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## Russia's Ideological Construction in the Context of the War in Ukraine



Marlène LARUELLE

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### **Ifri**

27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15 – FRANCE

Tel. : +33 (0)1 40 61 60 00 – Fax : +33 (0)1 40 61 60 60

Email: [accueil@ifri.org](mailto:accueil@ifri.org)

**Website:** [ifri.org](http://ifri.org)

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## **Author**

**Marlène Laruelle**, Ph.D., is Research Professor of International Affairs and Political Science at the Elliott School of International Affairs, The George Washington University. She is also Director of the Illiberalism Studies Program and the former director of the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (IERES).

Dr. Laruelle received her Ph.D. in history from the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Cultures (INALCO) and her post-doctoral degree (habilitation) in political science from Sciences Po in Paris. She has published widely on Russia's ideologies and nationalism, on Russia's foreign policy and soft power strategies, as well as on the rise of illiberal thoughts and politics in Europe.

# Executive Summary

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Russian government has been proactive in the ideological realm to ensure the sustainability of the war for Russian society. Counter to the claims of many Western observers, this paper argues that the Russian regime *does* have an ideology, in the sense of a relatively consistent and coherent political project for Russia and aspirations to build a new world order. This ideology is based on a set of beliefs that has evolved over the years while remaining true to its core principles. However, it draws on an eclectic doctrinal stock and multiple (sometimes contradictory) repertoires, and sees content as situational and therefore malleable.

With the war, proponents of the officialization of a state ideology—all from the hawkish part of the establishment—have been gaining weight: the Presidential Administration now mainly reproduces language and tropes that have long been present in the security and military realm and have become the official doxa. Yet while new indoctrination methods and textbooks are introduced to the school system, the Kremlin has not so far recreated a Soviet-style ideological monolith: even in the context of war, it appears hesitant to engage in excessive “true teaching”, preferring a functional, technocratic understanding of ideology.

After briefly defining what ideology means for the Putin regime, this paper explores how the main set of beliefs, strategic narratives, and doctrines have stabilized and gained increased internal coherence, as well as how new textbooks and military-patriotic indoctrination mechanisms are developed, before delving into the social reception of this official ideology.

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# Introduction

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Russian government has embarked on a flurry of new projects to ensure the promotion of the “special military operation” and the sustainability of the war for the Russian economy and society. In parallel, the Duma passed a record number of laws—more than 650—in 2022.<sup>1</sup> The state has developed what has been called a Russian version of military Keynesianism,<sup>2</sup> providing massive state support for military-industrial production—which has served to revive the economies of several depressed regions—and generous financial packages to men who go to the front and their families.<sup>3</sup> The state also promises those who return from the war fast-tracked entry into public administration, health insurance, and free public transportation, as well as free university education and free food at school for their children.<sup>4</sup>

In the ideological realm, too, the regime has been proactive. Yet, while there has been a visible radicalization of state language, this should not be read as a total rupture. Rather, Russia’s ideological construction has undergone a process of gradual sedimentation, with several turning points, of which the war is both the most recent and, of course, the most dramatic. Not only have grand narratives crystallized in a more acute form and gained internal coherence, but also—and more importantly—the scale on which the toolkit of indoctrination and repression has been deployed has changed: whereas these efforts once targeted specific segments of the population—underprivileged young people, in the case of indoctrination, and the liberal opposition and activists, in the case of repression—they now reach a broader swath of the public. Yet the regime still hopes to avoid carrying out mass repressions by manufacturing consent to the war. Indeed, the ruling elites are divided between those who wish to reduce pressure on society and those who call for greater censorship and repression;<sup>5</sup> interestingly,

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1. L. Uvarčev, “Gosduma prinâla v 2022 godu rekordnoe čislo zakonov—653” [The State Duma Adopted a Record Number of Laws in 2022: 653], *Kommersant*, December 22, 2022, available at: [www.kommersant.ru](http://www.kommersant.ru).

2. V. Ishchenko, I. Matveev, and O. Zhuravlev, “Russian Military Keynesianism: Who Benefits from the War in Ukraine?”, *Policy Memo*, No. 865, PONARS Eurasia, November 27, 2023, available at: [www.ponarseurasia.org](http://www.ponarseurasia.org).

3. “Pravitel’stvo brosit 300 milliardov rublej na povyšenie zarplat voennym i silovikam” [The Government will Throw 300 billion Rubles to Raise Salaries for the Military and Security Forces], *The Moscow Times*, November 14, 2023, available at: [www.moscowtimes.ru](http://www.moscowtimes.ru).

4. M. Laruelle and I. Grek, “Why Do Russians Still Want to Fight?”, *The New York Times*, March 31, 2023, available at: [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

5. A. Percev, “Repressii na minimalkah. Kak Kreml’ pytaetsâ snât’ trevožnost’ rossijskogo obščestva” [Repression at Minimum Wages. How the Kremlin is Trying to Relieve the Anxiety of Russian Society],

Putin himself observed in December 2023 that the country should not repeat the Soviet-era repressions.<sup>6</sup>

Western observers tend to dismiss Russia's ideological construction, seeing it as defying logic and being comprised of a collection of random aberrations.<sup>7</sup> This paper argues on the contrary that this construction has its own logic and plausibility, and is credible for a large part of the Russian population. The combined work of the state administration and a whole constellation of ideological entrepreneurs, both individual and institutional, has created what can be called a discursive habitat—that is, a strategic culture “that circumscribes how government officials understand the world, enabling some policy avenues while closing down others”.<sup>8</sup>

After briefly defining what ideology means for the Putin regime, this paper explores how the main set of beliefs and strategic narratives have stabilized and gained increased internal coherence, as well as how new textbooks and military-patriotic indoctrination mechanisms are developed, before delving into the social reception of this official ideology.

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 20, 2023, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

6. I. Baranova, “Putin prizval ne dopustit’ povtoreniâ političeskikh repressij” [Putin Called for a Prevention of Political Repression], *Gazeta.ru*, December 4, 2023, available at: [www.gazeta.ru](http://www.gazeta.ru).

7. On this issue, see the great analysis by J. G. Waller, “Putin’s Wartime Dictatorship Enters a New Year”, *The National Interest*, December 28, 2023, available at: <https://nationalinterest.org>.

8. E. Götz and J. Staun, “Why Russia Attacked Ukraine: Strategic Culture and Radicalized Narratives”, *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 43, No. 3, June 2022, available at: <https://omnilogos.com>.

# What is ideology for the Putin regime?

There are all kinds of claims about Russia's ideology. For one school of thought, ideology is a simple rhetorical tool guiding a cynical and opportunistic regime motivated by material and financial interests.<sup>9</sup> For another, ideology is a deep-seated, almost immutable cognitive frame and every action taken by the Russian leadership should be read through an imperialist, revanchist, revisionist lens.<sup>10</sup> For a third school, there is no binary opposition between ideology as a cover for material interests and ideology as a set of deep beliefs: ideology is an open-ended dynamic that is context-sensitive and meaning-making for both the regime and the population.<sup>11</sup>

The lack of a consensual definition of ideology contributes to the multiplicity of contradictory analyses of the Russian regime's relationship to the ideational realm. Indeed, there are several possible definitions of ideology, from a broad set of worldviews and values to a well-crafted doctrine of truth. This paper shares Clifford Geertz's vision of ideologies as symbolic systems that serve as a road map for a person in a complex social reality and result in creative adaptation by each individual.<sup>12</sup> It therefore argues that Putin's regime does have an ideology, in the sense of a relatively consistent and coherent global view of its political project for Russia and the world, and that the population largely shares the main principles of this ideology.

## An evolutive, cocreationist, and flexible ideology

One can identify three key features of Russia's ideological construction. First, it has evolved over the last three decades, and chronology therefore matters: the 2022 war was not predetermined but became the only possible path, as a series of choices and circumstances led to the gradual closure of other options and futures.

The current ideology has deep roots in Soviet ideology, as the majority of ideological actors in today's Russia were socialized in late Soviet society under

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9. See, for instance, S. Guriev and D. Treisman, *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022.

10. See, for instance, T. Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*, New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018.

11. See, for instance, M. Kneuer, "Legitimation Beyond Ideology: Authoritarian Regimes and the Construction of Missions", *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, Vol. 11, 2017, pp. 181-211.

12. C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973.



Brezhnev. At that time, ideology was omnipresent in many aspects of everyday life, even if largely discredited and seen mainly as an exercise in conformity in the public space.<sup>13</sup> Perestroika and the first years of independent Russia saw a radical deconstruction of Soviet ideology and its replacement with a kaleidoscope of contradictory narratives.<sup>14</sup> However, a rapid recentralization process began around 1994-1995, during which time the Kremlin continued the re-ordering of ideology.

Since Putin's arrival in power, one can schematically dissociate three eras: early Putinism (Putin's first and second terms, 2000-2008), which featured an ideology that one can broadly define as liberal-conservative, looking for stabilization as well as modernization and global integration; late Putinism (Putin's third and fourth terms, 2012-2022), marked by a more reactionary conservatism and trends toward both aggression and isolationism; and wartime Putinism, since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has witnessed the accentuation of the previous features.

Obviously, this tripartite division remains schematic and can be refined through many subdivisions. One can discuss, for instance, whether Medvedev's presidency in 2008-2012 should be considered as part of early or late Putinism: it was a genuine transition, promoting some forms of modernization and liberal thinking while simultaneously inaugurating the conservative turn and especially the Russian Orthodox Church's entry into state institutions.<sup>15</sup> Another complexity is that wartime Putinism is to some degree doctrinally rooted in the 2020 constitutional amendments, which enshrined a revised version of the 19th-century tsarist formula "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality",<sup>16</sup> as well as in the two texts published by Putin in 2020 and 2021 on interpretations of the Second World War and the alleged unity between Russians and Ukrainians.<sup>17</sup>

A second key feature is that the regime needs to take into consideration Russian society's own preferences. For instance, despite the best efforts of propaganda, the population has never embraced the Eurasianist language.

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13. A. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

14. M. Karnysheva, "Writing an Illiberal History of the Russian Revolution: How the Kremlin Projected Policy Into the Past, 1985-2011", *Journal of Illiberalism Studies*, No. 3, Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (IERES), January 2023, pp. 47-70, available at: [www.illiberalism.org](http://www.illiberalism.org).

15. K. Wilson, "Modernization or More of the Same in Russia: Was There a 'Thaw' Under Medvedev?", *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 62, No. 3, 2015, pp. 145-158; K. Richters, "The Russian Orthodox Church and Medvedev's Modernisation Policy: Allies or Foes?", *Religion, State & Society*, Vol. 40, No. 3-4, September 2012, pp. 363-378.

