

RUSSIA'S WARTIME IDEOLOGY

RADICALIZATION, RENT-SEEKING AND SECURING THE DICTATOR

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- Anti-Western propaganda and the indoctrination of citizens, especially young people, have gradually intensified since the early days of Putin's rule. However, their radicalization during the war is indicative of the regime's need for manipulative control rather than reflective of broad support for the regime's worldview.
- The most significant shift in the Kremlin's wartime propaganda has been its codification in school education since the summer of 2022. This timing reveals more about the regime's need to justify the war and its consequences than it does about any consistent long-term strategy.
- Key actors behind the ideological codification are opportunistically exploiting the current context. Meanwhile, ideological radicals face little opposition, as most citizens show limited interest in their activities.
- Despite the regime's indoctrination practices, the indifference of society suggests that the conditions for a strong anti-Western consensus after Putin will be weak. Such a consensus can only emerge if the future regime, like the current one, is able to maintain satisfactory material conditions and a tolerable daily life alongside its ideological views, whatever they may be.



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INTRODUCTION

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has highlighted the resilience and capacity of Vladimir Putin's regime to maintain public support for the protracted invasion despite significant losses. This has sparked a debate about the nature of the ideology that Putin represents. It has been argued that Putinism has become a state ideology that not only rests on Putin himself, but is likely to dictate Russia's political priorities after him as well.¹ Whereas the invasion can be seen as the violent culmination of the Kremlin's longer-term worldview, efforts to institutionalize it over the course of the war clearly coincide with the failure of the invasion's initial goals. This indicates the regime's heightened need to ensure manipulative control over a changed situation, rather than the implementation of a determined ideological agenda from its early days to the present.

Furthermore, the main initiators of ideological projects, on the one hand, seem more interested in securing their position in the eyes of the president than in promoting a particular ideology that would define their entire careers. On the other hand, the war has created a free playground for various ideological radicals whose views do not align with those of the majority in society. It follows that the Kremlin's wartime priorities – characterized by large financial investments and unprecedented repression – along with the reluctance of citizens to participate voluntarily in the war, raise doubts about the genuine demand for these policies in society. Current policies primarily reflect Putin's worldview and are implemented by an elite that is dependent upon him. Ideological radicalization and its codification in education during the war are central to this dynamic.

This Briefing Paper provides an overview of central ideological aspects in wartime Russia and argues that the conditions for the success of a post-Putin anti-Western consensus will be weak, based on the regime's indoctrination practices and the level of societal interest. As with current Putinism, the success of this

consensus will depend on the ability of the future regime to implement it, and on its capacity to maintain a satisfactory daily life for the population alongside its ideological principles.

RADICALIZATION OF THE KREMLIN'S IDEOLOGICAL PRIORITIES

Two central pillars in the implementation of Vladimir Putin's worldview during his nearly quarter-century rule have been patriotic education targeting young people, and increasingly intense anti-Western propaganda aimed at society at large. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, both have demonstrated a return to, and even surpassed, the most aggressive practices of the Soviet era. In terms of patriotic education, policymakers' long-standing struggle between a softer "patriotism of everything" and a more militaristic patriotism has ended in the triumph of the latter over the former. For example, Soviet-era basic military training has been reinstated as a compulsory subject in schools.² As far as propaganda is concerned, the previous effort to cram television programmes with apolitical entertainment has shifted to aggressive anti-Western war rhetoric, where unrestrained threats of nuclear weapons, for instance, have become commonplace.

Besides the familiar propagandistic tropes regarding Ukrainian fascism, the NATO threat, or Western double standards, the war has sparked a surge in advocating the importance of Russia's role as a special civilization defending and upholding traditional and conservative values against Western decadence. The Kremlin also seeks to appeal to what it sees as the conservative non-Western majority of the world, profiling Russia as a protector of the "victims of liberal values".³ Conservative-moralistic scandals – such as the widely covered "naked party" organized by celebrities in Moscow⁴ – serve to distract the

1 Snegovaya, Maria & McGlynn, Jade (2024) Dissecting Putin's regime ideology. *Post-Soviet Affairs*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1060586X.2024.2386838>.

2 Larina, Anastasiya (2022) "Kurs nachal'noy voyennoy podgotovki vvedut v shkolakh s 1 sentyabrya 2023 goda." *Kommersant*, 9 November 2022. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5653305>.

3 The New Times (2024) Putin podpisal ukaz o "gumanitarnoy podderzhke" inostrantsev, ustavshikh ot "destruktivnykh neoliberal'nykh ideologicheskikh ustanovok." *The New Times*, 19 August 2024. <https://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/248141>.

