



# **RUSSIAN IDEOLOGY AFTER CRIMEA**

Andrei Kolesnikov



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Carnegie Moscow Center  
16/2 Tverskaya  
Moscow, 125009, Russia  
Tel. +7 495 935 8904  
Fax: +7 495 935 8906  
[info@Carnegie.ru](mailto:info@Carnegie.ru)

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## About the Author

**Andrei Kolesnikov** is a senior associate and the chair of the Russian Domestic Politics and Political Institutions Program at the Carnegie Moscow Center. He is a frequent contributor to *Vedomosti*, *Gazeta.ru*, and *Forbes.ru*, and he is also a board member of the Yegor Gaidar Foundation.



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## Summary

Following the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, the Russian public has embraced an increasingly conservative and nationalistic ideology. Any repudiation of this ideology, let alone the transformation of the country as a whole, will only happen if demand for change from the bottom coincides with a desire for modernization from the top.

### Key Findings

- The new social contract demands that the Russian people surrender their freedom in return for Crimea and a sense of national pride. It seizes on changes that have already occurred in the minds of many Russians.
- The new ideology is based on a deliberate recycling of archaic forms of mass consciousness, a phenomenon that can be termed the sanctification of unfreedom.
- Confined to a besieged fortress, surrounded by external enemies, and faced with a domestic fifth column, the people of Russia have begun to experience Stockholm syndrome and have thrown their support behind the commander of the fortress, President Vladimir Putin. They have adopted his logic and even defended his interests, believing that they are members of his team.
- Freedom of expression has been significantly curtailed through a system of bans and strict forms of punishment, including criminal prosecution, which have both didactic and deterrent components. Pressure on democratic media outlets has also increased drastically.
- Ideology in Russia is a mass product that is easy to absorb; it is legitimized by constant references to the past, glorious traditions, and occasionally fictional historical events.
- Although ideology emanates from the top, there is demand for it from the bottom.

### Looking to the Future

- With economic concerns mounting, at some point, the energy behind the mass mobilization of the Russian body politic will begin to dissipate, and the social contract that emerged during the period of high oil prices will start to lose steam. At a minimum, the sausage that was exchanged for freedom, so to speak, will have to get worse—and more expensive.

- While the Crimea gambit proved to be amazingly effective at generating popular support for the leadership, the regime will have to supply the people with something new in the near future. Supply will have to drive demand. Modernization of the new ideology will only come when there is a supply of reformist ideas from above and a demand for them from below.
- The state ideology offers no overriding concept for the future; its foundation is Russia's past glory. In this sense, it may have a decidedly limited life span.
- The strategic problem facing the regime is: What can it offer the Russian people now that the Crimean card has been played?

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## Making Unfreedom Sacred

Russia's ideological matrix has deep historical roots, having taken shape over several hundred years. That makes its trajectory difficult to alter. This ideology is entrenched in the same way that graft is entrenched in the Russian government and economy. In a private conversation, the cultural sociologist Daniil Dondurey referred to graft as a “cultural prescription” in Russia, and ideology might be similarly labeled. It is more comfortable to conform than to dissent. When faced with a choice between formal and informal economies, Russians frequently opt for the informal rules that they find more comfortable.

Russia remains a country of concepts based on relationships between two parties. The two most important pairs of ideas are power and property (having power is linked to owning property) and civilization and the state. In discussing the latter, Dondurey pointed out that “the civilization-state as a super-institution protects people, traditions, its history, culture, morals, and the ‘rules of living,’ but most importantly, it protects its own distinctness and sovereignty. That is its mandate. It must constantly demonstrate its mammoth power; otherwise, the people will be disappointed. They have to be certain that any sacrifices are made for a higher purpose—to protect the state. Russian President Vladimir Putin talked about this mandate for the entire second half of 2014: ‘We will not be subjugated,’ he repeated over and over.”<sup>1</sup>

Russian ideology is mystifying; like Putin's approval ratings, it seems to be enchanted. In *The Spirit of Enlightenment*, the French philosopher Tzvetan Todorov wrote that “Enlightenment removes the spell from the world.”<sup>2</sup> The contemporary Russian regime is attempting to put the world back under a spell, using the tactics of pre-Enlightenment theocracies rather than those of modern states. This trend can be described as a process of making unfreedom sacred, and it has been accompanied by a newfound fundamentalism and intolerance toward all things foreign.

