No. 299 4 August 2023

www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html

IDEOLOGICAL AND CONSPIRATORIAL UNDERPINNINGS OF RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

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ANALYSIS

The Views of Russian Elites on Military Intervention Abroad

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000625073

Abstract

In the aftermath of the mutiny led by Wagner Group head Evgenii Prigozhin, a lively debate ensued about what this series of events revealed about the pillars of President Vladimir Putin's support. One way to approach this issue is to examine the attitudes expressed before the onset of the Russo–Ukrainian War by those holding positions a few notches below the top leadership in Russia. These are individuals at the apex of their professions—part of an elite stratum whose support, research shows, is more crucial for a dictator to maintain than that of the mass public. An analysis of trends from a unique dataset extending from 1993 to 2020, the Survey of Russian Elites, shows that highly placed Russians exhibit a nuanced combination of views on issues pertinent to the ongoing war in Ukraine. Although overall approval of the use of Russia's military outside its borders is shown to be much higher in 2020 than it was in the early 2000s, support for the unification of Ukraine with Russia is weak, as is approval of military adventurism that comes at the expense of domestic improvements.

As the war in Ukraine grinds on, Russia watchers continue to debate the meaning of Evgenii Prigozhin's "march for justice" and its aftermath for Vladimir Putin's support among Russian elites. That is indeed the right question to ask, since research shows that the support of elites is more consequential for maintaining authoritarian rule than that of the mass public. Indeed, Milan Svolik (2012, pp. 4–5) finds that more than two-thirds of all dictators who lost power by nonconstitutional means did so following defections by regime insiders. One way to approach this issue is to examine the attitudes of those holding positions a few notches below the top leadership, i.e., the elite sector. This stratum consists of individuals who are at the apex of their professions and thus are influential in their respective spheres.

To be sure, these are not members of the president's inner circle—the small group of *siloviki* involved in the decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022 (Troianovski 2022a)—and elites outside of this circle exert little, if any, influence on Putin's political decisions. As Henry Hale (2015) has argued, power is concentrated in a pyramidal political system that Putin has consolidated while in office, in which power flows from personal connections. Atop the system sits the president, who encourages conflict among rival elite networks. His patronage-based relationships with political actors both prevent successors from being groomed in a systematic manner and make collective action by elites difficult (V.G. 2022). The president also has at his disposal well-funded security, law-enforcement, and regulatory agencies, such as the Federal Security Service (FSB) and Roskomnadzor, Russia's media censorship agency (Mozur et al. 2022). Nevertheless, members of the broader elite are important in their own arenas, and depending on the timing and circumstances of Putin's exit, some might even be positioned to move upward into governing circles after he leaves office.

Although Russian elites are difficult to reach and challenging to interview (Rivera, Kozyreva, and Sarovskii 2002), the Survey of Russian Elites (SRE) that I now direct has been querying a cross-section of highly placed individuals approximately every four years since 1993. My analysis of SRE data collected through 2020 reveals a nuanced combination of attitudes held by Russian elites: although overall approval of the use of Russia's military outside its borders is higher than it was in the early 2000s, support for the unification of Ukraine with Russia is weak, as is approval of military adventurism that comes at the expense of domestic improvements.

The Survey of Russian Elites: A Unique Resource

In each survey, the SRE interviews between 180 and 320 high-ranking Russians based in Moscow who work in a broad range of occupational sectors (Zimmerman, Rivera, and Kalinin 2023). Respondents are drawn from Russia's legislative branch, executive branch, military and security forces, state-owned enterprises, private businesses, scientific and educational institutions with strong international connections, and media outlets; all are connected in some way with foreign policy issues. The most recent survey, conducted in February–March 2020, included 245 respondents selected using a quota sample.

With the addition of the latest data, the series now spans 27 years and includes 1,909 individuals. The dataset is unique in that it constitutes the only repeated cross-sectional survey data of Russian elites available. As project founder William Zimmerman told me more than once, "It's almost like real science. We can now look at the same questions and responses given from basically the collapse of the USSR—1993—to today." Although a lively discussion con-

tinues about the validity of polls in Russia ("The Value of Public Opinion Polls" 2023), we believe that meaningful conclusions can be drawn when analyzing trends over time—especially across nearly three decades of data collection.

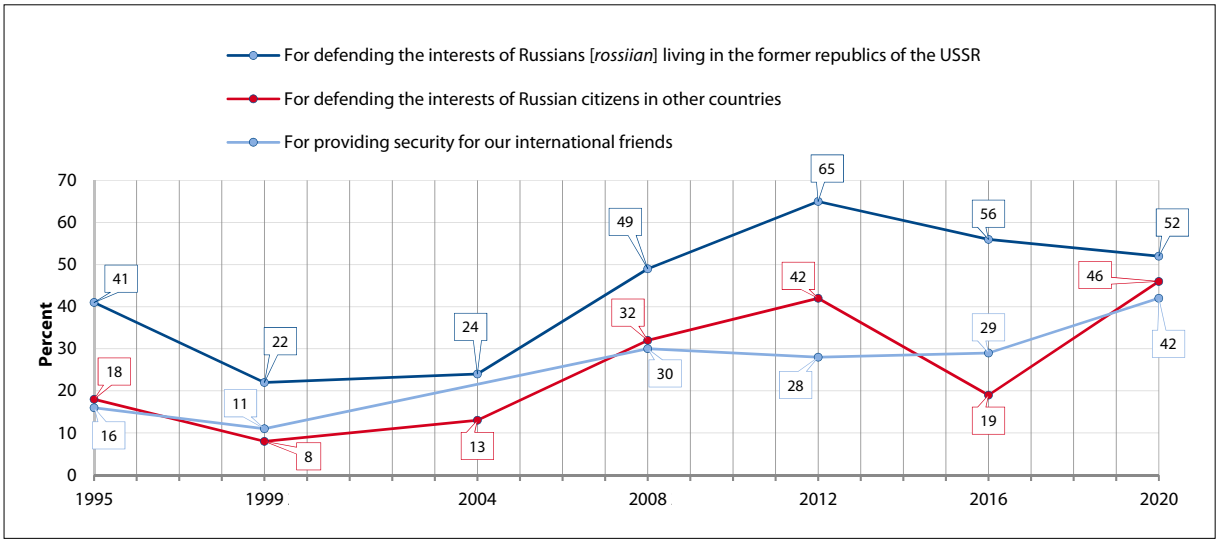
Trends in Elites' Attitudes, 1993–2020

So, what are the trends in elites' attitudes that might determine the extent of support for Putin's war in Ukraine—and, by extension, his rule itself? On the one hand, as I reported in the *Washington Post*'s *Monkey Cage* blog in the immediate aftermath of the February 2022 invasion, there is little appetite among Russian elites for the unification of Ukraine with Russia (Rivera 2022). Support for a merger with Ukraine was highest in 1995 (at 65 percent) and has fallen steadily to a low of 5 percent in 2020. In addition, a 2020 report that I co-authored with Hamilton College students shows that in every year since 1993 (with the partial exception of 2004), elites have viewed the failure to solve domestic problems as more threatening to Russia's security than the growth of U.S. military power (Rivera et al. 2020). Taken together, as I wrote in the *Monkey Cage*, "elites will be ambivalent about a costly military campaign in Ukraine."