16. D. S. Hutcheson and I. McAllister, "Consolidating the Putin Regime: The 2020 Referendum on Russia's Constitutional Amendments", *Russian Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2021, pp. 355-376, available at: [www.diva-portal.org](http://www.diva-portal.org).

17. V. Putin, "Vladimir Putin: The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II", *The National Interest*, June 18, 2020, available at: <https://nationalinterest.org>; V. Putin, "Article by Vladimir Putin 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians'", Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, July 12, 2021, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

Whereas the state has long described Russia as the pole of attraction for Eurasia and promoted open borders between the member states of the Eurasian Economic Union, the public supports more xenophobic policies and would prefer citizens of Russia's Caucasian and Central Asian neighbors to be required to get visas to visit Russia.<sup>18</sup> In spring 2022, after surveys showed that the population was not really buying the narrative on the denazification of Ukraine, the official language shifted its argumentation to present the war as a conflict with the West, which resonated better with public opinion.<sup>19</sup> And in late 2023, only one-quarter of the population believed Ukraine and Russia are one nation and that Ukraine should join Russia, even though this had been Putin's personal argument since 2020.<sup>20</sup>

The third key feature is the flexibility of the regime's internal configuration. It has long resembled a conglomerate of competing opinions; it is not a uniform, cohesive group and has only reluctantly moved toward a more cohesive and repressive ideology. It draws on an eclectic doctrinal stock and multiple (sometimes contradictory) repertoires and intellectual genealogies. This ideological stock has rarely been produced in-house by the Presidential Administration; instead, this task has been outsourced to providers of doctrinal content—be they thinkers, entrepreneurs of influence, or institutions such as the Russian Orthodox Church—who compete for resources and recognition. This realm follows the rules of a competitive, privatized market for ideas, and a whole ecosystem of ideological entrepreneurs, producers, and subcontractors has taken shape.<sup>21</sup> With the full-scale war, however, the scope for improvisation, along with the bottom-up dynamic underpinning the co-creational nature of the regime, has been curtailed but has not entirely disappeared.

## Which status for ideology? the regime's dilemma

Until the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the regime was reluctant to commit to an official ideology, supporting this in the name of Article 13 of the Russian Constitution of 1993, which prohibits any state ideology: "Ideological plurality shall be recognized in the Russian Federation. No ideology may be instituted as a state-sponsored or mandatory ideology".

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18. H. S. Chapman, K. L. Marquardt, Y. M. Herrera, and T. P. Gerber, "Xenophobia on the Rise? Temporal and Regional Trends in Xenophobic Attitudes in Russia", *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 3, April 2018, pp. 381-394.

19. P. Goode, "How Russian Television Normalizes the War", *Riddle*, July 14, 2023, available at: <https://ridl.io>.

20. V. Zvonovsky, "Crimea May Be Russia, but Ukraine Definitely Is Not", *Russia.Post*, November 28, 2023, available at: [www.russiapost.info](http://www.russiapost.info).

21. See more in M. Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021.

The war has revived debates over this provision, with the 11<sup>th</sup> St. Petersburg International Legal Forum of May 2023 showing ruling elites divided. Some chief—among them Investigative Committee head Alexander Bastrykin and other *siloviki*, presidential adviser Vladimir Medinsky, current deputy chairman of the Security Council Dmitry Medvedev, and Justice Minister Konstantin Chuichenko—call for repealing Article 13 and reinstating a state ideology, while others (for instance famous jurist Valery Zorkin) oppose it. The former group argues that, to prevent Western ideas from penetrating Russia, the state should formulate a new state ideology based on the presidential decree of November 2022 on spiritual values. For the second group, the 2020 constitutional amendments and other official documents have already defined the contents of Russia's national idea, and there is no reason to convene a Federal Assembly to change the Constitution to make it legally binding.<sup>22</sup> The debate is ongoing.

The authorities have long been cognizant that a state ideology would face two major difficulties. First, since the fall of the USSR, Russian society has grown more diverse and fragmented in terms of lifestyles and ideological references.<sup>23</sup> Forcibly recreating unity from scratch would thus be challenging. Second, imposing ideological constraints would require the corresponding development of a large-scale repressive apparatus that could ensure the application of dogma and punish the recalcitrant. The Putin team, itself a product of the fragmentation and globalization of Russian society, has interpreted excessive Soviet doctrinarism as one of the reasons for the Soviet collapse and vividly remembers the failure of the Soviet tools of repression in the last decades of the USSR, as well as the exorbitant costs associated with maintaining a coercive system.

For them, therefore, the question has historically been how to promulgate a “national idea” that would secure popular approval without officializing an overly fixed “state ideology.” With the full-scale war, this equilibrium has been challenged and proponents of the officialization of a state ideology—all from the hawkish part of the Russian establishment—have been gaining weight.

The so-called “moderates,” or technocratic elite, have either become very cautious and silent (e.g., former Minister of Finance and Chairman of the Accounts Chamber Aleksey Kudrin), have continued to distance themselves from the party of war while remaining loyal to the regime and playing an integral part therein (e.g., Central Bank governor

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22. A. Majer, A. Kiseleva, and E. Muhametšina, “Ministr ūsticii načal diskussii ob otmene zapreta na ideologii” [The Minister of Justice has Started a Discussion on Lifting the Ban on Ideology], *Vedomosti*, May 12, 2023, available at: [www.vedomosti.ru](http://www.vedomosti.ru); A. Kornâ and A. Vinokurov, “Ideologičeskie edinoglasia” [Ideological Unanimity], *Kommersant*, May 11, 2023, available at: [www.kommersant.ru](http://www.kommersant.ru).

23. M. Laruelle and J. Radvanyi, *Russia: Great Power, Weakened State*, 2nd ed., Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023.

Elvira Nabiullina and Moscow mayor Sergey Sobyenin), or have embraced the new course (Dmitri Medvedev epitomizes this transformation from a “liberal” to a virulent hawk; a similar path has been taken by First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration Sergey Kiriyenko, who is now in charge of both managing Ukraine’s occupied territories and crafting new mechanisms for ideological indoctrination).

# Unpacking Russia's ideological construction

What is the architecture of Russia's ideology? Michael Freeden's seminal work sees ideology as a process of de-contestation offering "temporary stabilities carved out of fundamental semantic instability in the social and political worlds".<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the apparent semantic chaos of Russia's official language should obscure neither the coherence of the mental apparatus nor these repertoires' roots in intellectual history. There is both political opportunism—the narratives promoted are contingency-specific—and ideological stability in the core set of beliefs. It would thus be a mistake to see this construction as slapdash or random: it has its own inner logic.

To analyze it, I propose to see ideology as composed of five layers: 1) a set of core worldviews and values, meaning non-homogenous opinions, popular prejudices, and general presuppositions, implicitly formulated and based on the "realm of experience" that shapes a society's interpretation of the world at a certain moment; 2) broad discursive notions that are floating signifiers, such as sovereignty, civilization, conservatism, Eurasia, and Russian World, each of which has their own intellectual history; 3) strategic narratives or storylines that make sense of the political and social order and adapt to changing contexts; 4) doctrines—precise textual corpora developed by authors or propagators (e.g., churches) outside the state structures, and from which the regime borrows selectively; and 5) *topoi* or ideologemes—small key semantic units that reduce complex realities to simplistic slogans and mottos that have populated the public space ("Ukronazis", "collective West", "Russophobia," etc.). These ideologemes are most prevalent on state television, where they mesh well with the culture of aggressive political talk shows, a powerful format for spreading narratives on the war and the world in which the main anchors compete to make the most radical statements.<sup>25</sup> This paper focuses on worldviews, strategic narratives, and doctrines.

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24. M. Freeden, "The Morphological Analysis of Ideology," in: M. Freeden, L. Tower Sargent, and M. Stears (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 118.

25. V. Tolz and S. Hutchings, "Truth with a Z: Disinformation, War in Ukraine, and Russia's Contradictory Discourse of Imperial Identity", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 39, No. 5, 2023, pp. 347-365.

## A set of core worldviews and values

The Russian leadership's set of worldviews and values has not evolved over the years, remaining anchored in the experience of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the chaotic 1990s. Three core elements can be identified: 1) the collapse of the Soviet Union was a treason by both the then-ruling elite and the West and should not be allowed to occur again; 2) Russia should be recognized as a unique great power to help it resist Western pressures; and 3) the state embodies the Russian nation, hence society should be supportive of the regime and accept the prioritization of state interests over individual rights. These core elements were early expressed in Putin's Millennium Manifesto, published on December 31, 1999, in which he insisted on the idea of Russia as a specific civilization that cannot simply repeat Western models and that is shaped by greatness, statism, and national unity.<sup>26</sup>

The regime has continued to both rely on and cultivate social traumas inherited from the 1990s, such as fear of chaos, and to present itself as offering society protection from internal and external threats. The West is positioned as the main Other of Russia—as it has been since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century, if not before—and this is the driving, core element that shapes the whole state language.<sup>27</sup> The latter has evolved from learning from the West during the Yeltsin era to competing with the West during the early Putin period, diverging from the West during the late Putin period, and now quite literally fighting against the West. While the memory of the collapse of the Soviet Union has gradually faded, since younger generations of Russians did not experience it, it has been reimagined and augmented as the fear of an existential threat coming from the “collective West”. The latter is now condemned for having a “cultural code” that is essentially Russophobic.

Over time, therefore, while the three core principles of this set of beliefs have remained stable, their interpretation has evolved. A conspiracy mindset and a Manichean worldview that sees history as an ever-repeating clash of good and evil have now become systemic elements shaping Russian political culture, particularly when it comes to foreign policy. This conspirationism has deep roots in Soviet political life, especially Stalinism, and has been accentuated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and Russian politicians' strategy of blaming the West and/or avoiding recognizing their agency during the difficult decade of the 1990s.<sup>28</sup>

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26. V. Putin, “Rossiâ na rubeže tysâçeletij” [Russia at the Turn of its Millennium], *Nezavisimââ Gazeta*, December 31, 1999, available at: [www.ng.ru](http://www.ng.ru). An English-language translation is available at: <https://pages.uoregon.edu>.

27. L. Engelstein, *Slavophile Empire: Imperial Russia's Illiberal Path*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009; A. Walicki, *The Slavophile Controversy: History of a Conservative Utopia in Nineteenth-Century Russian Thought*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989.

28. I. Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet World*, Cambridge: Polity, 2018; E. Borenstein, *Plots Against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy After Socialism*, New York, NY:

## Evolving strategic narratives

This set of worldviews is developed around several strategic narratives capable of adapting to quickly evolving contexts and transforming the main notions used by the regime to make sense of the world into coherent and credible plots. We identify five major strategic narratives: Russia as a civilization-state, Russia as *katechon*, Russia as defender of traditional values, Russia as the anti-fascist power, and Russia as the leading anticolonial force.