## Ideological Supply and Demand

Vladimir Nabokov's 1945 *New Yorker* story “Conversation Piece, 1945,” sheds light on Russian conservatism, describing the kind of conversations that can still be heard in Moscow's conservative quarters, corporate backrooms, and luxury apartments. Indeed, Russian conservative ideology has not changed much since then. The words of the former White Guard colonel, a character in the story, brilliantly summarized the sentiments expressed by the mainstream

in modern-day Russia: “The great Russian people has waked up and my country is again a great country. We had three great leaders. We had Ivan, whom his enemies called Terrible, then we had Peter the Great, and now we have Joseph Stalin. I am a White Russian and have served in the Imperial Guards, but also I am a Russian patriot and a Russian Christian. Today, in every word that comes out of Russia, I feel the power, I feel the splendor of old Mother Russia. She is again a country of soldiers, religion, and true Slavs.”<sup>3</sup>

What is behind the rapid ascent of this type of ideology-driven Slav, after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014? Why have these kinds of people become so visible (it is hard to say whether they are in the majority or not) in post-Crimea Russia, which had been moving toward the West for a quarter of a century? Why are talk show hosts on public television channels, Facebook users, visitors to the Kremlin’s cafeteria, and patrons of upscale restaurants suddenly so ideological? Who are the conduits of this ideology?

The Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski wrote that “ideology is always weaker than the social forces that express it and serve as conduits of its values.”<sup>4</sup> This is true. It is hard to call an ideology powerful when it is premised on the czarist-era construct of Count Sergey Uvarov (the policy known as Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality) and relies on the prescriptions of self-isolation and militarism to guide Russia in the post-industrial twenty-first century. It is impossible to consider territorial acquisition a particularly resonant geopolitical move in an age when seizing territory is no longer considered a sign of strength.

The ideology of the current Russian regime is antiquated and weak. Nevertheless, the ideology has been utilized at the right place at the right time and has been sown on fertile ground. As Kołakowski wrote, the social wave that supported the ideology turned out to be more powerful than the actual ideology borrowed from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries.

The regime has attempted to rewrite Russian history, justifying the 1939 Winter War against Finland and the 1979–1989 invasion of Afghanistan (among other revisionist interpretations). Still, it does not merely derive its legitimacy from past policy and ideology by whitewashing dark pages of history. The state is also reproducing old ideological projects. Take Catherine the Great’s Crimean project, for example. Under her rule, Crimea became a Russian protectorate—a “buffer state” of sorts—after the Turks were driven out. In April 1783, the peninsula was annexed to Russia without a single shot being fired. As historian of Russian culture Andrei Zorin wrote, “Crimea endowed Russia with enormous symbolic capital. It could represent both the Christian Byzantium and the Classic Hellas.”<sup>5</sup>

The Russian Orthodox Church has historically played a large role in all ideological projects (except during the Soviet era). While talking about the continuity of Russian ideologies in 2012, Zorin noted, “The idea of a symbiotic relationship between the state and the church is being revived. The state is relying on legitimacy

derived from the church. On the other hand, the church is becoming an administrative service of the state, which increases its authority.”<sup>6</sup>

A simple ideology should consist of simple components, like designating enemies within and without. Putin’s March 18, 2014, speech justifying the annexation of Crimea focused on this aspect: “This is a decision that we need to make for ourselves. Are we ready to consistently defend our national interests, or will we forever give in, retreat to who knows where? Some Western politicians are already threatening us with not just sanctions but also the prospect of increasingly serious problems on the domestic front. I would like to know what it is they have in mind exactly: action by a fifth column, this disparate bunch of ‘national traitors,’ or are they hoping to put us in a worsening social and economic situation so as to provoke public discontent?”<sup>7</sup>

Putin’s address to the Federal Assembly later that same year also outlined another aspect of contemporary Russian ideology: “Crimea, the ancient Korsun or Chersonesus, and Sevastopol have invaluable civilisational and even sacral importance for Russia, like the Temple Mount in Jerusalem for the followers of Islam and Judaism. And this is how we will always consider it.”<sup>8</sup>

All of this is part of the supply-side of contemporary Russian ideology. But the demand for it came first. Demand for an eclectic brand of Russian national-isolationist ideology was delayed by the period of political and economic reforms in the 1990s, but Putin has managed to create a product that is in demand and can be easily and profitably sold, thus making it accessible to everyone. Putin as a brand is also part of this product, this new ideology.

Mass ideology, like any mass-marketed product, is simple, both in terms of supply and demand. It is an ideology created without much effort and absorbed without much reflection.