On the other hand, Russian elites in 2020 are overall more favorably disposed toward the deployment of Russian troops abroad than in previous survey years. Every year since 1993, the SRE has asked the question, "In your opinion, for which of the following purposes is the use of the Russian military permissible?" This is followed by a list of scenarios, several of which concern regions outside of the Russian Federation. Figure 1 reveals that the percentage willing to dispatch troops to provide "security for our international friends" increased from 29 percent in 2016 to 42 percent in 2020, which is the highest level of support ever recorded in the survey. When the focus is on "defending the interests of Russian citizens in other countries," fully 46 percent agree that it is permissible to use the Russian military for this purpose—up from 42 percent in 2012 and 19 percent in 2016. Respondents expressed even more support for using the Russian military to defend "the interests of Russians [*rossiian*] living in the former republics of the USSR" in each of the surveys conducted. From 2008 on, the percentages viewing military intervention as permissible in this scenario are noticeably higher than either in the 1990s or at the end of Putin's first term in 2004, rising from 24 percent in 2004 to 65 percent soon after Putin returned to the presidency in 2012. Although down slightly from that 2012 high, 56 percent in 2016 and 52 percent in 2020 agree that the Russian military should be used to protect Russians [*rossiian*] in the post-Soviet regions.

At first glance, these two sets of results might seem contradictory, with the former challenging and the latter buttressing claims that those in Russia's elite circles adhere to an "imperial nationalism" (Ponarin and Komin 2018). In actuality, these two trends might coexist in uneasy tension, reflecting an unwillingness to renegotiate all of Russia's post-1991 borders, but also a willingness to project Russia's influence abroad, particularly when it can be done cheaply and effectively.

Figure 1: Elites' Approval of the Use of the Russian Military (%)



n=180 (1995), 240 (1999), 320 (2004), 241 (2008), 240 (2012), 243 (2016), and 245 (2020)

Source: Data from Survey of Russian Elites, 1993-2020.

Notes: The figure displays the percentage of all respondents (including those who answered "don't know" or refused to answer) who responded yes to the question.

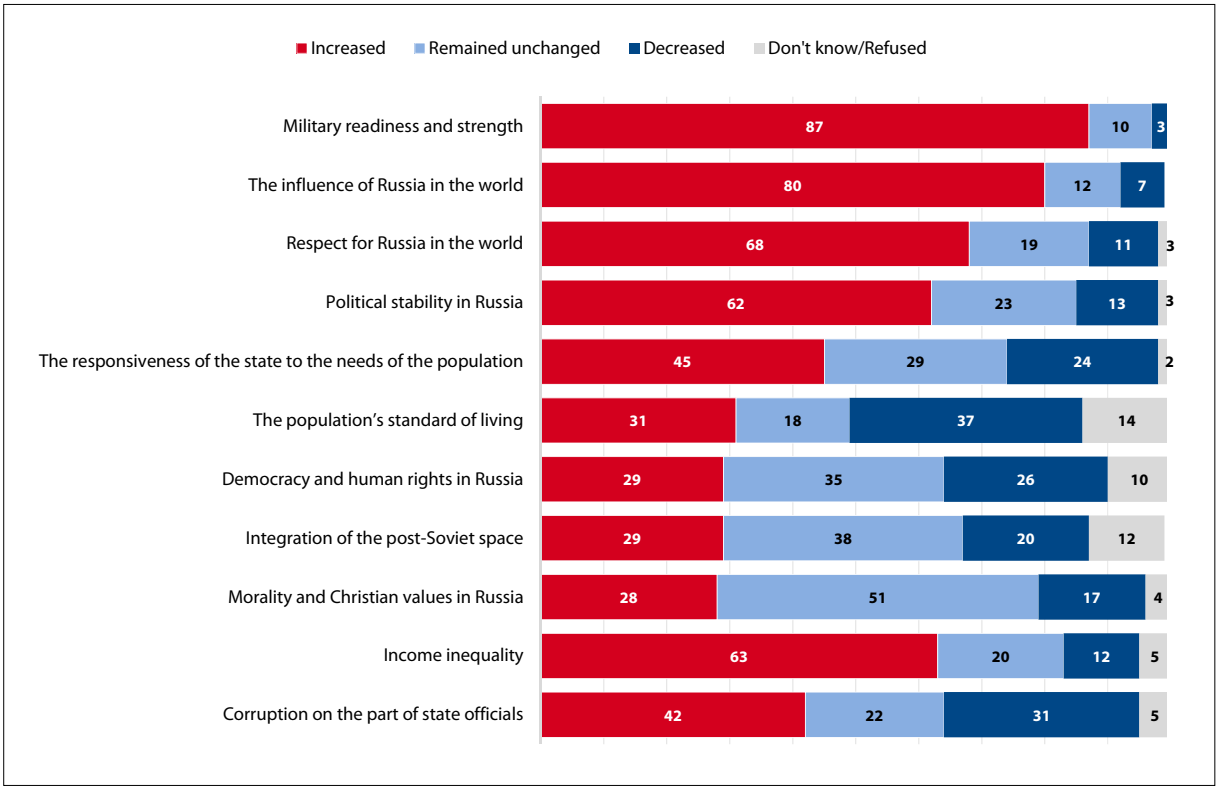
Question wording: "In your opinion, for which of the following purposes is the use of the Russian military permissible? [Defending the interests of Russians [rossiian] living in the former republics of the USSR] [Defending the interests of Russian citizens in other countries] [Providing security for our international friends] 1. Yes, 2. No."

Another finding is that the vast majority of Russian elites assert that Russia's influence and respect in the world, as well as its military capabilities, have increased since Putin came to power in 2000. In the Putin era, Russia has pursued a muscular foreign policy around the globe, whether in Syria, Africa, or the post-Soviet region. Putin also oversaw a dramatic economic recovery and boom after a deep economic contraction in the 1990s. Both Russia's enhanced international status and economic growth have been important pillars of the president's popularity. As Henry Hale's analysis of mass survey data from Russia shows, some foreign policy moves—such as the annexation of Crimea—can generate a "rally-'round-the-flag" effect, increasing levels of trust in Putin (Hale 2018).

Elites recognize Russia's international achievements and, at least as late as 2020, give Putin credit for them. In the 2020 wave of the SRE, Russian elites were asked about Putin's accomplishments during his two decades in office. As is displayed in Figure 2, 87 percent assert that Russia's military readiness and strength have grown during this period. Another 80 percent state that Russia's influence in the world has increased. Furthermore, more than two-thirds (68 percent) credit Putin with increasing global respect for Russia.