### ***Russia as a civilization-state***

Russia's civilizationism denies the existence of a unique yardstick by which to judge other civilizations. It sees Western universalism as both a philosophical threat to the God-given diversity of the world and as a political lie organized by the West to obfuscate its strategic interests. While the regime positions Russia as a unique civilization that rejects Western normative pressures, it has continued to play on diverse civilizational repertoires.

For a long time, the Kremlin presented Russia as having signs of civilizational belonging with Europe and some forms of Western culture, while simultaneously following its own distinctive course of development. It then gradually moved toward claiming full "civilizational autonomy." The dominant official language is now that Russia is both the original Europe, preserved from the demons of Westernization and liberalism, and a specific civilization in its own right.<sup>29</sup> This paradoxical stance therefore blends the historical Slavophile and Eurasianist viewpoints about Russia's relationship to Europe.<sup>30</sup>

Whatever its positioning on the question of whether Europe or the West should be accepted as a benchmark of civilization, negotiated with, or rejected, one core element of Russia's civilizational ideal has remained: its emphasis on ethnic and religious pluralism as evidence of Russia's unique cultural identity. The discourse on Russian civilizationism is therefore not anchored in ethnonationalism—on the contrary, the regime (and especially Putin) has been vocally opposed to ethnonationalism, seen as a destructive

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Cornell University Press, 2019; S. Radnitz, *Revealing Schemes: The Politics of Conspiracy in Russia and the Post-Soviet Region*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

29. F. Luk'ánov, "Rossiâ kak strana zdravogo smysla—vot èto bylo by zdorovo" [Russia as a Country of Common Sense—That Would be Great], Russian International Affairs Council, February 13, 2023, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru>.

30. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Slavophiles and Westernizers opposed each other: all thought Russia belonged to Europe, but Slavophiles believed that Russia was a better, more authentic Europe than Western Europe, while Westernizers called for Russia to follow the Western model. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the advent of the Eurasianists, who rejected the Slavophile-Westernizer binary and claimed that Russia was neither Europe nor Asia, but a continent in its own right.

force from within and a threat from outside aimed at bringing about the collapse of Russia.

The civilizational argument has been developed around the idea of a common destiny for those peoples living on Russia's territory: Russia, on this narrative, was not a classical colonial power but a specific imperial construction that other nations joined "voluntarily" and that, during the Soviet era, sacrificed the wellbeing of the core ethnic group, Russians, to support the development of backward provinces.<sup>31</sup> This primordial pluralism is constructed around the *matryoshka* (nested dolls) principle: each ethnic group is allowed to have its own local sub-civilizational history as long as it fits into the Russian supraethnic framework.

This reading of Russia's imperial history as a shared common destiny has contributed to gradually rehabilitating Russia as an empire. The policy elite increasingly makes references to the most prominent Russian emperors, such as Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, whom Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov has presented as Putin's main "foreign policy advisors."<sup>32</sup> Central to this imperial identity, of course, is the issue of Ukraine—both as a nation and as a state. In the Russian state's perspective, the Russian and Ukrainian nations should be at least closely linked (the "brotherhood" trope), if not blended into a unified nation (the "triune" trope—with the Belarusian nation being the third branch of the pan-Russian nation). A byproduct of this denial of a specific Ukrainian identity is the postulate that the Ukrainian state can exist only if Russia allows it to do so: if Kyiv becomes the "anti-Russia", then Ukraine should be "denationalized".<sup>33</sup>

These two beliefs have always existed in the background of the Russian ideological construction, and have long been promulgated by far-right groups, whether inspired by Aleksander Solzhenitsyn's eastern Slavic ethnonationalism or by a more classic imperialism like that of Aleksander Dugin. For much of post-Soviet history, however, they were not articulated directly by the Kremlin, which recognized the Ukrainian state and identity, albeit with contempt. That said, the idea that Ukraine's statehood was illegitimate did surface periodically. In 2008, for instance, following the NATO Bucharest summit where Kyiv and Tbilisi were half-promised membership, the Russian press reported that a furious Putin declared, "Ukraine is not even a state! What is Ukraine? Part of its territory is Central Europe, the other part, the most important part, we gave it!"<sup>34</sup> The

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31. Y. M. Brudny, *Reinventing Russia: Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953-1991*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998; G. Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire*, London: Harper Collins, 1997.

32. M. Seddon, C. Miller, and F. Schwartz, "How Putin Blundered Into Ukraine—Then Doubled Down", *Financial Times*, February 23, 2023, available at: [www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com).

33. I. Torbakov, "Deadly Illusions: The Ukraine War and Russian Historical Imagination", *The Russia Program at GW Online Papers*, No. 3, May 2023, available at: <https://therussiaprogram.org>.

34. O. Allenova, E. Geda, and V. Novikov, "Blok NATO razošelsâ na blokpakety" [The NATO Bloc has Split into Blockades], *Kommersant*, April 7, 2008, available at: [www.kommersant.ru](http://www.kommersant.ru).



idea of conquering parts of Ukraine's territory was left unspoken by the Kremlin until the annexation of Crimea and the dream of bringing Ukraine's southeastern regions—the *Novorossiia* conquered by Catherine the Great from the Ottoman Empire—"back" into the Russian fold. Yet it was not until 2021 that Russia's imperial and ethnic irredentism toward Ukraine was blatantly formulated by Putin.<sup>35</sup>

## ***Russia as katechon***

The civilizationist language is intimately bound up with the promotion of conservatism, the political cornerstone of the regime. In the Kremlin's view, excessively rapid transformations lead to revolution, and revolution brings chaos: first because of Russia's own historical experience of the 1917 and 1991 revolutions; second because revolutions challenge the statism of the regime, which holds that reforms can only be initiated in a top-down manner; and third because revolutions are seen as a tool by which for foreign powers to intervene in domestic affairs.

But far from being solely about regime survival—which is, obviously, a non-negligible component of the ideological construct—Russia's state-backed conservatism is also rooted in a genuine ontology. This ontology maintains a pessimistic view of human nature, as it believes humankind is driven by negative forces and an overall decline. It thus favors a conservative political philosophy, which holds that humans have features that cannot be easily challenged or denied by means of individual willpower, and that identity (be it national, sexual, or gender) is not a mere social construct that can be changed simply because an individual feels dissatisfied with it. From this perspective, "excessive" progressivism is seen as destabilizing mankind's ontology. Russian conservatism thus promotes traditional social institutions, emphasizes stability and continuity, and embraces such notions as traditions and natural law.<sup>36</sup>

The Kremlin advocates for what can be defined as an ecumenical conservatism: almost all versions of conservatism are welcome and find room (albeit of different size and status) under its protective umbrella.<sup>37</sup> One can identify at least four such strains of conservatism: 1) the state-promoted one, presented as "moderate" and embodied intellectually by state-sponsored projects such as the *Notebooks on Conservatism* and the intellectual circles of the Young Conservatives, now dismantled; 2) liberal conservatism, which stresses the importance of economic reforms but in a conservative political

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35. V. Putin, "Vladimir Putin: The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II", *op. cit.*

36. P. Robinson, *Russian Conservatism*, Ithaca/London, NY: Northern Illinois University Press/Cornell University Press, 2019; G. Diesen, *Russian Conservatism: Managing Change Under Permanent Revolution*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021.

37. M. Suslov and D. Uzlaner, *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives*, Leiden: Brill, 2019.

context, and exists mostly among economic and financial technocrats—it was dominant in the 2000s but has since been relegated to the political margins; 3) the Russian Orthodox Church's brand of conservatism, which is more oriented toward religion and moral values, and whose activist groups are focused on ultra-conservative family values; and 4) a reactionary conservatism that rejects the status quo and pushes for revolutionary transformations—this has become more dominant since the war.

Because it is anchored in Orthodox theology, the Russian conservative and reactionary tradition should be read through its religious undertones: millenarianism and eschatology.<sup>38</sup> It sees Russia through the Biblical notion of *katechon* (“the withholder” in Ancient Greek), a term used to describe the force that delays the coming of the Antichrist and protects the world from the kingdom of the Beast. The Swedish scholar Maria Engström presents *katechon* as the gatekeeper of chaos, “a military force that resists a metaphysical enemy sent by the Antichrist. This metaphysical enemy takes different shapes in different historical periods: the Tatars, the Turks, freemasons, Napoleon, Hitler, and nowadays American agents, Ukrainian fascists, and the Kiev junta”.<sup>39</sup> Vladimir Putin has expressed Russia's katechontic identity on several occasions: he has presented Russia as the last bastion of reason and stability against a decadent and destabilizing West. This ideology has become hegemonic since the war, which has seen religious language permeate public discourse, from calls for the “desatanization of Ukraine” to claims that the war is spiritually and even theologically justified.<sup>40</sup>

### ***Russia as the defender of traditional values***

Closely associated with this katechontic discursive line, one finds the idea of Russia as defender of traditional values. In the 2000s, the non-intrusive state was the linchpin of the social contract, according to which citizens were permitted to hold a plurality of values in their private lives. After 2012, the idea of a “cultural code” took shape in the state language; this has since been gradually systematized, reaching the level of a presidential decree on “Fundamentals of State Policy to Preserve and Strengthen Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values” in November 2022.<sup>41</sup>

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38. V. Shnirelman, “Russian Neoconservatism and Apocalyptic Imperialism”, in: M. Suslov and D. Uzláner (eds.), *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives*, Eurasian Studies Library, Vol. 13, Leiden: Brill, 2019, pp. 347-378; D. Sidorov, “Post-Imperial Third Romes: Resurrections of a Russian Orthodox Geopolitical Metaphor”, *Geopolitics*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2006, pp. 317-347.

39. M. Engström, “Contemporary Russian Messianism and New Russian Foreign Policy”, *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 2014, pp. 365.