## Militarization and Stalinization

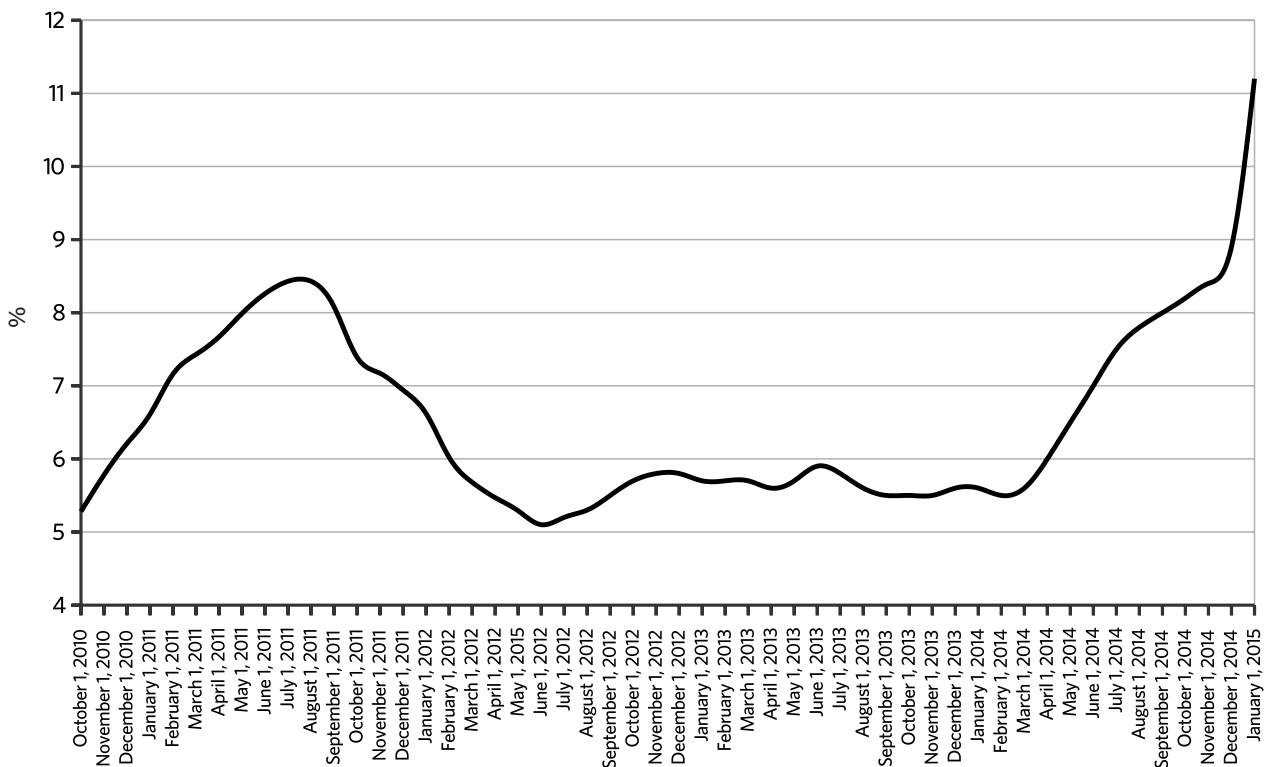
At the end of December 2014, the Public Opinion Foundation conducted an opinion poll entitled “How Russia is Viewed Around the World.” Respondents were markedly more optimistic than they had been in a poll from ten months earlier. In February, 57 percent of those polled thought that they were living in a developed, advanced country; by December, that number had risen to 69 percent. The number of Russians who believed that they were living in a rich country increased from 58 percent to 66 percent; in a free country—from 60 percent to 73 percent; in a country that everyone fears—from 68 percent to 86 percent; and in a country whose influence is growing—from 55 percent to 67 percent. The only problems facing Russia, according to Russians, had to do with the fact that foreigners do not like Russia.<sup>9</sup> According to a November 2014 Levada Center poll, 68 percent of respondents considered Russia a great power, compared to 48 percent in September 2012.<sup>10</sup>

Russians think they are living in a besieged fortress. While some believe that they have been taken hostage, others seem to enjoy their imprisonment. They have Stockholm syndrome and have turned their unfreedom into something sacred.

This sacralization of unfreedom gives birth to militarism. Russian society has been militarized for decades, if not centuries. Being prepared for a lightning-fast military mobilization was arguably the main shared value in the Soviet Union, during and after Joseph Stalin’s rule. The badge that Soviet children received upon successful completion of athletic challenges was even named “Ready for Labor and Defense.” Soviet discourse was replete with rhetoric about the “struggle for peace,” which gave birth to a rather canny joke about struggling for peace until the world was torn into pieces. Exorbitant military spending contributed to the Soviet Union’s collapse. But this lesson has been completely forgotten now.