Notably, however, evaluations of the president's accomplishments on the international stage (represented by the top three bars) differ markedly from assessments of his domestic performance. Respondents were asked about a wide variety of domestic issues, including official corruption, income inequality, and democracy and human rights in Russia. Elites notice marked improvement in only one of these areas—political stability—with 62 percent saying that it is higher and only 13 percent perceiving it as lower. On all other domestic indicators, less than half of the sample sees improvement over the past two decades. Respondents reserve their sharpest criticism for the economy (sentiments that were expressed even before oil prices collapsed in April 2020 and the coronavirus health crisis really took hold in Russia). During the February–March 2020 survey period, a plurality (37 percent) reported that the standard of living had fallen since 2000 and only 12 percent agreed that Putin had been able to reduce income inequality.

Figure 2: Elites' Perceptions of Putin's Performance Over the Past Twenty Years (%)



n=245

Source: Data from Survey of Russian Elites, 1993-2020. *Figure from Sharon Werning Rivera, et al.,* "Survey of Russian Elites 2020: New Perspectives on Foreign and Domestic Policy," *July 28, 2020, p. 27.*

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100.0% due to rounding.

Question wording: "In the last twenty years since the year 2000, when Putin first became president, do you think the following things have increased, decreased, or remained unchanged? 1. Corruption on the part of state officials, 2. Income inequality, 3. Political stability in Russia, 4. The influence of Russia in the world, 5. Democracy and human rights in Russia, 6. The responsiveness of the state to the needs of the population, 7. The population's standard of living, 8. Respect for Russia in the world, 9. Morality and Christian values in Russia, 10. Military readiness and strength, 11. Integration of the post-Soviet space."

Implications for the Russo–Ukrainian War

What do these data mean for the ongoing war in Ukraine? First, they suggest that the strong approval of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea observed in the 2016 SRE data will not repeat itself during Russia's efforts to absorb broad swaths of Ukrainian territory (Rivera et al. 2016). The Crimean operation could plausibly be framed as correcting a historical error left over from the Soviet era and, most importantly, was quick, successful, and virtually bloodless. In contrast, as the SRE shows, elite support for the unification of Russia and Ukraine has declined significantly since 1995 and was anemic as of 2020.

The second implication that can be extracted from the SRE is that the Kremlin will have more success sustaining its war effort if it can capitalize on elites' preexisting inclinations to assign Putin high marks in the foreign policy domain, as well as their support for military intervention in international conflicts and the "Near Abroad." Putin's speeches are chock-full of grievances and diatribes against the West (e.g., Putin 2022); these will resonate less with most elites than a recounting of the ways in which he increased Russia's international respect and influence during his first two decades in power. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, however, Russia's foreign policy has been marked by notable setbacks (e.g., the West's shift away from Russian hydrocarbons, Central Asian states' distancing from Russia, the expansion of NATO to include Finland and Sweden, and an order for Putin's arrest issued by the International Criminal Court) that could complicate Putin's ability to use his foreign policy record to maintain elite support.

Third, the SRE highlights the importance of differentiating between Putin's inner circle and the elite sector more broadly. Analysts and scholars have rightly emphasized that the elite stratum is not monolithic. For instance, Alexandra Prokopenko (2022) describes it as having been "divided into war and peace camps" at the beginning of the war; more recently, Tatiana Stanovaya says it is split between "technocrat-executors" and "patriots" (Chotiner 2023). Empirical studies demonstrate that the *siloviki* have a more illiberal orientation than civilian elites (Rivera and Rivera 2019). And intra-elite divisions became apparent to all when the long-running feud between Prigozhin (who appears to have the tacit support of the milbloggers and Russian "superhawks," to use Eliot Cohen's phrase, but who horrifies the bureaucracy) and the Ministry of Defense played out visibly on the road from Rostov-on-Don to Moscow (Cohen 2023; Remnick 2023; Soldatov and Borogan 2023).

But another dividing line—that between the top Kremlin leadership and lower-ranking elites in a broad variety of spheres—is also noteworthy. The small cadre of individuals in Putin's inner circle are cut from the same hawkish cloth as he is; even erstwhile voices of moderate reform such as Dmitrii Medvedev are falling over themselves to demonstrate their alignment with Putin's positions (e.g., Medvedev 2022). Yet according to the SRE, a broader group of elites expresses a more complex set of attitudes toward Russia's foreign policy course. The immediate reaction of many Russian elites to Prigozhin's mutiny illustrates this point: observers have characterized it as lackluster in defense of Putin (Belton and Dixon 2023; Kilner 2023; Steinberg and Gel'man 2023; Verstka 2023). The findings from the SRE suggest that this may result from generally tepid support for foreign policy adventurism—especially when it is conducted ineptly—that diverts attention from Russia's economy and limits elites' ability to maneuver therein for personal gain.

That said, how the war is framed and what elites may privately think are likely to be overshadowed by the multiple levers employed by Putin's dictatorship to keep its upper stratum in line. Strong signals continually beam from the Kremlin to the elite, conveying that even in that privileged sector, dissent from the state's official line will not be tolerated. For instance, after he took to Instagram to denounce the invasion, former banking tycoon Oleg Tinkov was forced to sell his stake in his Tinkoff bank for a fraction of its value (Troianovski 2022b). Similarly, the frequent deaths of highly placed individuals have led one writer to dub this phenomenon the "Sudden Russian Death Syndrome" (Godfrey 2022). Repression is at a post-1985 high, and the Kremlin has been binding the career prospects of Russian elites ever more tightly to the regime as a means of preventing defections—even going so far as to confiscate the passports of high-ranking civil servants and executives in state-owned corporations (Pertsev 2023; Seddon 2023). Indeed, reporting by *Meduza* suggests that government officials' compliance with the president's decisions is primarily due to fear of, rather than respect for, Putin (Pertsev 2022). Predictably, elites have accepted their new reality and are publicly falling into line in an effort to preserve their assets and survive politically and personally (Inozemtsev 2023). In other words, most Russian elites have outwardly acquiesced and adapted to Putin's war; they are biding their time in the hope that things will eventually work out. As Alexandra Prokopenko (2023) writes, they "have no choice but to hunker down in Russia…anyone who has anything to lose simply prefers to lie low and keep quiet."

To be sure, accounts of dissatisfaction among high-ranking individuals do surface periodically. Some journalists who have interviewed a smattering of Russian elites report frustration among business executives and a sense of impending doom among political and economic elites (Belton 2022; Rustamova and Tovkaylo 2022). As Stanovaya (2022) writes, "a significant part of the Russian elite considers the war a catastrophe," even if it has not turned against Putin. In a more recent article, she identifies a trend among Russia's elites, namely "growing alarm and despair, and

a sense that Putin is leading the country over a precipice to imminent doom" (Stanovaya 2023). According to Cooley and Harrington (2022), Russia's oligarchs have suffered what has been called the "social death" of stigmatization brought about by Russia's international pariah status, and that stings.