4 Alexander, Rustam (2024) "From Homophobia to Sexophobia: Russia's Continued Crusade for 'Traditional Values'." *Russia.Post*, 28 June 2024. <https://russia-post.info/society/sexophobia>.

generally conservative society from everyday problems by condemning elitism adopted from the immoral West and reinforcing the myth of Russian spiritual values. This is particularly highlighted as a fight against the LGBT “propaganda” represented by the West.⁵

Anti-Western propaganda and the indoctrination of citizens, particularly young people, have reflected a steadily intensifying trend since the early days of Putin’s rule. Nevertheless, the content of this messaging has remained unchanged. The fear of Western influences corrupting youth culture, sex, and family norms; the desire for respect based on the fear of Russia; combined with the propagandist myths of the Soviet era, especially the victory over Nazi fascists in the Second World War, or the age-old talk of Russian spiritual values, have never entirely disappeared from Russian politics. After the fall of the USSR, underground ultra-conservative and nationalist voices surfaced as a motley, albeit still political opposition movement in the 1990s. Under Putin, anti-Western actors have been systematically co-opted into the system, while the most radical nationalist and conservative voices have remained on the fringes. Meanwhile, the Kremlin’s eclectic anti-Westernism has progressively been granted official status.

The year 2022 marked a significant breakthrough for radical views as the regime transitioned to total political control, repressing almost all critical voices. The Kremlin’s domestic political priorities are reflected in the fact that the budget for patriotic education tripled in 2022 compared to 2021, amounting to 11.4 billion roubles. Approximately 5 billion roubles were initially allocated for 2022. The state media’s budget for January–March 2022 alone was more than 17 billion, compared to approximately 5 billion during the same period in 2021. Almost 115 billion roubles were budgeted for the media for 2022, with more than 118 billion allocated for 2023. Notably, these increases were proportionally larger than those for the military and domestic security between 2021 and 2022.

Investing in “correct” information can be seen as a sign of the regime’s ideological determination or its fear of any form of “wrong” information. With regard to the latter, the banning of all independent political activities and forcing dissenters into silence, acquiescence or exile has been notable. The regime’s previous reliance on practices that marginalized critical voices, rather than outright repression of them, appears weak in the context of its wartime actions. In this respect, the Kremlin’s domestic war policy is characterized by a need for

total manipulative control, rather than confidence in the majority’s support for its radical anti-Westernism.

CODIFICATION OF ANTI-WESTERN PROPAGANDA DURING THE WAR

The most significant change in the Kremlin’s propaganda since February 2022 has been the codification of its worldview in school education, replacing the previous fragmented efforts. The most important milestones have been “Conversations about Important Things” (see the Briefing Paper’s cover photo), a series of compulsory school lessons, a unified history textbook for all Russian 11th graders (aged 17–18), and the compulsory “Foundations of Russian statehood” course taught at universities.

“Conversations about Important Things” is a mandatory propaganda review that begins the school week. It is an update of the earlier voluntary “Lessons of Heroism”, a Soviet-era initiative conducted by disparate patriotic actors. While the latter discussed the exploits of the “Great Patriotic War”, the former is directly connected to the “special military operation” in Ukraine, which is repeatedly legitimized through comparisons to the 1941–1945 war. The 11th grade history textbook is, in turn, a fast-paced, visually impressive re-Sovietization of 20th-century history. The USSR and its policies are portrayed in an overwhelmingly positive light, while its challenges and collapse are framed as the result of anti-liberal and anti-Western conspiracies. The most recent history, unsurprisingly, culminates in praise for the president as the saviour of Russia.

A telling example of how Soviet narratives, revived by the history textbook, are subordinated to the president’s opportunism occurred in September 2023. Around that time, Putin condemned the Soviet invasions of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.⁶ However, the textbook introduced earlier that same month, contradicts his stance, defending the occupations. In foreign policy, it appears that any narrative can be manipulated if it is perceived to foster potential Russian sympathies or discourage support for Ukraine.

With regard to the “Foundations of Russian statehood” course, the aim is that students “will understand the peculiarities of the historical path of the Russian state, the originality of its political organization” and will identify their “individual merits and successes”

5 Kragh, Martin (2024) “Putin’s Homophobia Is an Echo of Stalinism.” *SCEEUS Commentary* No. 2, 2024. <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/putins-homophobia-is-an-echo-of-stalinism/>.

6 Radio Svoboda (2023) “Putin nazval oshibkoy vvod sovetskikh voysk v Vengriyu i Chekhoslovakiyu.” 12 September 2023. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/putin-nazval-oshibkoy-vvod-sovetskikh-tankov-v-vengriyu-i-chehiyu/32589212.html>.

with “the political stability of their Motherland”.⁷ In other words, the course is an attempt to formalize the ideology of Putin’s Russia within Russian higher education, similar to the mandatory Soviet-era courses on the history of the Communist Party and scientific communism, which emphasized one’s own superiority and the inexorable inferiority of the West.