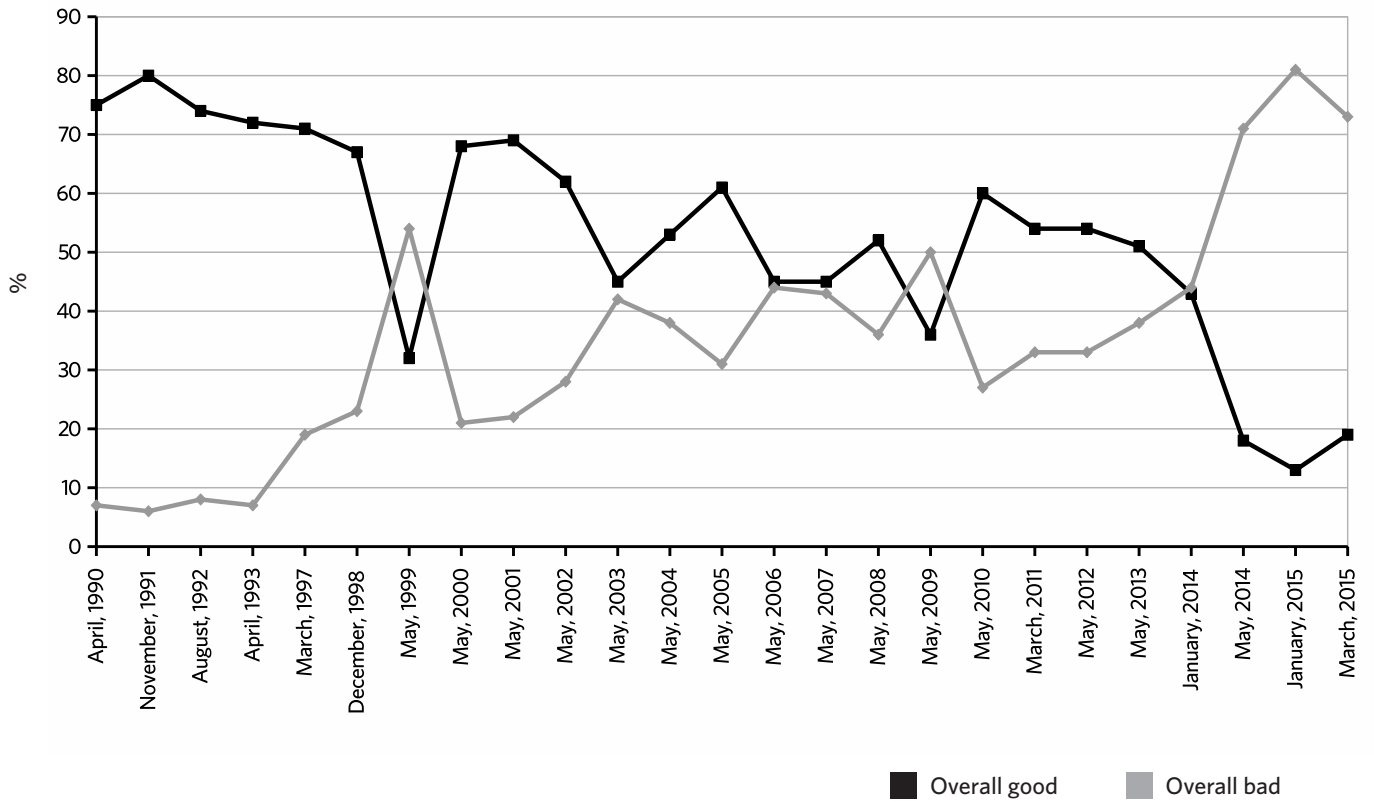
There is a remarkable correlation between the level of inflation in the Russian economy and the level of antipathy toward the United States and European Union (EU) countries (see figures 1–3). While inflation is a fundamental problem that has been worrying Russians a great deal, according to a variety of polls, negative views of the West have been hitting new record highs lately.

**Figure 1: Russia’s Core Inflation Rate, as a Percent**



Source: Federal State Statistics Service’s official website, last accessed September 8, 2015, [www.gks.ru](http://www.gks.ru).