What is unknown at the moment is how the underlying trends in elite attitudes identified by the SRE will shift as the war in Ukraine continues. As we recall, elites have consistently viewed the failure to solve domestic problems as more threatening to Russia's security than the growth of U.S. military power, and in 2020 gave Putin low marks for domestic accomplishments. If the military, human, and economic costs of the Ukrainian invasion escalate, elites' privileged positions are threatened, and, crucially, a viable alternative to Putin or Putinism appears, segments of the now-quiescent elite stratum may well change course. In that case, Russian elites' tacit support for the individual occupying the top office in the Kremlin—the one who is personally responsible for perpetrating the war—might just dissipate in surprising fashion.

About the Author
Sharon Werning Rivera is the Sidney Wertimer Professor of Government and Director of Russian Studies at Hamilton College (Clinton, NY). Her articles have appeared in numerous journals, such as *Perspectives on Politics, Post-Soviet Affairs, Problems of Post-Communism,* and *Demokratizatsiya*. She is the Principal Investigator of the Survey of Russian Elites, a project funded by the National Science Foundation (Award # 1742798) and on deposit with the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan. She is grateful to Naval Lappalainen for research assistance and to Fabian Burkhardt, Kirill Chmel, David Rivera, and Maria Snegovaya for their comments on previous drafts of this article.

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ANALYSIS

Elite Political Culture and Illiberalism in Wartime Russia

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000625073

Abstract

While a general ideological shift toward illiberalism has been noted in Russia for over a decade, recent developments suggest an increasingly deep, pervasive, and comprehensive use of illiberal rhetoric and framings by Russian elites. Policy discussions, which could once be held in a neutral or technocratic register, are increasingly suffused with illiberal legitimating and justifying language, which suggests the further integration of illiberal ideology into the worldviews of a broader cohort of Russian public figures, intellectuals, and loyalist professionals. The case of a recent public debate surrounding nuclear use policy gives rise to useful observations that underline this development.

Since the early 2010s, scholars have noted a changing ideological dynamic in Russia, characterized by an increasingly severe and notable mix of geopolitical anti-Westernism, social traditionalism, cultural conservatism, and national-civilizationism (Laruelle, 2020; Shcherbak, 2023). This change, pioneered first by regime elites, has often been referred to as a Russian version of "illiberalism," which has grown as a form of reaction to perceptions of an aggressive, left-progressive ideological agenda emanating from the West that is believed to seek the undermining of the Russian regime, the division of its population, and the maintenance of global military, cultural, and economic hegemony by elites in the United States and the European Union (Petro, 2018; Schiek and Isabaev, 2019).

This ideological shift is often framed as largely instrumental, insofar as Russian elites do not actually care about "culture war" issues or seek a traditionalist revanche due to their own personal beliefs. Rather, Russian illiberalism is claimed to be a top-down phenomenon designed by Putin and other domestic political managers to outflank domestic opponents and secure the regime's survival (Laruelle, 2013; Sharafutdinova, 2014). This sets it apart from illiberalism in other contexts, which is often linked to ambitious political oppositions and social movements (Buzogány, 2017; Buzogány and Varga, 2021). Other research suggests that the picture is more complicated, with meso-level institutions such as the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Armed Forces, as well as entrepreneurial lower-tier elites in the media and in politics, working diligently for reasons of ambition, opportunity, and genuine belief to produce illiberal policies, political justifications, and identity frameworks (Adamsky, 2019; Waller, 2021). At the same time, other non-ideological technocratic and securitized discourses existed throughout the 2010s (Fomin, 2022). Still, even if there is a demand-side and voluntarist element to the phenomenon, it is undeniable that illiberal ideological production has been a conscious policy of the Presidential Administration, (McGlynn, 2023).

Observations since the start of the Russo–Ukrainian War of 2022 suggest that an illiberal worldview—emphasizing the perfidy of Western elites, the importance of cultural traditions and resistance to left-liberal policy agendas, and a civilizationist framing of global affairs—is now quite common within Russian elites' own rhetoric and argumentative framings. This is an important development: although the Kremlin had favored a change in ideological emphasis for a decade, that period nevertheless featured a plurality of ways of discussing policy issues in the context of the authoritarian system, allowing for plain national-security framings, technocratic fixes, and other non-illiberal points of rhetorical reference (Chebankova, 2020; Gel'man, 2018; Schimpfössl and Yablokov, 2017).

This is increasingly rare. Since the start of the war, discussions in a growing set of policy domains have been packaged with a particular, ideologically illiberal framework—even when a non-ideological framing is possible, or more relevant to the issue at hand. Rhetorical shifts can be observed on issues as diverse as education policy and healthcare. This implies that the need to rely on illiberal worldviews as moral guideposts and legitimating concepts has become more fully integrated into Russia's changing elite political culture. One evocative example illustrates this trend nicely: the recent public debate over changing Russia's nuclear-use policy.

Illiberal Rhetoric in Russia's New Elite Political Culture

The shift is most notable below the top-level of the Russian regime. "Upper-tier" elite actors have long internalized and expressed the ideological change preferred by the Kremlin (Fomin, 2022; Grek, 2023; Waller, 2021). For some time, the statements of Dmitry Medvedev, Vyacheslav Volodin, and other public politicians have been full of aggressive, civilizationist, and traditionalist

language. It is only recently, however, that "lower-tier" elites' discussions of a range of policy issues have been fully integrated into an illiberal worldview.

A recent public discussion of potential changes to Russia's nuclear doctrine suggests this integration is in full swing among figures that are far lower on the elite totem-pole, including the tertiary field of mainstream intellectuals and think-tank analysts. In June, the noted Russian historian Sergei Karaganov wrote a strident piece in the academic journal *Russia in Global Affairs* in which he claimed that the use of nuclear weapons might be necessary in the fight against the "new fascism" being promoted in Ukraine by the United States and its European allies (Karaganov, 2023). A series of public responses in the same journal quickly followed. Dmitry Trenin (2023), another major Russian academician, wrote a sympathetic piece arguing that a "restraining fear" of nuclear use needed to be made clearer by the Russian state in order for the latter to survive on the international stage. Other responses were more nuanced and negative; the political scientist Ivan Timofeev (2023) argued forcefully against a change in nuclear doctrine, for example. None of these figures are in a position to actually change policy, but their statements provide evidence of an ongoing, comprehensive ideological rhetorical shift among lower-tier Russian elites and associated professional-class figures.