40. G. Persh, “War and Eschatology”, *Public Orthodoxy*, January 27, 2023, available at: <https://publicorthodoxy.org>.

41. The 17 values are life; dignity; human rights and freedoms; patriotism; civic consciousness; service to the Fatherland and responsibility for its fate; high moral ideals; a strong family; creative work; the

This cultural code is packaged in a traditional-values language that is especially visible when it comes to family policy. On LGBT+ issues, the state's language has been radically conservative, in line with the Soviet legacy of pathologizing and criminalizing homosexuality and gender non-conformity. Homophobia has been weaponized by the Kremlin since 2012-2013, becoming instrumental in Russia's competition with Europe, decried as *gayropa* (a portmanteau of "gay Europe").<sup>42</sup> This reached new levels in 2023 with the Russian Supreme Court's decision to ban the alleged "LGBT international movement" for "extremism".<sup>43</sup>

This cult of traditional values should be read as a "retrotopia": Russian society is indeed more conservative than its Western European counterparts (although no more than some Central European societies or segments of the American public) in terms of declared values on issues such as heterosexuality, abortion, divorce, and transgenerational links, but is simultaneously a dysfunctional society with high rates of single-parent families, drug and alcohol consumption, and suicide, not to mention the world's highest age-adjusted rate of mortality due to external causes (that is, those not related to disease).<sup>44</sup>

On women's rights and gender equality, the Russian state historically advocated for a more moderate conservatism, following the line taken during the Soviet era, when views were generally progressive (with the exception of the Stalin years) but gender roles were stereotypical.<sup>45</sup> Since the launch of the war, however, the highest-level authorities have adopted a more radically conservative tone: motivated by the idea that, in wartime, women should prioritize their reproductive role, the government is pushing more openly for multi-child families and an anti-abortion policy.<sup>46</sup> If the latter were to be enacted and abortion banned, it would be the biggest state intrusion into private life in post-Soviet Russia.

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priority of the spiritual over the material; humanism; mercy; justice; collectivism; mutual assistance and mutual respect; historical memory and intergenerational continuity; and unity of the peoples of Russia. For an analysis of the decree, see B. Noble, "Traditional Values' and the Limits of Civic Unity", *Russia.Post*, November 21, 2022, available at: <https://russiapost.info>.

42. O. Riabov and T. Riabova, "The Decline of Gayropa? How Russia Intends to Save the World", *Eurozine*, February 5, 2014, available at: <https://www.eurozine.com>; A. Tûška, "Weaponizing Narrative: Russia Contesting Europe's Liberal Identity, Power and Hegemony", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2022, pp. 115-135.

43. P. Sauer, "Russia Outlaws 'International LGBT Public Movement' as Extremist", *The Guardian*, November 30, 2023, available at: [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).

44. "Deaths by Sex and Age Group for a Selected Country or Area and Year [Caused by Injury]", WHO Mortality Database, available at: <https://platform.who.int> [accessed January 24, 2024].

45. A. Novitskaya, V. Sperling, L. McIntosh Sundstrom and J. E. Johnson, "Unpacking 'Traditional Values' in Russia's Conservative Turn: Gender, Sexuality and the Soviet Legacy", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2023.

46. B. Vitkine, "As Population Is Declining in Russia, the Right to Abortion Is Under Attack", *Le Monde*, November 29, 2023, available at: [www.lemonde.fr](http://www.lemonde.fr).

## ***Russia as the anti-fascist power***

A fourth strategic narrative relates to the cult of the Great Patriotic War. The nation's foundational myth since the 1970s, it understands the war as an event of mythic proportions: larger than life, it exemplifies the highest human values of courage and sacrifice, elevating the Russian people to the double status of martyr and hero. But for the regime, Russia's struggle against fascism is not confined to the past; the crusade is ongoing. Vladimir Putin revealed this mindset as early as 2005, declaring that the "imperishable lesson from the war is [still] today very actual and important".<sup>47</sup> The president has regularly warned citizens that fascism might return, compelling Russia to rescue itself—and the world—from this evil.

The old Soviet trope of the West, in particular the United States, supporting fascists and Nazis around the world has been renewed and is constantly highlighted in the media realm.<sup>48</sup> In the Russian vision, today's fascists are those who refuse the status quo over the 1945 victory and those who equate Communism with Nazism, as well as those who challenge classical Western civilization with postmodern theories.<sup>49</sup> Opposed to "fascists" are "conservatives", i.e., those who want to rescue the real Europe by promoting Christian values, defending classical Western civilization (both in the sense of Antiquity and in the sense of state sovereignty), and supporting a conventional reading of the Soviet victory in the Second World War. Inspired by that discursive frame, the theme of the "denazification of Ukraine" has become the major strategic narrative the Russian regime uses to justify its intervention in Ukraine; and the full-scale invasion has been framed as the natural continuation and even a real-life re-enactment of the Great Patriotic War.<sup>50</sup>

## ***Russia as the leading anticolonial force***

Last but not least has been the narrative of Russia as the anticolonial force partnering with countries of the Global South to oppose Western hegemony. This anticolonial narrative relies on an old intellectual tradition, dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that declares Russia to have been colonized by Europe—a position first theorized by the Slavophiles, then expressed by

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47. V. Putin, "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation", Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, April 25, 2005, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

48. E. Gaufman, "Second World War 2.0: Digital Memory of Fascism in Russia in the Aftermath of Euromaidan in Ukraine", *Journal of Regional Security*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2015, pp. 17-36.

49. More in M. Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East West*, op. cit.

50. J. McGlynn, *Memory Makers: The Politics of the Past in Putin's Russia*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023.

the founding fathers of Eurasianism in the 1920s,<sup>51</sup> and rearticulated by Russian nationalist dissidents such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn in the Soviet Union in the 1960s-1980s. It is also obviously rooted in the longstanding political tradition of Soviet anti-imperialist discourse. It was present already in early Bolshevik discourse calling on colonial nations to join the world revolution and was institutionalized under Khrushchev to attract the “Third World” and the non-aligned countries.

It was therefore relatively easy for the Kremlin to re-brand this narrative. Already in the early 2000s, the government spoke regularly about the West's attempts to transform Russia into a colony providing it with raw materials, framing the Russian government's economic recentralization and exertion of pressure on foreign investors as a strategic step to secure the country's sovereignty against Western intrusions.<sup>52</sup> During this period, the denunciation of the so-called “golden billion” became a regular reference in official speeches.

In a second phase, this narrative was developed by Russian media outlets for external audiences, such as Sputnik and RT, as well as by the media galaxy around Prigozhin, with Africa as the main testing ground.<sup>53</sup> With the war, this narrative has become a very loud feature of the presidential discourse. In his September 30, 2022, speech announcing the annexation of the four occupied Ukrainian regions, Putin offered a bold summary of Western colonialism, explaining that the West “put entire nations under drugs, exterminated entire ethnicities in the name of land and resources, organized hunting of human beings as if they were animals. It is against the very nature of mankind, truth, freedom, and justice”.<sup>54</sup>

This anticolonial repertoire is articulated in a language of economic partnership, shared technologies, and prosperity—yet with postmodern illiberal accents of conservative values to defend. It has accelerated a shift by the Kremlin toward “leftist” and Soviet-inspired narratives around the notion of world social justice. The idea that Russia needs to “unlearn the West” in order to become the leading anticolonial force has now become

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51. S. Glebov, “The Anticolonialist Empire. N.S.Trubetskoi's Critique of Evolutionism and Eurocentrism”, in: S. Glebov (eds.), *From Empire to Eurasia: Politics, Scholarship, and Ideology in Russian Eurasianism, 1920s-1930s*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017, pp. 76-110.

52. P. Rutland, “The Place of Economics in Russian National Identity Debates” in: P. Kolstø and H. Blakkisrud (eds.), *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism, 2000-15*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017, pp. 336-360.

53. M. Audinet, “Le Lion, l'Ours et les Hyènes: Acteurs, pratiques et récits de l'influence informationnelle russe en Afrique subsaharienne francophone”, *Étude de l'IRSEM*, Vol. 83, IRSEM, July 2021, available at : [www.irsem.fr](http://www.irsem.fr); M. Audinet and C. Gérard, “Les ‘libérateurs’: comment la ‘galaxie Prigojine’ raconte la chevauchée du groupe Wagner au Sahel”, in: J. Fernandez *et. al* (eds.), *Les nouvelles formes de guerre*, Paris: Les Équateurs, 2022, pp. 69-85.

54. V. Putin, “Podpisanie dogovorov o prinâtii dnr, lnr, zaporožskoj i hersonskoj oblasti v sostav Rossii” [Signing of Agreements on the Admission of the DPR, LPR, Zaporizhia and Kherson Regions into Russia], Oficial'nye setevye resursy Prezidenta Rossii, September 30, 2022, available at: [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru).

mainstream in the Russian establishment. Freed from normative dependency on the West thanks to the war and sanctions, Moscow should now be able to take the lead of what Ivan Timofeev, Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council and one of the leading International Relations figures in Russia, has called the “rebellion of the discontented”.<sup>55</sup>

## The search for greater coherence

The 2022 war has intensified the Presidential Administration's concern about a lack of inner ideological coherence. Previously disunited repertoires stemming from different doctrinal stocks—sovereignty, civilization, conservatism, traditional values, Eurasia, Russian world, Byzantium, victory in the Second World War, etc.—have gradually been blended together thanks to determined bureaucratic work. Indeed, Russia's 2023 foreign policy concept draws together several long-disconnected repertoires:

More than a thousand years of independent statehood, the cultural heritage of the preceding era, deep historical ties with the traditional European culture and other Eurasian cultures, and the ability to ensure harmonious coexistence of different peoples, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups on one common territory, which has been developed over many centuries, determine Russia's special position as a unique country-civilization and a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power that brings together the Russian people and other peoples belonging to the cultural and civilizational community of the Russian world. [...]

Russia, taking into account its decisive contribution to the victory in World War II and its active role in shaping the contemporary system of international relations, is one of the sovereign centers of global development, performing a historically unique mission aimed at maintaining the global balance of power and building a multipolar international system, as well as ensuring conditions for the peaceful progressive development of humanity on the basis of a unifying and constructive agenda.<sup>56</sup>

This excerpt demonstrates the blending of two major discursive lines that were, prior to the war, largely dissociated from each other. The first is the identitarian line on Russia as a state-civilization, which focuses on the country's historical continuity (its “one-thousand-year-long” history), its multinationality (the national construction that promotes “unity in diversity”), its spatial features (the world's biggest country), and its Eurasian/Russian World destiny. The second is the geopolitical line on the

55. I. Timofeev, “‘Russian Rebellion’: Local and Global Consequences”, Russian International Affairs Council, June 15, 2022, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru>.

56. “Konceptiia vnešnej politiki Rossijskoj Federacii” [The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation], approved by Presidential Executive Order No. 229, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, March 31, 2023, available at: <https://mid.ru>.

memory of the Second World War and the legitimacy the 1945 victory gives to Russia; the Soviet Union's legacy on the international scene; and present-day Russia's aspirations to a multipolar world decolonized from the West.

Notably, this excerpt does not explicitly mention traditional values, which are present in other sections of the document and which speak to both lines: identitarian (conservative values as a component of Russia's state-civilizational identity) and geopolitical (conservative values as a form of soft power against the decadent liberal influence promoted by the West). The decolonization of the world order would indeed allow to avoid "imposing destructive neoliberal ideological orientations contradictory to traditional spiritual-moral values" on non-Western civilizations.