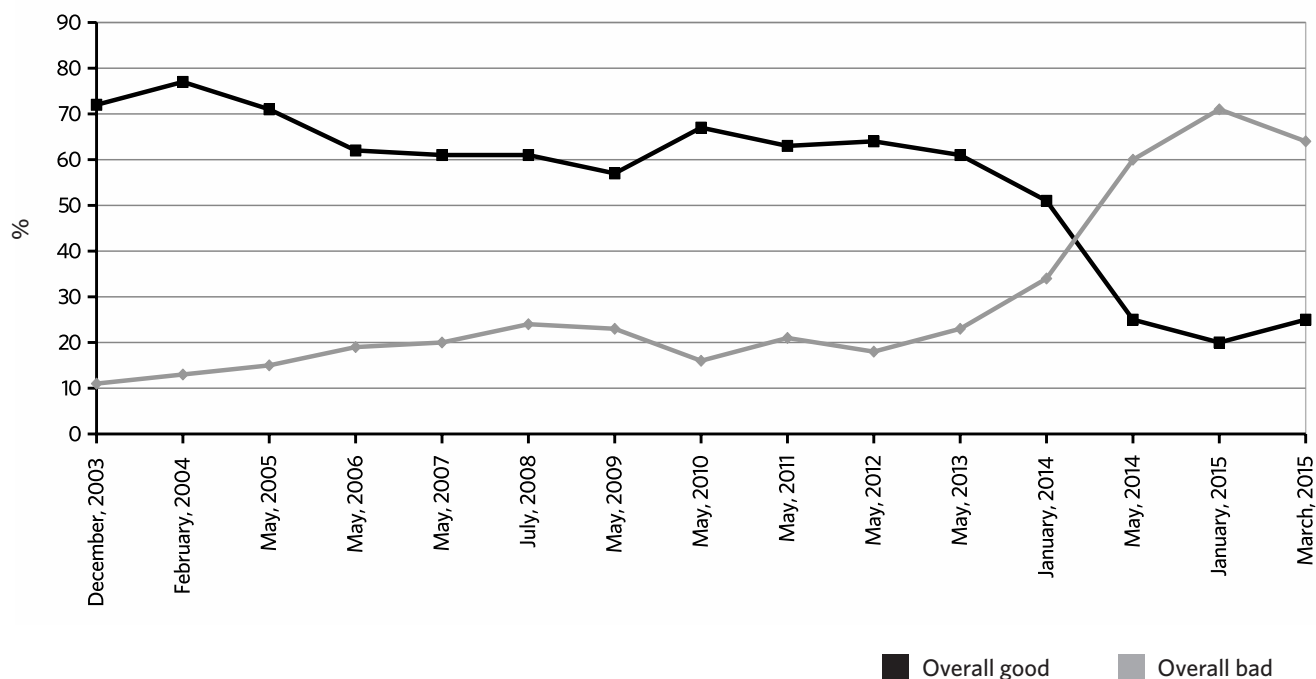
**Figure 2: Russians' Attitudes Toward the United States**



Sources: Levada Center, "Otnosheniye k drugim stranam" [Attitude toward other countries], April 2, 2015, [www.levada.ru/02-04-2015/otnoshenie-k-drugim-stranam](http://www.levada.ru/02-04-2015/otnoshenie-k-drugim-stranam); and Levada Center, "Otnosheniye rossiyan k drugim stranam" [Attitude of Russians toward other countries], June 5, 2014, [www.levada.ru/05-06-2014/otnoshenie-rossiyan-k-drugim-stranam](http://www.levada.ru/05-06-2014/otnoshenie-rossiyan-k-drugim-stranam).



Figure 3: Russians' Attitudes Toward the European Union



Sources: Levada Center, "Otnosheniye k drugim stranam" [Attitude toward other countries], April 2, 2015, [www.levada.ru/02-04-2015/otnoshenie-k-drugim-stranam](http://www.levada.ru/02-04-2015/otnoshenie-k-drugim-stranam); and Levada Center, "Otnosheniye rossiyan k drugim stranam" [Attitude of Russians toward other countries], June 5, 2014, [www.levada.ru/05-06-2014/otnoshenie-rossiyan-k-drugim-stranam](http://www.levada.ru/05-06-2014/otnoshenie-rossiyan-k-drugim-stranam).

