Rather than trying to make everyone a true believer in its worldview, the Kremlin and state-aligned propaganda seek a spectrum of acceptable outcomes (apathy, loyal neutrality, "my country right or wrong," passive support, etc.). They therefore offer a menu of options all pointing to the same conclusion ("Kremlin knows best," "West out to get us," "I can't influence anything anyway," etc.) but via different arguments ("the West is Russophobic," "even worse than Russia," "Ukrainians have been brainwashed by the West, we must save them," "Ukrainians are traitors and Nazis who must be punished," etc.). Russians—many of whom are already inclined to **accept** much

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13 This trend is informed or at least justified by June 22 syndrome, the notion that Stalin should have attacked first and everything should be done to avoid a repeat of June 22, 1941.

of the Kremlin's policies by default—can then choose the propaganda lines that resonate with them and help rationalize the Kremlin's actions (especially when reinforced by negative incentives like memory laws, vilification of alternative views of history, and so on). This **diffuse** penetrating aspect of Putin's ideology appears to be highly effective.

Third, the lack of a *futuristic vision for Russia* is often named as one of the main weaknesses of Putin's ideological narratives. Even if true, that would hardly be unique to Russia: many **other** autocratic regimes lack a vision of the future as well. But, in fact, the Kremlin does offer a futuristic vision in the form of restoration and nostalgic anticipation: the future will be better because it will look more like the past, and Russia will restore its pride and the good things that it lost. The motif of an assertive Russia is a motif tied to Russia's place in the twenty-first-century international landscape, in which the decline of the United States and Europe will make way for the rise of Russia and of its partner, China. In this sense, the Kremlin ideology combines both resentment-based and affirmative elements mutually reinforcing each other.

The Kremlin also offers a broader vision of Russia's role in the world and even a sense of mission: helping other countries to avoid U.S. cultural colonization (as in the 2021 National Security Strategy) and neoliberal hegemony (as in the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept). This is not fully detached from reality: Putin's proposed vision of a multipolar world order has some truth to it, though his vision may contain the seeds of its own destruction, as it could spark resentment and disillusionment if Russia fails to secure a position akin to that of the Soviet Union or of a major global player.

> *The Kremlin does offer a futuristic vision in the form of restoration and nostalgic anticipation: the future will be better because it will look more like the past, and Russia will restore its pride and the good things that it lost.*

Fourth, the share of *groups that favor modernization along Western lines keeps shrinking* in Russia. These are liberal Russians with pro-Western and anti-war attitudes, who have higher levels of impersonalized trust, and who possess an ability to build horizontal networks found disproportionately among younger Russians and white-collar middle-class groups.

There are simply too few younger Russians to reconfigure the country's trajectory, even if they somehow manage to resist the state's hardening propaganda effort and repressive apparatus. In the **2019 census**, those aged 15–29 made up only 16.5 percent of the population, and they typically have lower rates of political participation. According to the polls, only about 20 percent of people aged 14–29 are interested in politics, and only 7 percent consider actively participating in Russia's political life in the future. They follow news and discuss political topics roughly half as often, and vote in elections three times less, than older age cohorts. As a result, in the last decade, despite their growing dissatisfaction, young people's share in opposition protests has remained fairly **stable** at about 20 to 30 percent, below that of older generations. Meanwhile, the Kremlin has mobilized significant resources to shape young people's political thought and social values. While there is little compelling evidence these efforts have succeeded—and analysts have **observed** an active opposition-minded youth minority

emerging in Russian regions—the Kremlin appears to have convinced young people not to hope for anything better. As a recent analysis by Félix Krawatzek **states**:

> Across all focus groups, young Russians are united in their view that they are powerless to influence their country's development . . . There is no positive, forward-looking momentum and participants complain about lacking any possibility to realise a future they themselves desire. The youth of Russia were already affected by this situation before the war. And whereas some may see the war as a moment of national revival and strength, many of those that took part in our focus groups will feel increasingly isolated.