Indeed, common to every contribution in this debate was the highly emotive and ideological language that the authors used to frame their arguments. Karaganov's piece made clear that nuclear use needed to be rethought not only for pure power-balancing purposes, but also to beat back the ideological and cultural threat to Russia. He depicted the West as uniquely depraved, "liberal-totalitarian," and an "enemy of civilization," arguing that its elites embraced "anti-human ideologies: denial of the family, homeland, history, love between a man and a woman, faith, service to higher ideals, everything that makes up the essence of a person…" Their goal, he went on, "is to mankurtize [to make into unthinking slaves—JW] people in order to reduce their ability to resist the increasingly obviously unjust and harmful to man and humanity, modern 'globalist' capitalism." He described the use of nuclear weapons viscerally, explaining that "this is a morally terrible choice—we use the weapons of God, dooming ourselves to severe spiritual losses. But if this is not done, not only may Russia perish, but most likely the entire human civilization will end."

This represents a new evolution in public elite rhetoric, in which major policy questions are filtered through a cultural-civilizational lens and the legitimacy of a given policy is directly tied to ideological concerns about civilization, moral degeneracy, and cultural challenges—that is, framed in illiberal ideological terms. Karaganov wrote, for example, that there is "an unprecedented rapid change in the balance of power in the world in favor of the Global Majority, which not only infuriates the imperial-cosmopolitan elites (Biden and co.), but also frightens imperial-national ones (Trump). The West is losing the ability it had for five centuries to suck wealth out of the whole world, imposing, first of all, by brute force, political, economic orders, and establishing its cultural dominance." While illiberal rhetoric in nuclear discussions is not new, the fact that all participants engaged in the same discourse is a notable shift (Adamsky, 2019).

Even Timofeev's negative response took Karaganov's claims about the West at face value, although he argued that they led to different conclusions. Timofeev noted that internal cultural fights in the United States would not alter U.S. full-scale opposition to Russia; as such, any escalation by Russia would not intensify divisions in the U.S., but rather increase the danger of nuclear annihilation. He further stated that neither conservative Poland nor traditionalists in the United States were allies of Russia, framing them instead as implacable enemies: "various forces are opposing Russia, including quite traditional ones, and are far from breaking away from their historical roots and their identity." Thus, his discussion of Western political-military opposition to Russia was framed using ideology as an important argumentative point, positioning even those who might be aligned with Russia's illiberalism as antagonistic to Russia.

Discussion

That Russian policy discussions, even in areas—such as nuclear doctrine—that are unlikely to change, are increasingly dominated by an illiberal rhetorical framework is relevant for future research. Rhetorical frames ultimately filter into observable strategies and techniques in Russia's approach to international relations, among other issue areas, by contouring and shaping the premises, outlooks, and approaches that input into policy discussions. If civilization, moral decay, and traditional values are indeed the primary legitimating boundary conditions between friend and adversary, and otherwise suffuses internal discussions about agreed-upon goals for state and society, this is an important development.

Furthermore, elite acceptance of illiberalism as a constitutive component of the Russian state and its position in the global system makes efforts to appeal to China and the broader "Global South" easier and more legible for domestic consumption, and will influence how the internal Russian debate is shaped, argued, and justified. Illiberalism's status as a moral guidepost and legitimating language for policy discussions will inform the way in which Russia approaches potential allies and frames its place as an anti-Western illiberal-civilizational

pole for other states and actors, especially for those in non-Western states for whom such a worldview is perfectly coherent and understandable. It will also create new frictions with the West, whose leadership in important ways adheres to a set of ideological doctrines broadly incompatible with Russian illiberalism.

None of this is to suggest that ideology is the sole—or even primary—driver of Russian policy motivations. Depending on one's school of thought in the International Relations subfield, one might expect power considerations, economic dynamics, or even personal decision-making motivations to also be core explanatory factors. And in domestic policy areas, other factors will be at play in any policy change. Yet in order to understand Russian political discussions, we must factor in the development of illiberalism as a worldview that increasingly dominates and contours much of the public discussion. Grasping how Russian elites are thinking (and the ways in which they must justify their arguments) is necessary for a full analytical picture of the country's politics.

Although Russia may be a closed authoritarian regime in a wartime state of emergency, its domestic political and policy debates cannot be dismissed as so much fluff (Waller, 2023). In fact, if we wish to prepare ourselves for how relations with Russia may evolve in the coming years, we need to take Russian illiberalism seriously. It is no longer just a political ploy from the top, but part of the country's new political culture. Even after Putin is gone, we cannot assume that ideological changes developed within the Kremlin and supported by other illiberal institutions in society will fall away quickly, if at all. Indeed, the inculcation and dominance of these frames of reference and an overall comprehensive illiberal worldview may survive well into the medium- or long-term, even when thinking about a future, post-Putin Russian regime.

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ANALYSIS

Conspiracy Theories and Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000625073

Abstract

The Russian government, which has promoted conspiracy theories for years, has done so with special intensity since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This article explains the role conspiratorial propaganda has played in the war, highlighting the Kremlin's aims of persuasion, signaling, and confusion. It also discusses how the authorities seek to target varying audiences inside Russia, internationally, and in Ukraine. Although conspiracy theories are unlikely to be decisive in the outcome of the war, they provide insight into the Kremlin's worldview and indicate how it aims to shape public opinion.

The Kremlin publicly espoused conspiracy theories long before its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Since the mid-2000s, when President Putin reoriented Russia's foreign policy away from the West, official rhetoric has promoted several persistent, overarching conspiratorial narratives. In the context of the invasion, it has reiterated some of these ideas: that the West/NATO seeks to destroy or dismember Russia; that Europe seeks to weaken Russia by imposing liberal values such as LGBT rights and "gender ideology;" and that there is a fifth column, backed by the West, that aims to undermine Russia from within. These mainstays of Kremlin rhetoric, along with other conspiracy theories with distinct origins, have been evident in both the justification for the initial invasion in February 2022 and efforts to achieve short-term political goals as the war has dragged on. Although not as important to the course of the war as military strategy or fighting prowess, conspiracy theories matter when it comes to maintaining domestic support for the regime and cultivating international opinion.

A conspiracy theory—or the belief that powerful actors with malign intentions carry out secretive plots to achieve political or financial benefit, and for which sufficient credible evidence is absent—can be wielded as propaganda by those in power, circulate among political subjects and citizens, or operate on both levels. They were pervasive in the Soviet Union, especially in the context of the superpower rivalry of the Cold War, and they persisted in pre-Putin Russia. During the 1990s, however, they mostly proliferated among the political opposition: Communist and nationalist journalists, sundry intellectuals, and critics of the Yeltsin government (Oushakine 2016). NATO's bombing campaign in Serbia over Russian resistance provided fuel for detractors of the West and would later figure in narratives about the West's hypocrisy and disregard for Russian interests.