One of the key contradictions often mentioned by external observers relates to the mixing of Eurasianist and Russian World notions, which seem to be opposed to one another (one is imperial, the second is ethnocentric), but these contradictions are encompassed by state-centrism, which allows the state to have multiple identities depending on its audience. The same contradiction is visible in Putin's own speeches, which simultaneously offer an essentialist definition of Russians and Ukrainians as one unified *ruskij* nation and celebrate the multinationality of Russia and ethnic minorities' contribution to the war in Ukraine.<sup>57</sup>

## Doctrines

To build this ideological constellation, the Kremlin must rely on doctrines—sophisticated intellectual constructions with their own internal coherence—produced outside the state administration. These doctrines and their authors (individual or institutional) are autonomous from the state; they may be seen by the Kremlin as both competitors and allies. Some of their arguments are co-opted and integrated into state narratives, others float around independently, and still others are rejected and sometimes even denounced. These doctrines can be both upstream (feeding ideational products to the Kremlin) and downstream (amplifying the narratives put out by the Kremlin). The regime's interaction with the broad field of ideological actors is thus a two-way street.<sup>58</sup> We identify at least seven main doctrinal corpora in today's Russia from which the regime cherry-picks.

Two religious institutions, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Muftiates, have their own, theology-based, corpora of doctrines. While they play a central role in supporting state ideology, they remain autonomous from it thanks to their religious mission, which is broader in

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57. A. C. Lenton, "Who Is Dying for the 'Russian World'?", *Riddle*, April 26, 2022, available at: <https://ridl.io>.

58. J. Faure, "What Role Did Ideology Play in Triggering Russia's Invasion of Ukraine?", *The Russia Program at GW Online Papers*, No. 8, 2023, available at: <https://therussiaprogram.org>.

time and space than the Kremlin's state-centric ideology. They struggle to find an equilibrium between being seen as the state's right hand in religious matters and retaining legitimacy in the eyes of their respective communities of believers. Areas of tension or divergence can be seen in terms of mores and family values (the Church and the Muftiates are more conservative than the state), in terms of memory policy (the Church is more critical of the Soviet regime's atheism and mass violence than is the state, even if this trend has been declining), in terms of national identity (the Church is more ethnonationalist than the state, while the Muftiates are more concerned with promoting Islamic identity and local ethnic identities than the state), and in terms of foreign policy (both the Church and the Muftiates are less aggressive than the state and are internally divided on Russia's foreign policy).<sup>59</sup>

A third doctrine that contributes to the state kaleidoscope is what can be called "Russian Communism," represented by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and its intellectual and political figures. It preceded the state in combining Marxism-Leninism and Russian nationalism, in particular Stalinist National-Bolshevism and the rehabilitation of Orthodoxy.<sup>60</sup> It advances a stronger Soviet nostalgia than the state and employs more leftist political language, insisting on social justice, a welfare state, and renationalization while criticizing privatization and neoliberalism. It has its own audience and electorate (mostly elderly and provincial), who may both support the regime and compete with the presidential party, United Russia.<sup>61</sup> The Kremlin has gradually reintegrated into its constellation several doctrinal components from the Russian Communist school, including social justice and a Russocentric reading of Soviet doctrine. Moreover, when it comes to foreign policy, the state has endeavored to present Russia to its Chinese counterparts as the legitimate heir of the Soviet Union and Marxism by having Communist Party leader Gennadi Zyuganov participate in high-level diplomatic exchanges between the two countries.

Three other doctrinal schools revolve around those whom Katharina Bluhm has called "conceptual ideologues"—intellectual figures who promote a certain political agenda and undertake organizational

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59. Among the rich literature on religion, see K. Stoeckl, "The Russian Orthodox Church as Moral Norm Entrepreneur", *Religion, State & Society*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2016, pp. 132-151; K. Stoeckl, "Three Models of Church-State Relations in Contemporary Russia", *Constitutions and Religion*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2018, pp. 195-223, available at: [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov); A. Curanović, "Russia's Mission in the World: The Perspective of the Russian Orthodox Church", *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 66, No. 4, 2019, pp. 253-267; G. Sibgatullina, *Languages of Islam and Christianity in Post-Soviet Russia*, Leiden: Brill, 2020; G. Sibgatullina, "The Muftis and the Myths: Constructing the Russian 'Church for Islam,'" *Problems of Post-Communism*, 2023, available at: <https://pure.uva.nl>.

60. M. Karnysheva, "Writing an Illiberal History of the Russian Revolution: How the Kremlin Projected Policy into the Past, 1985-2011", *op. cit.*

61. L. March, *The Communist Party in Post-Soviet Russia*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002.



activities around their ideas.<sup>62</sup> Their intellectual production targets the regime more than Russian public opinion. These are the imperial-Eurasianist school, which proposes a messianic and aggressive ideology for Russia (embodied by Alexander Dugin and Alexander Prokhanov);<sup>63</sup> the Young Conservative school, which advances a more moderate, European-inspired conservatism and favors a civilizationist isolationism for Russia (with Mikhail Remizov and Boris Mezhuev as key figures);<sup>64</sup> and the monarchist and “White” school, which defends a vision of Russia inspired by late tsarism and the White emigration, with the reactionary thinker Ivan Ilyin as its major intellectual reference. The latter is led by the oligarch Konstantin Malofeev and brings together mainly cultural figures such as the world-famous film director Nikita Mikhalkov.<sup>65</sup>

A new seventh doctrine, which one might describe as “Z-patriotism”, is in formation as we speak. Born of the war experience, it is developed by military bloggers. Some of these bloggers—among them War Gonzo and Grey Zone—have hundreds of thousands of followers on Telegram; others, like Operatsiia Z, even have millions. They have become the key opinion leaders in an increasingly uniform public space.<sup>66</sup> “Z” doctrine is intimately linked to state ideology (many military bloggers work for, or at least cooperate closely with, the Ministry of Defense) but retains autonomy from it. Populist in nature, this doctrine denounces the elites for their corruption and lack of willingness to defend Russia. It has been able to spread virulent criticisms of state structures, resulting in the repression of key figures by the state: first Wagner leader Yevgeni Prigozhin, who died in a plane crash in what many believe was a Kremlin-plotted assassination in response to his failed mutiny in June 2023, and then former Donbas warlord and Russian nationalist Igor Girkin-Strelkov, currently serving time in jail.

This “Z” doctrine stands out from other corpora because it does not offer classical doctrines in the sense of big, long, sophisticated texts. Represented mostly on social media, it features shorter texts (blogs but also poetry, memoirs, and diaries of soldiers) and has strong visual (memes,

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62. K. Bluhm, “Russia’s Conservative Counter-Movement: Genesis, Actors, and Core Concepts”, in: K. Bluhm and M. Varga (eds.), *New Conservatives in Russia and East Central Europe*, London/New York: Routledge, 2018, pp. 25-53.

63. J. Faure, “A Russian Version of Reactionary Modernism: Aleksandr Prokhanov’s ‘Spiritualization of Technology’”, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2021, pp. 356-379.

64. A. Pavlov, “The Great Expectations of Russian Young Conservatism”, in: M. Suslov and D. Uzláner (eds.), *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives*, Boston, Leiden: Brill, 2019, pp. 153-176; M. Laruelle, “The Emergence of the Russian Young Conservatives”, in: A. J. McAdams and A. Castrillon (eds.), *Contemporary Far-Right Thinkers and the Future of Liberal Democracy*, London/New York: Routledge, 2021, pp. 149-166.

65. M. Laruelle and M. Karnysheva, *Memory Politics and the Russian Civil War: Reds versus Whites*, London: Bloomsbury, 2020.

66. A. Wenger, “Return of the Voenkor: The Military as a New Opinion Leader in Russia?” *Russia.Post*, August 15, 2022, available at: <https://russiapost.info>; I. Filippov and E. Senshin, “The Z-Space Has Unexpectedly Become a Place for Political Thought” *Russia.Post*, November 14, 2023, available at: <https://russiapost.info>.

photos) and musical components. Yet, we consider it a doctrine in the sense that it offers a full-scale vision of what the social order should be. Similar to the Communist, Church, and Muftiate doctrines, the “Z” doctrine has its own audience and is embedded into social life through networks of veterans and volunteering groups supporting the front.

The rise of paramilitary structures such as the Kadyrovtsy and the former Wagner troops, even if well integrated into the regime, combined with the strength of the veterans’ movement, foreshadows a powerful vigilante, reactionary social movement that the regime will have to keep under control. We saw this vigilantism in action already in December 2023 with the scandal related to the controversial “almost naked” party that was attended by some of Russia’s top celebrities.<sup>67</sup> It resulted in a widespread boycott of these celebrities and the cancellation of their appearances in many planned concerts and events. Even Vladimir Putin was obliged to weigh in, expressing his dissatisfaction with the celebrities, after the “Z” community orchestrated a large-scale “blame and shame” campaign.

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67. “Sliškom golyj dlâ Putina: kakoe imenno video s večerinki Ivleevoj razozlilo prezidenta” [Too Naked for Putin: Which Video from Ivleeva’s Party Angered the President], *Agentstvo*, December 31, 2023, available at: [www.agents.media](http://www.agents.media).

# Post-February 24 ideological production and its actors

## Internal ideological producers

Who are the concrete engineers of Russia’s ideological production? While not a thinker himself, Vladimir Putin is obviously a central piece of the Russian political architecture: he is at the center of different strains of strategic culture and ideological interest groups. He seems to take a keen interest in history and has read the memoirs of Russia’s main historical leaders. But Putin’s speeches do not represent the language of the Russian state in its entirety: government agencies and official figures sometimes express views that may be more radical or more moderate.

Nevertheless, Putin’s voice is central in two dimensions: in the sense of being the core—the embodiment—of the system and in the sense of being in the middle (“centrist”). Putin’s speeches are both the top of the pyramid and the tip of the iceberg: they should therefore be read as both upstream—i.e., informing how other protagonists should position themselves and how the media should comment—and downstream—i.e., resulting from a long process of crafting that takes into consideration several agencies and institutions with contradicting interests before producing an official, “final” version that all should agree on.

Unlike the Soviet regime, today’s Russia does not have an institutionalized Politburo. Indeed, it functions in a much more flexible, patronal, and transactional way. However, one can identify several key institutions producing ideology, which we have called ideological ecosystems. These include the *siloviki* realm (defense, interior, and intelligence services), the presidential administration, and the Orthodox realm.<sup>68</sup> As in other fields, the government and ministries work mostly as executing bodies in charge of implementing what has been decided but are not themselves decision-makers.