Russia's nascent middle class has been repressed and co-opted by the Kremlin since the early 2010s. By 2018, **about 50 percent** of Russia's middle class worked for the state. A product of the growing nationalization of the Russian economy, these numbers are likely much higher today. These trends are further exacerbated by a huge ongoing **exodus** of more pro-Western groups from Russia. The total number of Russians having fled the country since 2022 has reached one million people, and the majority of them are younger (80–90 percent **under the age of 45**) and hold more liberal **attitudes**. Even before the war, pro-Western liberal groups in Russia **made up** less than 7 or 8 percent of the population.[14] Their mass departure will further silence liberal voices, making pro-Kremlin narratives even more dominant.

The transformative effect of a protracted war of conquest, involving the entire society in a vicious circle of sacrifices and crimes, could **lead to** eventual demodernization. In the war's aftermath, Russians may grow even more distrustful of liberals who have chosen "a wrong side in the war," or "supported weapons supplies to Ukraine." Current polling **suggests** that only 6.8 percent of Russians would like a pro-Western government.

Fifth, in Russia's case *economic decline may help the Kremlin's ideology-building effort*. During periods of turmoil people often need to feel a sense of connection to something greater than themselves, a historical continuity and communion—through religion, an ethnic group, a nation, or a state. In Russia, these trends tend to manifest in the form of post-Soviet nostalgia. When the economy was doing badly (in the 1998, 2008–09, and 2021 crises), **societal preference** for a return to a Soviet-style economy tended to increase. This was most strongly the case in 1998: after the financial crisis, post-Soviet nostalgia reached **levels** still unbeaten during Putin's reign. In subsequent years, memories of the 1990s—enhanced by propaganda as a time of lawlessness and misery—became entrenched. They could be seen as a reflection of what life in the West, under democracy and market capitalism, was like, however **little** that period in Russia reflected actual Western norms.

Should Russia's economy stagnate or decline in the next few years, the demand for belonging to a greater community might increase. Westernized liberal opposition in Russia may not be the beneficiary, given the tendency among some of its leading figures (with a notable exception of opposition leader Navalny himself) to reject any form of nationalism, to conflate it with extremism, and instead to advocate for maximal individualism and universal global values. Russian liberals failed to offer a competitive vision of a Russian national community even when such an effort was state sponsored by

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14 For example, since the vast majority of human rights activists left Russia in the first months of war, in some Russian cities today only as few as one or two of the six to seven most prominent civil activists remain.

Yeltsin's Kremlin. Putinist ideology, however, recognizes a general suspicion of the West and can cater to a demand for an explicitly Russian political community.

FACTORS UNDERMINING PUTIN'S IDEOLOGY-BUILDING EFFORT

There are several war-related factors that may constrain the Kremlin's ideology-building effort. First, Putinist narratives *generally do not mobilize people*. In fact, societal political passivity has been one of the main assets allowing Putin to sustain his hold on power. In the periods when the Kremlin needed mobilization (be it the 2022 war effort or support for Donbas "separatists" in 2014), it relied on more extreme peripheral ideologues catering to different tastes—Dugin, Strelkov, or more recently Z bloggers and Prigozhin. As **Prigozhin's mutiny** and the subsequent arrest of Igor Strelkov attest, the use of such figures causes difficulties and conflicts within the elite. Without them, as long as Russia is seemingly at peace, the Kremlin can still rely on silent, acquiescent, apolitical Russian citizens, but a passive population will not come out to support Putin. As the Kremlin demands more and more sacrifices from ordinary people during wartime, it might require a base of support that is more active and less apt to pose a threat to regime security. Creating such a base will likely be a challenge. It remains to be seen whether this ideology can actually mobilize people successfully.

Second, while they acquiesce to the Kremlin's ideology, Russians often express the *desire to dissociate from the state*. They are not eager to commit huge sacrifices on its behalf. Surveys show, for example, that Russians (and especially younger groups) **demonstrate** a high degree of individualism, distrust of the state in its practical (rather than symbolic) form, and adaptability. For example, in a 2018 **survey** almost half of respondents said they prefer to be independent of the state (to be self-employed or start their own business) and about 60 percent would want their children to become successful private owners or entrepreneurs. Even if Russians acquiesce to state-promoted ideological narratives, they might reject them under other circumstances, raising doubts as to the longevity of the ideology.