The Evolution of Conspiracy Theories in Service of Russian Politics and Policy

When it came to the rhetoric of conspiracy, officials in Putin's government initially did not exhibit a drastic break from their predecessors, as Putin portrayed himself as a competent reformer and sought to cooperate with the West. In the years that followed, however, as Russia faced terror attacks in Moscow and the North Caucasus and "color revolutions" ushered in pro-Western governments in Georgia and Ukraine, the Kremlin's rhetoric shifted. Appropriating the tropes of nationalist detractors of the West, by 2005 government officials and sometimes Putin himself alleged that Russia's chal-

lenges were the result of a deliberate plot against Russia by some permutation of the US, Europe, NATO, and Western intelligence services, often in cahoots with Russian liberals or Chechen militants (Radnitz 2021). These claims went beyond conventional analyses asserting that NATO threatens Russia's security interests to allege that high-level officials in enemy countries were secretly pulling the strings to cause actions that would precipitate Russia's downfall. During this period, Russia also slid toward autocracy and adopted a more confrontational stance toward the West.

Once these narratives took hold and were regularly promoted by government officials, spokespeople, pro-Kremlin journalists and pundits, and members of the Duma, as well as on state television, subsequent destabilizing events that challenged the Putin regime could be expediently enfolded into existing conspiratorial narratives. For example, the Euromaidan, a grassroots Ukrainian uprising initially directed against President Yanukovych's decision to reject an association agreement with the EU, was interpreted as an uprising contrived by the West to forcibly install a pro-Western and anti-Russian government. Putin then justified the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of the Donbas by alleging, in view of the existence of far-right supporters of the Euromaidan, that the new government contained U.S.-backed fascists who threatened ethnic Russians in Ukraine (Schuster 2014). The reputed influence of fascists or neo-Nazis in Ukraine remained a prominent theme throughout the years of fighting in Eastern Ukraine.

When it came time to create a pretext for the full-scale invasion in 2022, Russia brought out and repurposed several existing tropes. In what can be interpreted as a conspiratorial re-reading of history, in summer 2021 Putin published a treatise claiming that Ukraine was an artificial construct created by the Bolsheviks and later forcibly wrenched away from Russia by Western countries, "radical nationalist groups," and neo-Nazis (Putin 2021). On the eve of the invasion, Putin continued in this vein, claiming the need to "denazify" Ukraine. He repeated allegations of an imminent threat to compatriots abroad, reiterating a rationale used in the invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 (Radnitz 2022a). He also deepened the conspiratorial claim about Ukraine's supposed role as an adjunct to Western expansionism, arguing that its integration with Western militaries and putative accession to NATO would make Ukraine a base from which for NATO to attack Russia, making the issue "existential" for Russia. These themes have since been recycled, with variations, depending on the needs of the moment.

Conspiratorial Purposes

Conspiracy theories can serve multiple purposes. While we cannot get into the speaker's mind, the study of propaganda has shown that speech acts can be used in various ways, not all of which are straightforward. The production of a particular claim may depend on the audience, short-term objectives, and—although this is harder to demonstrate—the sincere beliefs of the speaker. When it comes to the war in Ukraine, we can discern several reasons why Putin and his cohort might believe that conspiracy claims have value.[1]

Persuasion. The most straightforward use of conspiracy theories is to bring about a change in beliefs in their intended audience. Since the war began, Russia has sought to persuade audiences that its actions are justified and worth supporting. Critical to this effort is repositioning Russia from an aggressor to a victim. Doing so involves rethinking the scale of the conflict (Toal 2017). If the only parties involved were Russia and Ukraine, then, given the senselessness and unprovoked nature of the invasion, we would naturally conclude that Russia was the aggressor. However, if Russia were locked in a struggle against the combined forces of the US and Europe, using Ukraine as a proxy, then Russia would be the underdog and justified in defending itself. Putin has been trying to sell a version of this story for most of his time in power. While viewers will not necessarily be persuaded by such arguments, research shows that repetition over time and limited alternatives help to achieve the intended effect (Enikolopov et al. 2011).

Signaling. Conspiracy theories may be designed to send implicit messages about the speaker. First, because the purported information in the alleged conspiratorial plot often requires access to secret intelligence or technical proficiency, naming a conspiracy is a way of demonstrating one's power. Second, playing up the enormity of a conspiracy and depicting the stakes as existential necessitates an equally strong response, which is a way to signal resolve and intimidate audiences (Radnitz 2021). This is the case with the *ad nauseam* claims about Ukrainian Nazis, which reference a universal villain and the basis of the USSR and Russia's dominant mythos since the Great Patriotic War. This is also the logic behind the Kremlin's intermittent claims of imminent calamity, such as Ukraine's supposed plans to use

1 While the various Kremlin factions publicly endorse the same general line on the invasion, some actors—such as Deputy Chair of the Security Council Dmitry Medvedev, Patriarch Kirill, and secretary of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev—have been more prominent in advancing certain narratives, whether directed to do so or freelancing, and Kremlin-allied television personalities ensure that these narratives reach large audiences.

a dirty bomb in a false-flag attack or the release of U.S.-funded bioweapons in Ukraine (Qiu 2022). It is difficult to assess how rhetoric figures into public perceptions of the government's power and resolve, as the lack of open dissent may also be explained by the demonstrative use of repression. Both repression and signaling can also lead to self-censorship in responses to public opinion surveys (see below).

Confusion. When used in abundance, conspiracy theories can perform another function: hindering people's ability to make sense of conflicting information. Here, it is not the malevolent aspect of conspiracy theories that matters, but their tenuous connection to the truth. If repeated consistent narratives are intended to bring about persuasion, then multiple, inconsistent, and contradictory ones are more likely to cause confusion. This can operate as distraction: when Russia is credibly accused of an atrocity, throwing out assertions that cast blame in different directions is a way to deflect responsibility. The Kremlin deployed this tactic after Russian-backed separatists were credibly linked to the shooting-down of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 in 2014, and has done so multiple times in the current conflict, including after the bombing of a maternity hospital in Mariupol (Ber 2022). Over time, some have argued, people are inclined to give up seeking truth and simply disengage. However, they are perhaps more likely to switch to other information sources or fall back on personal experiences (Szostek 2018).

Conspiratorial Audiences

Domestic. Russia pitches conspiracy claims to various audiences with distinct purposes. As in most autocratic regimes, domestic audiences have long been the primary targets of Kremlin propaganda (Guriev and Treisman 2022). The government aims to maintain public support for the war and to avoid the outbreak of mass protests. It has therefore sought to persuade the citizenry that if Russia does not fight in Ukraine, NATO will invade Russia. To discourage vocal dissent and mobilize pro-war activists, Putin has warned of fifth columns whose Western orientation threatens internal solidarity (Mylonas and Radnitz 2022). Exaggerated rhetoric about the dire consequences should Russia back down also serves to signal Putin's seriousness. It may be intended to make potential critics or dissenters think twice before acting or deter military recruits from evading the draft.