What is noteworthy about these efforts is their timing in relation to the protracted war. All three youth-focused projects were launched in the summer and autumn of 2022, which is unlikely to be a coincidence. By then, it had become clear that the war would drag on, and the need to justify it and its consequences had become acute. These actions by the regime reflect an ad hoc need to maximize manipulative control, rather than a long-term plan to instil a particular worldview that happened to materialize in the context of the war. It is entirely possible that had the takeover of Ukraine succeeded as originally planned, there would have been no need for such haste.

7 Pertsev, Andrey (2023) “Meduza izuchila programmu novogo «ideologicheskogo predmeta» dlya vuzov,” *Meduza*, 25 May 2023. <https://meduza.io/feature/2023/05/25/meduza-izuchila-programmu-novogo-ideologicheskogo-predmeta-dlya-vuzov>.

WAR AS IDEOLOGICAL RENT-SEEKING AND AN OPEN SPACE FOR RADICALS

Along with the timing of the institutionalization of Putin’s worldview in the education system, it is essential to pay attention to those behind these projects. Unsurprisingly, they are engaging in rent-seeking behaviour typical of authoritarian regimes, where personal gain is maximized.

First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration Sergey Kiriyenko, who has been in charge of domestic policy coordination since 2016, has played a particularly significant role in this regard. For example, “Conversations about Important Things” was developed and launched by Sergey Novikov, Head of the Russian Presidential Administration for Public Projects and one of Kiriyenko’s longest-serving subordinates. Novikov presented the project at a session of the Znanie Society, a Soviet-era organization focused on educational matters that was re-established in 2016. Kiriyenko has played a central role in the revival of the organization and its significantly increased budget.

The same pattern can be found in the introduction to “Foundations of Russian statehood”. Its central authorities were Alexander Kharichev – Head of



Sergey Kiriyenko, Director General, State Atomic Energy Corporation (ROSATOM), delivers his statement at the 57th Regular Session of the IAEA General Conference in 2013.

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the Presidential Office of the Russian Federation Unit for Ensuring the Activities of the State Council – and Andrey Polosin, who still works for the state nuclear energy company Rosatom. Kharichev and Novikov also worked at Rosatom, which was headed by Kiriienko before he moved to the Kremlin. The Znanie Society has also played an important role in the implementation of the course.

Alongside these projects, Kiriienko has been the curator of the Movement of the First, another attempt to create a Soviet-style, large-scale youth organization aimed at producing state cadres. Although it has only been in operation for a little over two years, it has managed to absorb many pre-existing youth projects. Moreover, the movement has sought to be active in the occupied territories, an effort clearly favoured by the president. In the spirit of the personal relationships typical of Russian politics, Kiriienko has formed a team of loyal subordinates within the presidential administration, inherited from Rosatom. His transformation from the liberal prime minister of the late 1990s to Putin's influential "grey eminence" speaks of an excellent ability to sense Putin's temporal wishes and pseudo-historical fantasies. This hardly weakens his position in the struggle for the president's approval.⁸

The war has clearly provided momentum for the history textbook prepared by Vladimir Medinsky, former Minister of Culture from 2012 to 2020, and co-authored by Anatoly Torkunov (the rector of MGIMO University). Although Medinsky's influence is significantly less than Kiriienko's, he has retained his position through persistent opportunism. In late August 2024, it was announced that Medinsky would curate a programme in Presidential Administration dedicated to the "spiritual-moral foundations of Russian society". Even during his tenure as Minister of Culture, Medinsky promoted propagandistic myths that he held dear in the education system, but it was only through the prolonged war that he finally had the opportunity to codify his own – and, in practice, the president's – views.

For some of the more marginal, yet more ideologically consistent actors, the war has created unprecedented opportunities, as even the slightest constraints of conventionality have disappeared. A case in point is the appointment of Alexander Dugin, Russia's most well-known ultra-nationalist, or fascist thinker, as the director of the Ivan Ilyin College of Political

Studies, founded in 2023 at the Russian State University for the Humanities. The college is named after the émigré conservative-monarchist philosopher Ilyin (1883–1954), who is claimed to be Putin's favourite thinker. Dugin's appointment caused widespread discontent among students, but to no avail. The situation was different in 2014 when, despite the euphoria over the annexation of Crimea, Dugin's call to kill Ukrainians was too extreme for the university community and he lost his position as professor of sociology at Moscow State University.⁹