The *siloviki* vision of the world, shaped by anti-Western conspiracy theories and Soviet great powers, has gradually come to dominate the state language.<sup>69</sup> It is epitomized by Nikolay Patrushev, former director of the FSB and now Secretary of the Security Council, who is probably, behind

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68. For more on the three ecosystems, see M. Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West*, *op. cit.*

69. D. Minic, *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes. Du contournement de la lutte armée à la guerre en Ukraine*, Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 2023.

Putin, the high-level figure most vocal about his opinion on geopolitical and history issues.<sup>70</sup> Close to him are the head of the Investigative Committee, Alexander Bastrykin, and the whole Security Council apparatus. Similar language is employed, in a more academic setting, by Sergey Karaganov, head of the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy and a professor at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, and—to a lesser degree—by official foreign policy experts such as Dmitri Trenin, Timofei Bordachev, and Fyodor Lukyanov.

Other figures without official status have been observed by Russian experts to be highly influential, among them Putin's close friend Yuri Kovalchuk, who is known for his conservative and religious views of Russia's greatness. Kovalchuk is one of the most secretive personalities of Putin's inner circles.<sup>71</sup> He is the largest shareholder of one of Russia's main banks, Rossiya; controls several major media channels and newspapers; is said to be Putin's personal banker; and built the president's main palaces. Putin spent a large part of the Covid-19 lockdown with Kovalchuk, who seems to have inculcated in him the idea that history matters more than the present and that Putin needs to think of his own legacy as part of Russia's long-term history.<sup>72</sup>

In the early Putin era, the Presidential Administration under Vladislav Surkov was famous for its post-modern embrace of eclectic and sometimes even underground cultural products. It is now much more technocratic in its approach, and innovation is heavily supervised. Under the careful guidance of its deputy head, Sergey Kiriyenko, the Presidential Administration has recentralized part of its ideological production around its two in-house think tanks, the Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Research (ISEPI) and the Social Research Expert Institute (EISI), as well as Kiriyenko's team from the State Atomic Energy Corporation Rosatom.

Three key figures have emerged to curate these new ideological products: Aleksander Kharichev, head of the Presidential Administration's Department in charge of the State Council; Andrei Polosin, a psychologist by training, who is now the rector of RANXiGS (the Presidential Administration University, a kind of Russian version of the now-defunct French *École nationale d'administration*), from whence he supervised the

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70. A. Soldatov and I. Borogan, "Dead Water: How the Russian Security Services Paranoid Mindset Justifies the War", *Guest Report*, No. 5, Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies, 2022, available at: <https://sceeus.se>; M. Kragh and A. Umland, "Putinism beyond Putin: The Political Ideas of Nikolai Patrushev and Sergei Naryshkin in 2006-20", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 29, No. 5, 2023, pp. 366-389.

71. S. Panov, "За что воюет Владимир Путин. I pri čem tut ego drug Ūrij Koval'čuk" [What Vladimir Putin is Fighting for. And What does his Friend Yuri Kovalchuk Have to do With it?], *Republic*, February 26, 2022, available at: <https://republic.ru>.

72. M. Zygar, "How Vladimir Putin Lost Interest in the Present", *The New York Times*, March 10, 2022, available at: [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

creation of the “Foundations of Russia’s Statehood” course;<sup>73</sup> and Aleksei Drobinin, in charge of the International Planning department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>74</sup>

While Kharichev, Polosin, and Drobinin put in production the ideological corpora of the state, a second group of authors is responsible for producing content. Behind Sergey Karaganov, the most famous of these is probably former Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky, who has been a central figure in the securitization of Russian history for the past decade. Others are less known to external observers, among them Mikhail Piotrovsky, director of the prestigious Hermitage Museum, who loudly celebrated the “special military operation”.<sup>75</sup> One should also mention physicist Mikhail Kovalchuk (brother of Yury), director of the Kurchatov Institute, Russia’s leading research and development institution in the field of nuclear energy. Considered a pseudo-scientist by many foreign and Russian experts, he is known for eccentric declarations on psychological warfare, the capacity to control the flow of thought, and many conspiracy theories related to Covid-19.<sup>76</sup>

With these new ideological endeavors, the Russian Orthodox Church seems to have lost some of its influence in the public space. Patriarch Kirill has vocally supported the war: he has represented Russia’s opponents as “evil forces”, declared that there cannot be forgiveness without justice (referring to the Donbas), and explained that “if we see [Ukraine] as a threat, we have the right to use force to ensure the threat is eradicated”.<sup>77</sup> He has also offered an icon to Viktor Zolotov, the commander of the Russian National Guard, a gesture that symbolizes the full ideological companionship of the Church and the military.<sup>78</sup> Since then, the

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73. For more on their biographies, see A. Percev, “Spasti poterânoe pokolenie. Poznakom'tes' s Andreem Polosinym—polittehnologom, kotoromu Kreml' poručil prevratit' rossijskih studentov v 'patriotičeskuû intelligenciû” [Saving a Lost Generation. Meet Andrei Polosin, a Political Strategist who was Instructed by the Kremlin to Turn Russian Students into “Patriotic Intellectuals”], *Meduza*, May 22, 2023, available at: <https://meduza.io>; E. Muhametšina, M. Ivanov, and V. Stepanov, “Kurator regionov iz 'Rosatoma' zanâlsâ voprosami gosideologii na dolžnosti prorektora RANHiGS” [The Curator of the Regions from “Rosatom” Took Up the Issues of State Ideology as Vice-Rector of the RANEP], *Vedomosti*, May 14, 2023, available at: [www.vedomosti.ru](http://www.vedomosti.ru).

74. A. Drobinin, “Uroki istorii i obraz budušego: razmyšleniâ o vnešnej politike Rossii” [History Lessons and the Image of the Future: Reflections on Russia’s Foreign Policy], *Meždunarodnâ Žizn'*, August 3, 2022, available at: <https://interaffairs.ru>.

75. G. Golosov, “Est' li u Putina ideologiâ?” [Does Putin have an Ideology?], *Holod*, December 14, 2022, available at: <https://holod.media>.

76. D. Kortukov, “The Politics of Pseudoscience: Power and Knowledge in Contemporary Russia”, *Problems of Post-Communism*, 2023; A. Zaâkin, “Doktor pauk” [Dr. Spider], *Novaâ Gazeta*, January 29, 2023, available at: <https://novayagazeta.eu>.

77. Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, “Patriaršaâ propoved' v Nedelû syropustnuû posle Liturgii v Hrame Hrista Spasitelâ” [Patriarchal Sermon in the Cheesefare’s Week after the Liturgy in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior], *Press-služba Patriarha Moskovskogo i vseâ Rusi*, March 6, 2022, available at: [www.patriarchia.ru](http://www.patriarchia.ru).

78. D. Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019.

Moscow Patriarchate has blessed those defending the Motherland and endorsed the concept of spiritual warfare, deploying arguments close to the notion of a “just war” (a longstanding Catholic tradition also present in Leninism) protecting Russia to ensure that it remains a country of true faith.<sup>79</sup>

Now that state structures are more proactive in terms of ideological production, the Church has lost some of its initiative: it follows more than precedes the state, even if it remains proactive in the family policy realm and especially in advocating for anti-abortion policies. But if the Church's visibility has declined in the public space, it has increased on the battlefield, where priests are now the driving force behind ideological work (“agitprop”) with soldiers.<sup>80</sup> Other confessions have followed: the main Muftiates have embraced the war too. The two other religions recognized as “traditional” in the Russian legislation, Buddhism and Judaism, have been more divided, with some leaders and institutions supporting the war and others opposing it.<sup>81</sup> Even among the Russian Orthodox Church, there is not absolute unanimity: there have been several cases of Orthodox priests publicly opposing the war, the majority of whom have lost their positions, among them the famous protodeacon Andrey Kurayev.<sup>82</sup>

## New courses and textbooks

The war has motivated the Presidential Administration to reinforce the teaching of ideology to younger generations. The authorities—for good reasons, as we will see below—see young people as the segment of the population least supportive of the war and hope to transform it into a new “patriotic intelligentsia”.

Beginning in September 2022, all schools were instructed to hold a flag-raising ceremony every week (let us recall that this is the norm in many countries, including the United States) and were directed to implement new extracurricular classes called “Conversations About Important Things.” The first in this series of “conversations” was symbolically taught by Putin

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79. C. Hovorun, “Increasing Fragmentation Inside the Russian Orthodox Church”, *Russia.Post*, October 16, 2023, available at: <https://russiapost.info>.

80. D. Adamsky, “Russia Botched Its Early War Propaganda Campaign, but Now It’s Doubling Down”, *Foreign Policy*, April 30, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com>; A. Staalesen, “With a Cross and a Gun, Russian Church at War”, *Barents Observer*, November 29, 2023, available at: <https://thebarentsobserver.com>.

81. “Novye raskol’niki: sobytiâ v Ukraine rassorili rossijskih buddistov” [New Schismatics: Events in Ukraine have Divided Russian Buddhists], *Novye Izvestiâ*, October 13, 2022, available at: <https://newizv.ru>; “Glavnyj ravvin Moskvy uehal iz Rossii posle otkaza podderžat’ vojnu v Ukraine” [The Chief Rabbi of Moscow Left Russia after Refusing to Support the War in Ukraine], *Radio Svoboda*, June 8, 2022, available at: [www.svoboda.org](http://www.svoboda.org).

82. S. Romašenko, “Gruppa svâšennikov RPC prizvala prekratit’ vojnu v Ukraine” [A Group of Priests from the Russian Orthodox Church Called for an end to the War in Ukraine], *Deutsche Welle*, March 1, 2022, available at: <https://amp.dw.com>.

himself on September 1, 2022.<sup>83</sup> These lessons blend initiation into civic identity with safety and security norms, science and history, and more patriotic and pro-family themes, as well as an explanation of the “special military operation” and celebration of its heroes.

Another achievement made possible by the war has been the completion of the long-awaited unified textbook for the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia (taught in 11<sup>th</sup> class, the final year of high school), which Putin has been requesting for at least a decade. Authored by Vladimir Medinsky, a historian from the Academy of Sciences Aleksander Chubaryan, and MGIMO rector Anatoly Torkunov, the unified textbook has been in use since September 2023. Denounced by part of the historian community as counterfactual propaganda and a very ahistorical vision of history, it presents Ukraine’s independence as an “anti-Russia project” and provides a positive reevaluation of the Soviet Union in which dissident culture and the perestroika years come in for vehement criticism.<sup>84</sup> Revised history textbooks for other classes are planned for the 2024-2025 academic year, as are new atlases showing recently annexed territories as part of Russia.