The government has the capacity to propagate its messages to the public through multiple channels. First and foremost, it works through state-controlled television, which is the primary medium via which Russians receive their news. The government's conspiratorial perspectives are conveyed directly through the news and amplified by pro-Kremlin commentators and pundits who appear on popular evening talk shows. Conspiracy theories also circulate on the Internet, on websites controlled by the Kremlin, and on social media platforms such as VK and Telegram (Cottiero et al. 2015). Insofar as people evince ambivalence about the war, it is not because they have not been exposed to the authorities' messages.

International. Another audience is international and includes two groups that serve the Kremlin's strategic interests. First are the citizens of states in the Middle East, Latin America, Asia, and Africa whose leaders are skeptical of American power and aim to maintain autonomy in their foreign relations. Conspiracy theories targeting the West through local-language television channels like *RT* and *Sputnik* may land on fertile ground where citizens resent the Western- and U.S.-dominated international order. The Kremlin hopes they will pressure or support their governments to help Russia skirt sanctions or push back against American and European diplomatic initiatives.

The other contingent abroad consists of disaffected and especially right-wing voters in democracies. People who are alienated from their political systems and angry about progressive policies endorsed by the EU may be susceptible to the Kremlin's rhetoric on diversity, gender, immigration, and traditional values, and Russian conspiracy theories about Ukraine and Western countries. Other citizens, upset by the high price of energy or the cost of military assistance to Ukraine, may also be susceptible. Mobilizing sympathetic publics in democracies can help disrupt politics, elect pro-Russian governments, or erode public support for Ukraine (Roonemaa et al. 2022).

Ukrainians. A third audience resides in Ukraine. While most Ukrainians are unlikely to be drawn in while their country is occupied by Russia, the Kremlin has sought to convince people in the historically pro-Russian areas of Eastern and Southeastern Ukraine that they are actually under attack from the Ukrainian central government in Kyiv. It can attempt this conspiratorial outreach because people living along the border watch more Russian television, which Kyiv is unable to block (Gall 2023). Russia thus seeks to cultivate a fifth column, or at least hinder Ukrainian unity. There are anecdotal reports that people already inclined to trust Russia believe these claims, but facts on the ground—showing that historically Russian-speaking areas have borne the brunt of Russia's brutality—make it harder to win hearts and minds (Gibbons-Neff and Yermak 2022).

What Does It Amount to?

Whether conspiracy theories "work" more generally is hard to assess. On one hand, multiple surveys going back years find substantial belief in anti-West conspiracy

theories: that NATO is a threat, that the West seeks to corrupt Russian values, and that the Euromaidan was a coup perpetrated by the West (Levada 2016). Reporting during the conflict finds these attitudes have persisted, although they do not relate directly to support for the war (Meduza 2023). Polling in an autocracy during wartime is unlikely to elicit honest responses, and the data on support for Putin and the war are open to varying interpretations (Russian Analytical Digest 2023).

On the other hand, behavior rather than professed beliefs suggests a failure of conspiracy theories as persuasion or intimidation. In September 2022, the government announced a mass mobilization of eligible draftees to join the war. Hundreds of thousands of military-age men fled the country rather than risk being sent to fight in Ukraine. One interpretation is that this indicates simple self-preservation. But if Putin's rhetoric about the war as necessary to Russia's continued survival were more credible, we would not expect such an overwhelming preference for exile over service to the motherland (Radnitz 2022b). This indicates, at a minimum, that many Russians were not persuaded by the Kremlin's propaganda.

Conspiracy theories have long been part of the Kremlin's political repertoire and are now a popular rhetorical form across the world, including in democracies. Viewed as propaganda, it is not surprising that they are deployed in wartime, as an adjunct to military operations. Their impact should not be overstated, as other factors—including military power, strategy, morale, and regime stability—will play the biggest role in determining how the war unfolds. Yet conspiracy theories reflect the Russian government's geopolitical worldview and, in the context of armed combat, have a strategic underpinning. We would be remiss to ignore what they are telling us.

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ANALYSIS

The Russian "Old Left," Conspiracies around the USSR's Demise, and the Russo–Ukrainian War

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000625073

Abstract

Through the lens of online conspiracies around the USSR's dissolution, this text discusses the "old left" segment of the Russian Internet. It claims that while nostalgia for the Soviet Union remains outside state memory politics, there is a certain alignment between state propaganda about the Russo–Ukrainian war and the "old left" worldview. Moreover, it shows the misuse of decolonial language that is prominent in these narratives.

Introduction

As the Russo–Ukrainian war rages on, the initial astonishment with the Russian public's reaction has worn off. Various opinion polls and studies have revealed the limits of general support for the war and the difficulties in determining what this support (or lack thereof) consists of. However, there continues to be a fundamental lack of understanding of the Russian population. I must be clear here: understanding does not and should not imply justification, shifting blame, or sympathy. However, understanding is crucial in creating roadmaps for the future. To understand Russian public opinion on the war, it is critical to disaggregate Russian society into its various dimensions and segments (regional, ethnic, ideological, social, economic, etc.).

With a single unintentional mouse click, a computer screen can display an entirely distinct Runet (Russian-language segment of the Internet) bubble: the "old left." The self-identification of these social media users varies: communists, socialists, leftists, and even Soviet citizens. As Galina Nikiporets-Takigawa and her colleagues (Nikiporets-Takigawa et al. 2016) mapped out ideological streams on the Russian Internet (including nationalists, liberals, and conformists), they coined the term "old left" to describe an online ideology rooted in nostalgia for the good old Soviet times, misrepresenting the Soviet Union as a true socialist state, and, often, taking a critical stance toward the current Russian regime. The latter is portrayed as a capitalist and oligarchic government that robs people of social welfare and pensions and is engulfed in corruption and greed. Messages, comments, social media groups, and websites making these claims combine to create a web of nostalgic narratives, intertwined with often-unfounded historical claims. Yet the people behind these online narratives remain largely understudied.

Putin's USSR

Putin could never be considered a champion of the Soviet Union's revival. While he famously claimed that the Union's dissolution was a geopolitical catastrophe, he has never bought into Soviet nostalgia wholesale. Instead,

he focuses on themes relevant to his current policies and excludes events he does not want people to remember. Furthermore, he is equally enthusiastic about Tsarist history, weaving a bricolage of national memories where everything good has always come from within Russia (however big it was at the time and whatever name it bore) while everything bad has been imported from abroad. Although the Russo–Ukrainian war could be seen as a distorted attempt to re-establish a quasi-USSR 2.0 comprised of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, this narrative is not visible in Russian state-controlled and/or loyal media. In fact, the "reinstatement of the USSR" is only ever mentioned in response to Ukrainian calls for a return to the 1991 Ukrainian borders.