The same opportunity offered by the war applies to the radical conservative-nationalist Academist movement, sponsored by Konstantin Malofeyev, Russia's best-known conservative oligarch and Dugin's long-time supporter. Although the movement has not achieved the same status as Kiriienko's projects, the atmosphere is favourable for a movement that has remained relatively marginal up to now. It aims to root out what it sees as Western influences from Russian universities, for example by exposing the "wrong" views.¹⁰

SOCIETAL REACTIONS

The current ideological radicalization has shown no signs of fostering a new kind of ideological commitment in society. This might be evident if, for instance, the youngest age groups had shown strong support for official policies, but thus far this has not been the case.¹¹ In this respect, Russia's prevailing value priorities remain the brainchild of the aging Soviet generation regime, especially its dictator, whose presence guarantees the continuation of its corrupt, conservative and repressive course.

The new codification of patriotism and anti-Western views makes them more coordinated and ideological, but does not guarantee their effectiveness. Unlike in the early days of Putin's rule, when the president was also popular among young people, more than ten years of emphatic conservatism and anti-Westernism have not made young people get behind Putin like the older generations. In this regard, the younger generation's indoctrination, which has accelerated year by year, has not produced the desired result. Rather, its ineffectiveness

8 Pertsev, Andrey (2023) How Kiriienko Is Winning Putin's Ear. *Carnegie* 23 March 2023. <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/03/how-kiriienko-is-winning-putins-ear?lang=en>.

9 RBK (2014) Rektor MGU uvolil lidera "yevraziytsyev" Aleksandra Dugina. *RBK*, 27 June 2024. <https://www.rbc.ru/society/27/06/2014/57041ec39a794760d3d3fa35>.

10 Verstka (2024) "My postroili russkoye grazhdanskoye obshchestvo, teper' popyayte bilyety do Verkhnego Larsa, cherti." *Verstka*, 13 June 2024. <https://verstka.media/kto-takie-akademisty-molodezhnoe-dvizhenie-russkih-nacionalistov>.

11 Re-Russia (2024) Tri patriotizma: molodyye pokoleniya rossiyan boleye kritichno nastroyeny v otnoshenii voyny i izolyatsionistskogo kursa i potomu stanovyatsya ob'yektom razlichnykh strategiy "pervospitaniya." *Re-Russia*, 3 July 2024. <https://re-russia.net/analytics/0169/>.

has become a key argument for those involved in patriotic education to lobby for additional funding for new – but essentially the same old – projects. The same bias applies, for example, to the ultra-conservative family policy promoted by the Orthodox Church. Although most Russians agree that Russia is a country of traditional values, only a minority support the Church's ban on abortion or the view that sex is solely for reproduction.¹² With the help of the war, advocating radical but one-sided policies is both easy and tempting. There are no official channels left to criticize them without the risk of getting into trouble, and the state has allocated vast sums for such projects.

CONCLUSIONS

The ideologization of Vladimir Putin's policies is indisputable and their influence on Russian foreign policy has been obvious. Yet Putin's wartime regime has continued to operate with the same rent-seeking logic as before, with pervasive anti-Westernism as its main beacon. Loyalty to this ideology and control over it ultimately depend on material resources.

A more important question for post-Putin Russia is how this ideologization is being implemented more

broadly in society and what kind of practical consequences it has had. In the larger context, the intensified advocacy of anti-Western views is related to the regime's actors' need to sustain Putin's dictatorship to secure their own positions amid the protracted war. On the one hand, these actors, from the influential to the less powerful yes-men, are opportunistically seeking to benefit from the prevailing zeitgeist. On the other hand, the old extreme ideological fringes see this as their moment, while the citizens at large prefer to stay away from politics, especially in relation to the war.

Dwindling connections with the West and the widening divide between Russia and the West may lead to the emergence of a new Putinist generation in the coming years. However, history shows that the ideological crisis that played a key role in the collapse of the Soviet Union, along with the rapid rejection of Marxism-Leninism, underscores that isolation and time alone are not enough to create a new anti-Western generational consensus. After all, the Soviet Union, although relatively isolated, endured for 70 years. Ideological indoctrination requires, above all, the creation of satisfactory material conditions and a tolerable daily life for both its implementers and its target groups – in addition to promoting ideological principles, whatever they are. As long as these conditions are met, the elite and society alike will be able to absorb views that might otherwise be at odds with those of the majority. /

¹² Gudkov, Lev (2024) Velikiy post i traditsionnyye tsennosti. *Gorby*, 19 April 2024. <https://gorby.media/articles/2024/04/19/velikii-post-i-traditsionnye-tsennosti>.