The decline in positive attitudes toward the United States and the EU predates the conquest of Crimea. (In fact, public attitudes toward the West declined significantly during Russia's 2008 war with Georgia.) But following the start of direct confrontation with the West and the hybrid war in the eastern Donbas region of Ukraine, negative opinions started setting one record after another.<sup>11</sup>

Another important public opinion indicator—attitudes toward Stalin—has also been breaking records. According to a Levada Center poll from December 2014, 52 percent of Russians considered his historical role positive. In fact, the number of Russians who considered his role "definitely positive" has grown most substantially. From February 2013 to December 2014, the number of such respondents grew by 7 percentage points, from 9 percent to 16 percent.<sup>12</sup>

The number of those who greatly admired (2 percent), admired (7 percent), and respected (30 percent) Stalin adds up to 39 percent of respondents. The number of those who saw the death of Stalin as the "loss of a great leader and teacher" has also increased: from February 2013 to March 2015, it went up by 6 percentage points, from 18 percent to 24 percent. Most importantly, there has been a radical increase in the number of those who saw mass repression under Stalin as justified

by his “great” goals. In November 2012, 21 percent of those polled “somewhat agreed” with this response, while 4 percent “definitely agreed.” As of March 2015, these numbers had increased to 38 percent and 7 percent, respectively.<sup>13</sup>

The Russian public has generally endorsed greater Stalinization. Proposals to commemorate the role of Stalin as a great military commander have become commonplace. To cite just one notorious example, the Perm-36 Gulag museum was turned into a museum dedicated to the camp guards. In this context, Russian parliamentarian Irina Yarovaya’s proposal, which was signed into law in mid-2015,<sup>14</sup> to provide state pensions to “volunteer law-enforcement assistants” (that is, informers) does not seem at all out of the ordinary.

To the “Crimean majority,” made up of Putin supporters, Stalin is synonymous with order and the golden age of Russian statehood. From an ideological standpoint, the current regime is in some ways the successor to Stalin and the great Soviet empire, and an heir to its main achievement—victory in World War II. It does not even occur to most people that the Soviet Union won the war despite Stalin rather than because of him. They do not realize that, at the very least, Stalin is personally responsible for the destruction of the upper tier of military commanders, the painful series of defeats at the outset of the war, and the needlessly heavy human losses.

According to an April 2015 Public Opinion Foundation poll, 46 percent of Russians viewed Stalin’s role as the country’s leader during World War II positively, and only 7 percent negatively. Thirty percent found the question hard to answer, which is usually the case with serious historical analysis. On a related question, 24 percent of those polled gave Stalin credit for the victory; moreover, 15 percent viewed his brutal tactics positively.<sup>15</sup>

Importantly, positive attitudes toward Stalin are not simply a by-product of the annexation of Crimea and the increased ideological fervor; they have been an ideological fixture since at least the mid- to late 2000s. In fact, pro-Stalin views prevailed in public opinion toward the end of Putin’s second term as president. For instance, according to a Levada Center poll commissioned by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation in 2008, 37 percent of respondents expressed great admiration for the Soviet dictator as opposed to 12 percent in April 2001.<sup>16</sup>

The regime’s direct or indirect appeal to the greatness of the Stalin era is not simply a way to justify its domestic crackdowns. If a significant number of Russians give Stalin credit for the World War II victory, then to them, Putin is an heir to the good Stalin.

Those clamoring for a new ideology got what they wanted—an old, almost Soviet ideology replete with Stalinist social practices. This brings back the questions of who drives demand, who consumes this ideology, and who exactly are the defenders of the besieged Russian fortress?

## The Defenders of the Fortress

In 1964, the philosopher Herbert Marcuse, who would later become a role model for the 1968 generation, wrote a much-talked-about book entitled *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. The Marcusian “one-dimensional man” was a product of capitalism—more or less the same strand of capitalism adopted by the Russian state much later. In fact, even the title of the introduction to his book is quite telling when it comes to the nature of Russian society: “The Paralysis of Criticism: Society Without Opposition.”

In a society that enjoys “freedom from want,” as Marcuse put it (like the burgeoning Russian middle class during the era of high oil prices and recovering economic growth in the early 2000s), “Independence of thought, autonomy, and the right to political opposition are being deprived of their basic critical function in a society.” As a result, the state acquires a right to “demand acceptance of its principles and institutions, and reduce opposition to the discussion and promotion of alternative policies within the status quo. In this respect, it seems to make little difference whether the increasing satisfaction of needs is accomplished by an authoritarian or a non-authoritarian system.”<sup>17</sup>

The social contract in Russia in the 2000s conformed to this theory. Russians could profit from oil revenues in exchange for support for the regime. Put more bluntly, Russians gave up their freedom in exchange for sausage. Now that the freedom from want has been called into question by the economic crisis, the contract has been reformatted: Russians are being asked to give up freedom in exchange for Crimea and spiritual bonds.

The totalitarian regimes of past centuries sought to forge a new type of man, replacing temples with spacious and efficient public facilities. As a result, the Soviet people, representing a new historic entity, were born from the population and vast expanses of the old empire.