Instead, since the Euromaidan began, Putin's propaganda machine has been pumping out references to the Great Patriotic War (the part of the Second World War celebrated in Russia; it starts with the Nazi invasion of the USSR in June 1941, thereby excluding uncomfortable events like the Winter War that predated the invasion). The Great Patriotic War has long been the backbone of Putin's memory politics. Still, in the nine years since the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in the Donbas, the scope, variety, and intensity of its use have surpassed everyone's expectations. Again, this is the extent to which Putin is willing to rehash Soviet history. The word "revolution" is off-limits; Soviet terror is acknowledged but attempts to confront and deal with it are suppressed. State propaganda offers little to those who yearn for the Soviet Union. The cult of the Great Patriotic War is simply used to wage a new war.

Who Are the "Old Left"?

Those who preach and follow the "old left" are on the fringe: they are the opposition that neither the state nor the liberal opposition really recognizes. The "old left" has very little in common with the "new left," which is oriented toward European left values such as minority rights. The "old left" enjoys little, if any, political influence. Their few public projects, such as reinventing the parade commemorating Lenin's revolution, were never permitted by the state and gradually faded away. The most marginal group among them, "Soviet citizens" who believe that the USSR's dissolution was illegal and that Russian passports are therefore invalid, has been outlawed. This makes it a challenge to study the culture of the "old left," even online. Looking at conspiracies provides a useful way to scratch the surface and uncover some of the most prominent ideas.

Why conspiracies? Conspiracies do not have a good reputation, for many valid reasons. Nonetheless, their nature makes them valuable for studying complex non-mainstream ideologies. Conspiracies incorporate key ideas from countercultures and indicate power shifts and lacunae in mainstream ideologies. They help communities rationalize their positions, cope with them, and form new identities. In other words, conspiracies are distilled versions of a subcultural ideology.

Conspiracies of the "Old Left"

In general, vernacular online conspiracies about the USSR's demise revolve around the usual pillars of Russian conspiratorial narratives, combined with typical "old left" tropes. In "old left" discourse, the liberals, capitalists, and oligarchs sold off the country for their own benefit. Instead of pursuing good for all, they chose excessive wealth for a few. Of course, Gorbachev and Yeltsin are the main conspirators who betrayed the people's trust and sacrificed the country's greatness for personal gain, including the Nobel prize. Yet they did not always act alone or of their own accord. Behind them were the Jews (including the alleged Jewish brides' institute, which purportedly produced wives for both presidents) and the West. The latter trope is reminiscent of state propaganda (the relationship between the two is unclear, although, as Ilya Yablokov (2018) demonstrates, the Western countries are the central protagonists in the majority of state-sponsored conspiracies).

The "old left" operates from the vantage point of the lost Cold War: the war was a zero-sum game in which the losing side lost everything, including its independence. This idea is not foreign to some on the Western left. The language they use contains many colonial tropes. The general idea is that the West, primarily the US and the European Union, is steadily, if secretly, attempting to enslave the peoples of the former USSR and colonize their territories. From this perspective, the dissolution of the USSR was one of the first steps of a complex plot. One post reads:

> Now it is clear that the creation of the republics of the USSR and their phony "independence" were only transitional stages, parts of a single plan to include these territories in the global kingdom. (URL: http://www.facebook.com/100029279147027/posts/728610784791553)

The language is in many ways reminiscent of Soviet anti-Western propaganda, which featured terms like "world imperialism." However, it has been updated and upgraded to reflect new realities. These narratives tie real facts with fakes, mention real entities known to a lay person from the news but interpret everything in a conspiratorial manner.

> The Central Bank (CB) is completely independent from our state, and is not subject to either the President or the Government of the Russian Federation (Article 75, Part 2 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation), but is

> obliged to comply with the instructions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and has essentially become a branch of the US Federal Reserve System (FRS). Such a norm is prescribed only in four countries: Afghanistan, Iraq (after the murder of Saddam Hussein), Kosovo, and the Russian Federation—a company of completely sovereign and equal states, isn't it? (URL: http://www.facebook.com/100003837485113/posts/2245864455551449)

Here, Russia is placed in an unusual category. This only makes sense if one understands that in the "old left" worldview, post-Soviet states—and particularly Russia—are global victims. The disintegration of the Soviet Union (often described among the "old left" as "the world's strongest power"), the betrayal of Soviet and Russian leadership ("the colonial administration"), and the cunning of the Western countries all contributed to the "enslavement" of "the Slavs" (by which the authors of these posts usually mean ethnic Russians, of course). The rhetoric aids in making sense of the subpar living conditions and limited opportunities that many Russians faced even before the war. It is also reminiscent of populist declarations from various countries, including Western ones. While these narratives portray the current Russian regime in a negative light, they have not been threatening enough for the regime to actively persecute their adherents (except the most radical among them, such as the "Soviet citizens").

Conclusion

Generally speaking, "old left" representations of the past differ from those presented by the state. However, the Russian state's framing of the Russo–Ukrainian war meshes perfectly with the overall ideology of "world imperialism" (it is difficult to say whether this is a case of cooptation). Ukraine is interpreted as a pawn in a larger world war (one post refers to it as the war between "human" and "un-human" regimes) in which the world imperialism is unconcerned about either side of the conflict and seeks to colonize everyone. While the social media posts I cite here were published prior to the full-scale invasion, the war in Ukraine's east had already been going on for eight years.

Two points are important. First, all calls for Russia's decolonization and Russian acknowledgment of their country's imperialism are perfectly valid, but they miss and will continue to miss the mark with larger audiences. As Nikiporets-Takigawa et al.'s investigation of Russian ideologies showed, the "old left" is one of three non-conformist ideologies. While it is unclear how prevalent it is, it is obvious that it is one of the worldviews that needs to be acknowledged by those who seek to change Russian society. The concepts of imperialism and colonization are not unfamiliar to this worldview, but they refer to very different entities. Misunderstanding this would pave the way for yet another "democratization" reminiscent of the post-Soviet reforms that would fail to accomplish real change—just as the 1990s reforms ended up in creating an illusion of democracy instead of institutional changes. Second, the existence of such a popular ideology is not unique to Russia. The description of the "old left" given above might well have sounded quite familiar to those who follow European right-wing populism or the neo-Confederates in the US. Indeed, these groups share with their Russian counterparts similar feelings of ressentiment, their portrayal of "the common folk," and their longing for the good old days. And just as in Europe or the US, there is in Russia no simple answer to the question of how to deal with these growing social movements.

About the Author

Dr. *Daria Khlevnyuk* is a postdoctoral fellow with the ERC-funded project "Conspiratorial Memory." She has been working on memory of the USSR in contemporary Russia, including memories of the Soviet terror in museum exhibitions and public opinion and pro-Soviet views expressed online.

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Responsible editor for this issue: Fabian Burkhardt
Language editing: Ellen Powell
Layout: Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann, Michael Clemens
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