For example, the *incursion of war into Russians' lives* may shift the tide. Russians tend to accept state-promoted initiatives as long as these **do not interfere with** their personal well-being. Polls **have shown**, for example, a marked decline in war support among those Russians who live in the regions neighboring Ukraine (and are more affected by war realities, such as military raids and drone attacks). If the Ukrainian army is successful in its incursions into Russia's territory, this might weaken the Kremlin's ideology-building effort.

Third, the deficiencies in the state's response to the war "coming home," and its failures to equip soldiers, have necessitated a *growth in grassroots communities*, such as the relatives and volunteers (especially women) who fundraise and donate supplies to the Russian military in Ukraine—from sewing medical underwear to funding drones. The volunteers involved in crowdfunding or collecting donations for soldiers may have little concern for the Ukrainians being maimed and killed by their loved ones, but they are not necessarily pro-war. More often they are motivated by helping their relatives survive. Consequently, they are also critical of the state, bemoaning the lack of food supplies and equipment that they try to mitigate. These war-support communities are mushrooming and likely to expand further. Russian aggression against Ukraine shows little sign of relenting, and the Russian Ministry of Defense is consistently slow to meet the needs of its own troops.

Fundraising and volunteer groups represent a form of community activism that has been growing every year as an essential response to the reduced role of government. Years of reductions in state benefits and support have inured the population to the reality of Russia as an "empire of austerity." Even mobilized soldiers accept that the state will provide only mediocre and insufficient equipment, medicine, and conditions: "no one will take care of you except yourself" is a maxim that applies just as well to those fighting a war at the state's request as to pensioners struggling to access healthcare. For now, fundraising or volunteering helps stabilize the regime because it allows people to substitute for the deficiencies of the state. However, in the long term their self-organizing capacity represents one of the challenges for the Kremlin, because it could be put to different uses in the future, should a different popular political force emerge.

Russian volunteers prepare a camouflage for helmets planned to be sent to the Russian army fighting in Ukraine, September 2023.

Photo: Contributor/Getty Images

Fourth, a *competing alternative in the form of Russian* ***ethno-nationalism*** may be in the making. The concurrent official idealization and tangible failure of the state have spurred a popular resentment that nationalist figures, both pro- and anti-war, have used to their advantage. Prigozhin's June 2023 uprising offers the best illustration in that regard. Ethno-nationalism is a weak spot for Putinist ideology and one that it struggles to fully placate. Ethno-nationalism is a more mobilizational ideology. It could be a challenge to Putin's ideology-building, chipping away at the notion that Russia is polycultural (as opposed to "inauthentic" Western multiculturalism) and that its strength lies in an innate diversity

organized around a Russian civilizational identity and values.[15] However, the rise of ethnonationalism is more likely to happen if Russia is defeated in Ukraine.

Another political force with even greater social appeal is leftist agenda, including social justice and welfare state. Polls **reveal** that preferred political values for Russians are order and justice, which leaves an opportunity for other groups to exploit this agenda.

Conclusion

Putinism appears to have a firm ideological grip on Russia today. It springs from two decades of increasingly concerted ideological efforts aimed at unifying Russian opinion in support of the Kremlin. Current rewriting of Russian history—from textbooks to pop culture to faux-grassroots social movements—hearkens back to the exceptionalist grandeur of the Soviet era, or even to the dynastic Romanov empire, and has been an active government project for over a decade. The Kremlin's attention to education and memory politics, accompanied by a growing emphasis on traditional values and commitment to a great power future for Russia, contributed to the spread of beliefs that resonated with Russian society long before Putin's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

This process shows signs of accelerating. The 2022 war marked a real turning point: the protected zones of the 2010s, such as academia, education, publishing, high culture, are now under assault as is the entire "Westernizer" wing of the intelligentsia. The flexibility of Putin's ideology machine and the simplicity of the narratives it spreads suggest that Putinism is not going anywhere soon and may become further entrenched in the Russian social sphere. ■

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15 Other tensions could also play a part, such as the appeal to Orthodoxism (albeit less likely given the servile nature of Russian Orthodox Church leadership) while simultaneously refusing to introduce unpopular policies, such as abortion restrictions, that religious believers and leaders are keen to see implemented.