Last but not least, at the university level, a new 72-hour course on the “Foundations of Russian Statehood” has been mandatory for all first-year students since September 2023. Analogous to the Soviet-era course on “Scientific Communism”, the Foundations identifies “value constants” characteristic of Russia’s identity, explaining that “throughout Russian history, a strong central government has been of paramount importance for the preservation of national statehood”.<sup>85</sup> With the “Foundations of Russian Statehood”, the Russian authorities have succeeded at connecting the dots between the main ideologemes and repertoires they have produced over the years, stabilizing what has been called Russia’s “cultural DNA”.<sup>86</sup> The authorities thus seem to have succeeded at maintaining a bureaucratic vision of what ideology should be: none of the radical voices, such as the

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83. I. Fomin, “How the Kremlin Uses Schools for Ideological Indoctrination”, *Russia.Post*, September 12, 2022, available at: <https://russiapost.info>. See also “Minprosvešeniâ opublikovalo metodički dlâ vneklassnyh zanâtij ‘Razgovory o važnom’” [The Ministry of Education has Published Guidelines for Extracurricular Activities Named “Conversations about Important Things”], *Meduza*, August 26, 2022, available at: <https://meduza.io>.

84. S. Ivanov, “What Russia’s New History Textbook Reveals”, *RussiaPost*, August 18, 2023, available at: <https://russiapost.info>. See also T. Loginov, “Russkaâ nepravda” [Russian lies], *Novaâ Gazeta*, May 4, 2023, available at: <https://novayagazeta.ru>.

85. A. Vasil’eva, “Istoriâ stanet caricej nauk” [History will Become the Queen of Sciences], *Kommersant*, February 2, 2023, available at: [www.kommersant.ru](http://www.kommersant.ru).

86. A. Kolesnikov, “Istoki i smysl russkogo nacional-imperializma: istoričeskie korni ideologii Putina” [The Origins and Meaning of Russian National-Imperialism: the Historical Roots of Putin’s Ideology], Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 1, 2023, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org>; A. Percev, “Kredo razvitogo putinizma. Kak ob’âsnâût mir ‘Osnovy rossijskoj gosudarstvennosti’” [The Credo of Developed Putinism. How the “Foundations of Russian Statehood” Explain the World], Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 21, 2023, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

infamous Alexander Dugin, are quoted in the new textbooks, and they appear to be seen by the Presidential Administration as spouting “gibberish” (*mut*).<sup>87</sup>

## Military-patriotic upbringing

The Russian authorities do not confine themselves to creating new courses and textbooks. They know that raising a patriotic younger generation requires more direct involvement in the daily lives and leisure activities of youth. The state program for the patriotic education of citizens of the Russian Federation has grown into a massive phenomenon, reflected in its burgeoning budget.<sup>88</sup> In 2022 alone, it conducted 1.5 million events across the country.<sup>89</sup> Coordinated by several ministries, mostly Education and Defense, it offers a wide range of activities to youth: historical re-enactment clubs, military history tours, festivals, and outdoor sports activities.

In December 2022, the authorities launched the “Movement of the First”, a patriotic youth movement for children from the age of six, which claims a (likely inflated) 3 million members.<sup>90</sup> The goal of the movement is to inculcate in these young people a worldview “based on traditional Russian spiritual and moral goals”. The parallel with its Soviet predecessor is explicit: the Movement was created for the centenary of the Young Pioneers, which young Soviet citizens joined before entering the Komsomol.<sup>91</sup>

The Movement complements the Young Army (Yunarmii), created in 2015 by presidential decree. The Young Army brings together a vast array of state military-patriotic movements, as well as the Suvorov military boarding schools and Cadet corps, into a single organization. Young Army members—of whom there are around 1.5 million—can choose from an extensive portfolio of activities: 1) dual-use activities inspired by Scouting culture (e.g., navigation, setting up camp, building a fire, providing first aid to victims); 2) physical activities and sports, as well as participation in several national sport and talent competitions; and 3) familiarization with

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87. A. Percev, ““Spasti poterannoie pokolenie. Poznakom’tes’ s Andreem Polosinym—polittehnologom, kotoromu Kreml’ poručil prevratit’ rossijskikh studentov v ‘patriotičeskuū intelligenciū’”, *op. cit.*

88. Between 2006 and 2015, the authorities contributed between 70 and 130 million rubles per year to the program; this number jumped to 350 million rubles per year between 2016 and 2020 and then increased tenfold to 3.5 billion rubles per year in 2021. Calculated by the author based on the state programs 2001-2005, 2006-2010, 2011-2015, 2016-2020, and on annual spending for 2021 and 2022.

89. “Vojna patriotizmov: razvernutaâ v Rossii totalitarnaâ kampaniâ škol’nogo militarizma prizvana podavit’ modernye ustanovki rossijskoj molodeži” [The War of Patriotism: Russia’s Extensive Campaign of School Militarism is Designed to Suppress the Modern Attitudes of Russian Youth], *Re:Russia*, July 4, 2023, available at: <https://re-russia.net>.

90. “Dviženie pervyh’ ob’edinilo 3 mln čelovek po vsej Rossii” [The “Movement of the First” United 3 Million People across Russia], TASS, November 6, 2023, available at: <https://tass.ru>.

91. S. Kutepov, “Novoe vserossijskaâ detskaâ organizaciâ polučila nazvanie ‘Dviženie pervyh’” [The New all-Russian Children’s Organization was Named the “Movement of the First”], *RTVI*, December 18, 2022, available at: <https://rtvi.com>.



military preparation and techniques, with weekend and summer camp options for artillery training, visiting military expos and locations, and learning skills from active military personnel.

This militarization of Russian youth has penetrated the school system. A new course, “Fundamentals of Security and Defense of the Motherland”, is set to be launched in the 2024-2025 academic year. This course is the heir of the previous “Fundamentals of Life Safety” (abbreviated in Russian as OBZh), which is itself the heir of similar courses offered during the Soviet era covering basic disaster preparedness and survival, as well as military training and weapons-handling. The new course will provide a basis for the more systematic familiarization of children with military-medical, military-scientific, and military-technical knowledge, as well as the rules of civil and military safety.<sup>92</sup>

Beyond the decisions taken by the Ministry of Education, which are implemented across the whole country, early militarization of children (or resistance thereto) is partly left at the discretion of school directors and teachers. More zealous schools may organize mourning rituals for soldiers, offer military games to children as young as five or six, and serve as volunteer centers that help gather equipment for soldiers at the front and send them letters of support—all activities in which school pupils participate.<sup>93</sup> Some others try to do the minimal lip service. For instance, in a rare case, the mayor of Penza suggested not hanging commemorative plaques for those who have died in the “special military operation” in schools, evoking their psychological impact on children—a proposal that generated a negative reaction from the Russian political class.<sup>94</sup>

This militarization is also visible at the human level: veterans of the “special military operation” will be able to teach the new course on security and defense of the Motherland, as well as classes entitled “Lessons of Courage”. In the future, they may become co-teachers of all instruction related to civic education (an idea supported by Kiriienko himself);<sup>95</sup> a teacher-training center for veterans has already opened.<sup>96</sup>

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92. “Senators Want to Make Primary Military Training a Separate School Subject”, *Novye Izvestiâ*, April 2, 2023, available at: <https://en.newizv.ru>.

93. Avgust (pseudonym), “Gusi-lebedi’ s avtomatami. Kak militarizm stal čast’û škol’nogo obrazovaniâ v Rossii” [“Geese-Swans” with Machine Guns. How Militarism became a Part of School Education in Russia], *Doxa*, May 2, 2023, available at: <https://doxa.team>.

94. A. Muzyčuk, “‘Iznežennyj patriot’. V Gosdume otreagirovali na prizyv mèra Penzy ne prevrašat’ školy v ‘nekropoli’” [“The Pampered Patriot”. The State Duma Reacted to the Appeal of the Mayor of Penza not to Turn Schools into “Necropolises”], *RTVI*, November 25, 2023, available at: <https://rtvi.com>.

95. See S. Kiriienko’s telegram channel, available at: <https://t.me/rusbrief/147120>.

96. V. Rubanov, “Veteranov SVO podgotovât dlâ prepodavaniâ novogo predmeta v školah” [Veterans of the SVO will be Trained to Teach a new Subject in Schools], *TVZvezda*, September 6, 2023, available at: <https://tvzvezda.ru>.

# Societal reception

How is the ideological activism of the Russian government received by the population? As Levada Center sociologist Lev Gudkov has noted, for the past two decades, whenever Russian citizens have been asked which problems they are the most concerned with, there has been no mention of anything ideological—such as the danger of losing “traditional values” or the “Russophobia” of the “collective West”—but only of concrete issues such as social justice, salaries, pensions, quality of education and healthcare, corruption, etc.<sup>97</sup> Yet the regime has been able to build on genuine grassroots fears and desires, objectifying them and feeding them back into the public discourse—a form of vicious circle that creates social cohesion.

With the war, social cohesion has been shaken but, following the early shocks and panic moments (including impressive protests in February-March 2022 and the emigration of about one million people), society has stabilized.<sup>98</sup> There has been what scholar Jeremy Morris has called a “defensive consolidation” of the society behind the regime and a psychological adaptation to the inevitability of the war.<sup>99</sup> This has entailed citizens self-censoring themselves or putting aside their doubts to support the government (“my country, right or wrong”). This trend is visible in surveys conducted by independent agencies such as Chronicles and Russian Field, as well as the Levada Center, all of which confirm that between 50 and 70% of the population supports the war—or, more precisely, acquiesces to the state conducting the war on their behalf.<sup>100</sup>

But supporting the war effort does not automatically entail favoring a more rigid state ideology and its inculcation in citizens. Moreover, widespread support for the war should not hide the important nuances that exist among different constituencies of society. Some members of the urban middle and upper classes have shown their discontent with the war by emigrating or self-silencing, going back to the old Soviet tradition of “inner

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97. L. Gudkov, “Times Change, but Problems Worrying Ordinary Russians Stay the Same”, *Russia.Post*, November 16, 2023, available at: <https://russiapost.info>.

98. K. tertychnaya, “Russian Protests Following the Invasion of Ukraine”, *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 841, PONARS Eurasia, April 17, 2023, available at: [www.ponarseurasia.org](http://www.ponarseurasia.org); E. Kamalov, V. Kostenko, I. Sergeeva, and M. Zavadskaya, “New Russian Migrants against the War: Political Action in Russia and Abroad”, *The Russian Crisis*, No. 5, 2023, available at: <https://library.fes.de>.

99. S. Erpyleva and S. Kappinen (eds.), “Resigning Themselves to Inevitability: How Russians Justified the Military Invasion of Ukraine”, *PS Lab Report/The Russia Program at GW*, No. 1, 2022, available at: <https://therussiaprogram.org>.