In a similar vein, a new type of a person—a post-Crimean one—emerged in Russia in 2014. The archetype is even more one-dimensional than the one that matured amid the run-up in oil prices. It is impossible to authoritatively conclude whether this type of person now dominates in Russian society, but the post-Crimean man clearly exists and impacts the social milieu around him.

This new person was forged as he watched his television screen during the annexation of Crimea. Marcuse described this phenomenon in the context of “the society of total mobilization, which... combines in productive union the features of the Welfare State and the Warfare State.”<sup>18</sup>

Eventually, however, living conditions become worse while the war continues. And in this new state, even the post-Crimean man starts to fear war.

Fifty-nine percent of those polled in a May 2015 Levada Center survey responded “definitely yes” or “likely yes” to a question asking whether the United States poses a threat to Russia. Their concept of the American threat was rather vague, however. Compared to 2007, more people believed that foreign opposition

to Russia's development (an abstract concept) represents a threat to the country. Additionally, 31 percent of Russians feared "the possibility of military intervention or occupation" (up 10 percentage points from 2007).<sup>19</sup>

These figures point to a whole host of changes in society. Russian consciousness has been militarized, making the population increasingly fearful of and prepared for war; perceptions of the United States and Ukraine have also changed—including the concept that Ukraine is a satellite of the United States, and thus an occupied country fighting against the rebels in Donbas and, by extension, Russia.

As Russians have grown more confident of their country's greatness and consolidated support around their leader and the annexation of Crimea, concerns of other threats coming from the United States have dissipated. The Crimean majority does not fear economic and political domination, and indeed many Russians believe that their country is self-sufficient. The Crimean majority is unafraid of the West imposing its values on Russia; its values, it seems, are no longer susceptible to Western influence.

Despite increased militarization, most Russians understand mutually assured destruction perfectly well and are afraid of nuclear war between Russia and the United States. Fifty-two percent of Russians polled agreed that a war between the two countries would have no winners. Still, 33 percent of respondents were confident that Russia would win a nuclear war (5 percent think Russia would lose). According to the same poll, 32 percent of respondents believed that Putin can authorize the use of nuclear weapons in the event of a military confrontation. About one-third of respondents were scared by the president's recent statement on the possible use of nuclear weapons.<sup>20</sup>

Even though there is plenty of belligerent triumphalism apparent in the views of some respondents, the level of militarization actually leads a significant portion of Russians to fear that their president would be more likely to use nuclear weapons than the U.S. government.

## A Wave of Conservatism in Politics and Society

The creation of the post-Soviet man was complete by the end of the effort to adopt market principles in the late 1990s. As strange as it may seem, this archetypal figure more closely resembled the Soviet-era model than the post-Communist Russian man of the early 1990s. The future Putin majority of the 2000s, which would become the Crimean majority in 2014, started taking shape at the turn of the century as a reaction to the traumatic collapse of the empire and the disruptive changes in the country's sociopolitical and economic order. Paternalistic attitudes, anti-market opinions, and nationalist and imperialist beliefs began to prevail.

This wave of conservatism has been gathering momentum and political strength for years. It did not simply appear overnight with the annexation of Crimea.

Former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev's four-year tenure, which nurtured illusions about Russia's modernization and integration into the Western world, only increased the population's level of disenchantment and created an opening for conservative views to gain ground. In turn, the 2012 presidential election gave the regime a mandate to strengthen its authoritarian foundations.

The results of the 2008 Friedrich Naumann Foundation poll are quite telling in this regard.<sup>21</sup> In October 1991, immediately before the Soviet Union's collapse and the introduction of economic reforms, the Levada Center (which was, at the time, part of the Russian Public Opinion Study Center) found that 62 percent of Russians viewed Western lifestyles positively. Only 10 percent held a negative view.<sup>22</sup> This attitude undergirded Russians' faith in the omnipotence of liberal reforms and their desire to discard the Soviet past. By 2008, 30 percent of those polled viewed Western lifestyles negatively, even though a substantial part of the country's population had already been living in the Western consumption paradigm. Perhaps this explains why the percentage of positive responses did not hit rock bottom, though it did decrease substantially, falling to 46 percent in 2008.<sup>23</sup>

When pollsters asked the same questions in the fall of 2014 (after the annexation of Crimea), 34 percent of respondents viewed Western lifestyles positively and 42 percent negatively. An almost twenty-five-year-old trend had practically reversed.<sup>24</sup>