100. “Russian Field: Support for Non-Support of Peace and War”, *Re:Russia*, March 9, 2023, available at: <https://re-russia.net>; See also all waves of the Chronicles survey, available at: [www.chronicles.report](http://www.chronicles.report).

exile.” Individual and discreet forms of resistance have multiplied—elements that may be difficult for external eyes to capture but should not be underestimated.<sup>101</sup>

But for the poorer segments of Russian society, the war appears as a chance to rise. The support for Western sanctions against oligarchs expressed in Putin’s populism, the belief that sanctions actually strengthen the economy; disdain for *émigrés*—all attest to a class-based experience of the war. Millions of Russians at the bottom of the social ladder can picture themselves as the country’s true heroes, ready for the ultimate sacrifice. The war has been provincial Russia’s revenge on cosmopolitan Russia.<sup>102</sup>

Two groups appear to actively support the regime’s reinforced ideological control. The first of these is the older generation (50 and above), which approves more than any other age bracket of all regime-sponsored initiatives that are inspired by Soviet methods of social control. The second is a hawkish segment of the population—accounting for between 10 and 15% of the total, depending on the survey, mostly above 35-40%, more male than female—for whom winning the war against the “collective West” in Ukraine means putting Russian society in a war mood, including full military mobilization, mobilization of the economy for the war effort, and more active popular support.<sup>103</sup>

On the other end of the spectrum, there are also pockets of resistance to, or at least resilience against, increased indoctrination. Younger generations are the least supportive of war: 36% of those aged 18-24 are opposed to it (they are, of course, the first ones to be sent to the front), as are 25% of those in the 25-39 age bracket, compared to 13% of those above 55.<sup>104</sup> This can be explained both by sociological features (younger generations are the most detached from official culture and especially television programming, the most open to alternative sources of news, and the most supportive of privacy) and age-bracket features (young people tend to be more resistant to top-down social pressures).

A survey conducted in November 2022 among people aged 14 to 35 shows that half of them do not have any political opinions; among those who do, a majority identify with leftist ideologies (communist, social-democratic, or anarchist), only 9% with conservatism and 4% with

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101. I. Meyer-Olimpieva, “Do Russians Want War?’: Exploring the Landscape of Anti-War Resistance in Russia”, *The Russia Program at GW Online Papers*, No. 6, 2023, available at: <https://therussiaprogram.org>.

102. M. Laruelle and I. Grek, “Why Do Russians Still Want to Fight?”, *op. cit.*

103. “Russian Field: Support for Non-Support of Peace and War”, *op. cit.*; See also all waves of the Chronicles survey, available at [www.chronicles.report](http://www.chronicles.report). See also V. Fedorov, “Most Are Convinced That We Did Not Start It, That We Are Rather Defending Ourselves Against the Collective West Than Attacking”, *Russia.Post*, October 6, 2023, available at: <https://russiapost.info>.

104. “Konflikt s Ukrainoj” [Conflict with Ukraine], Levada Center, June 30, 2022, available at: [www.levada.ru](http://www.levada.ru).

nationalism—a clear sign that they have not necessarily internalized the state's newspeak, or at least not the most doctrinal segments thereof.<sup>105</sup>

We do not have enough survey data to capture the opinion of ethnic minorities as such. We know that Buryats, Tuvans, and Dagestanis have been sent to the front and therefore died at a higher rate than the Russian average, mostly because they belong to the poorer and rural part of the population, with a large “bulge” of unemployed young men.<sup>106</sup> Preliminary research conducted through survey experiments suggests that at least some ethnic minorities are statistically less supportive of the war than ethnic Russians, but data remain too scarce to confirm a broader trend.<sup>107</sup>

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105. O. V. Popova and N. V. Grišin, “Političeskaâ identičnost’ rossijskoj molodeži v samoosnenuh i otsenkah ekspertov” [The Political Identity of Russian Youth in Self-Assessments and Expert Assessments], *Političeskaâ nauka*, No. 2, 2023, pp. 140-162, available at: [www.politnauka.ru](http://www.politnauka.ru).

106. A. Bessudnov, “Ethnic and Regional Inequalities in Russian Military Fatalities in Ukraine: Preliminary Findings from Crowdsourced Data”, *Demographic Research*, Vol. 48, 2023, pp. 883-898, available at: [www.demographic-research.org](http://www.demographic-research.org).

107. K. L. Marquardt, “Ethnic Variation in Support for Putin and the Invasion of Ukraine”, *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 823, PONARS Eurasia, January 12, 2023, available at: [www.ponarseurasia.org](http://www.ponarseurasia.org).

# Conclusion

With the full-scale war, the more hawkish section of the Russian establishment has been triumphing over the more reformist one. The authorities have moved toward a much more rigid ideological structure, to the point that one can now talk about an official ideology, even if it has not yet reached the level of a state ideology—which would necessitate changing the Russian Constitution. This ideology sees resistance against foreign hostility as the driving force of Russia’s history and having a powerful and unchallenged state as the only way for the country to survive and thrive. It has succeeded, over the years and with the war as the culminating point, in blending two previously diametrically opposed discursive lines that battled against each other during the Soviet decades and the 1990s: Soviet greatpowerness—itsself a mix of a Marxist-Leninist reading of the world order and Western geopolitical schools—and the White (anti-Bolshevik) imperial vision of Russia.

Yet to date, the Kremlin has not recreated a Soviet-style ideological monolith: even in the context of war, it appears hesitant to engage in excessive “true teaching”, preferring a functional, technocratic understanding of ideology. It allows for some improvisation, personal interpretations, indifference, and multiple answers to any given question, as long as one stays within a set of non-negotiable values stressing Russia’s greatness and the threat coming from the West. The current ideological construction is thus both more flexible and more organic than the Soviet doctrine and is capable of adapting to quickly evolving realities.

An eclectic patchwork of diverse, sometimes contradictory narratives, it has core parts but no standardized identifiable sources, whereas Marxism-Leninism offered a full teleological interpretation of the world with highly codified symbols and state-sponsored rituals. More importantly, Soviet ideology was taught through a huge web of vertically organized higher education institutions, agit-prop schools, and trade union structures, with cells in every workplace and every leisure organization, making it deeply embedded into the social life of every citizen, which is not the case, at least so far, for the current ideology.

Western observers tend to see the Russian ideological construction as weak because it lacks a vision of the future, but one may challenge that interpretation. Indeed, there is a vision of the future as a “retrotopia” (back to a Soviet Union-lite) blending a cult of archaic features justifying violence, visible among the hawkish segment, with modernizing aspects:

social justice, a welfare state, and a modernizing economy are still major components of state legitimacy, and foreign policy language is open to the future (multipolarity, joining the Global South, etc.). The growing place of leftist ideas inspired by the Soviet doctrinal stock helps the Kremlin combine its “retrotopia” for Russia with a forward-looking narrative for the world, offering a rebranded messianism at a low cost. The international attraction of Russia’s rebranding as the anticolonial power helps Moscow secure “positive neutrality” in the Global South and even, in some cases, attract potential allies who share Russia’s rejection of a Western-led world order and embrace of so-called traditional values.<sup>108</sup>

A major challenge for the regime is to find the right balance between mobilization and demobilization, balancing ideological routinization that would situate the war as the “new normal” with the risk of losing attraction and meaningfulness. One may indeed wonder if this Soviet-inspired indoctrination will produce the same effect as during the 1970s and 1980s, namely significant distancing and double-think by young people who are indifferent or hostile to it. While the success of the new textbooks at shaping mindsets is not guaranteed, other forms of ideological transmission that are anchored into cultural production and everyday sociabilities and habits, such as military-patriotic education, will be more successful.

As Ilya Buraitkis explains, the actual content of ideology for popular consumption is secondary to form and place; the regime does not need a “real” ideology that takes itself seriously “but an ideology as an empty form, a technology of domination that works as a set of performative practices”.<sup>109</sup> A successful ideology does not necessarily need internal intellectual coherence but rather rituals and everyday practices that play a social function, and this is what the Kremlin has succeeded in producing. Research shows, for instance, that a large part of the Russian population is not, contrary to Western pundits’ analysis, “brainwashed” by state “propaganda” and can well dissociate fake news from plausible news, but they are not interested in looking for alternative narratives that would create cognitive dissonance with their world.<sup>110</sup> This means that the regime has been able to build a sense-making and credible narrative that cannot be deconstructed simply by debunking “fake news”.

What does the future hold? Thus far, the state’s ideological construction provides narratives and worldviews that make sense of the

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108. V. Bederson, “The Global South vs. the Global West: A Battle of Narratives”, *Re:Russia*, October 27, 2022, available at: <https://re-russia.net>; P. Rutland, “Why the West Is Losing the Global Information War over Ukraine and How It Can Be Fixed”, *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 803, PONARS Eurasia, October 17, 2022, available at: [www.ponarseurasia.org](http://www.ponarseurasia.org).

109. I. Budraitkis, “Putin’s Politics of Memory: The Sovereignty of the Past over the Present”, *Russia.Post*, December 12, 2022, available at: <https://russiapost.info>.

110. A. Shirikov, “Filtering the News: Why Russians Prefer Propaganda and Shield Themselves from Independent Reporting”, *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 873, PONARS Eurasia, January 29, 2024, available at: [www.ponarseurasia.org](http://www.ponarseurasia.org).

present reality for a majority of Russian citizens. It has succeeded at silencing the minority that disagrees, deploying vertical repressive measures and taking advantage of horizontal pressures that cause people to self-censor to avoid cognitive dissonance with their social environment and their loved ones. The authorities' ability to find the right balance between, on one side, mobilizing provincial and rural Russia to go to war through ideological and material motivations and, on the other side, shielding the rest of society—and especially the middle classes—from the impact of the same war will be critical to the long-term success or failure of state ideology.

In 2022, the Funds for Progressive Politics released a report forecasting three possible scenarios for post-war Russia. In the first scenario, USSR 2.0, Russia returns to a situation where a highly rigid ideological regime controls an impoverished society that has largely lost its “creative class” in exchange for a generous welfare state and the nationalization of the economy. In the second, NEP 2.0, Russia embarks on partial democratization, decreases ideological indoctrination, and relaunches at least some forms of economic modernization and support for the private sector. In the third, the Z-nation, Russia moves toward a nationalist regime focused on natalist policies and vigilante movements—something close to a fascist state.<sup>111</sup> Almost two years after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the NEP is not in view: Russia seems to be moving toward the first, Soviet-inspired, scenario with some features of the Z-nation, of which the veterans' movements will likely be the leading force.

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111. O. Bondarenko, I. Grašenkov, and S. Serebrennikov, “Obrazy budušego dlâ Rossii: scenarii, razvilki i ocenki” [Images of the Future for Russia: Scenarios, Forks and Estimates], *Fond progressivnoj politiki*, 2022, available at: <https://progresspolicy.ru>.

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