The so-called unique path (a national model distinct from the European one), however vaguely and intuitively understood, has invariably remained the most popular model for Russia's development—its popularity hovered around 60 percent in the 2000s, while about 20 percent supported a European path.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, the unique path was not as popular at the start of the 2010s as at other times since the breakup of the Soviet Union: it was supported by only 37 percent of Russians in 2013. That number increased to 55 percent in April 2015, after the first wave of post-Crimea patriotism. Nevertheless, the European path also enjoyed a relatively high level of support—31 percent, which is probably related to the fact that an entire generation of Russians now considers Western lifestyles and consumer behavior normal.<sup>26</sup>

By the end of former Russian president Boris Yeltsin's tenure and at the start of Putin's, a significant number of Russians had become supporters of government intervention in the economy, having lived through the shock of market reforms and the 1998 devaluation of the ruble, when Russia defaulted on its foreign debts.<sup>27</sup>

Since then, people have generally become more critical of economic reforms, especially in the housing, utilities, education, healthcare, pension, and energy sectors, and natural monopoly reforms that Putin proposed in the early years of his presidency. These reforms affected people's everyday lives, and even though many Russians were not satisfied with the state of affairs, they feared that things would only get worse and more confusing if changes were made.<sup>28</sup>

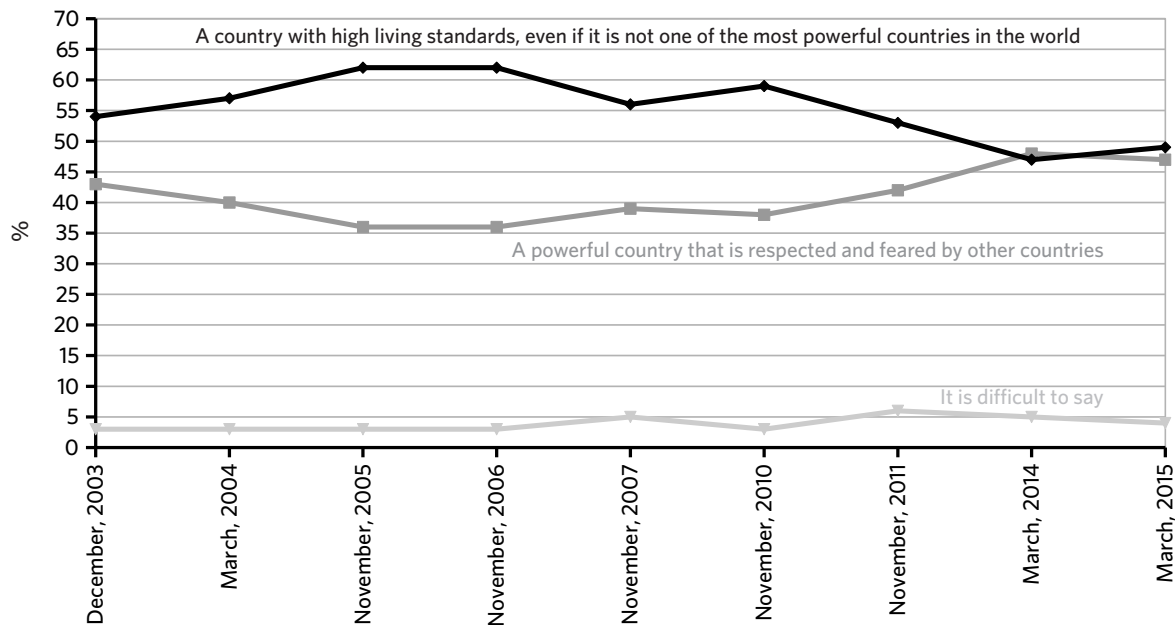
The failure of the 2005 mini-reforms, which sought to monetize numerous Soviet-era benefits, made the public and, importantly, elites even more resentful of reforms of any kind: the upper echelon lost interest in them and has remained

skeptical that reforms can be successfully managed. These concerns were later realized as the regime flip-flopped on pension reform; botched implementation of healthcare reform; and poorly administered the Unified State Exam for high school graduates. Ordinary people, perhaps understandably, preferred no change at all.<sup>29</sup>

The main driver of Russians' post-Yeltsin self-identification was the growing desire for Russia to be seen as a great power, a country that is both feared and to be reckoned with, as they saw it. At the same time, high living standards were seen as the main characteristic of a bright future and a strong country. Moreover, pragmatic rather than ideological views gradually gained ground—economic growth, high oil prices, and the emergence of a consumption-oriented middle class were beginning to change Russian society fundamentally.<sup>30</sup> While being paternalistic, imperialist, and nationalist at heart, Russian citizens preferred to remain pragmatic individualists in their daily lives.

After 2010, the desire to see Russia as a great power began to match or prevail over pragmatic concerns, according to the Levada Center (see figure 4).

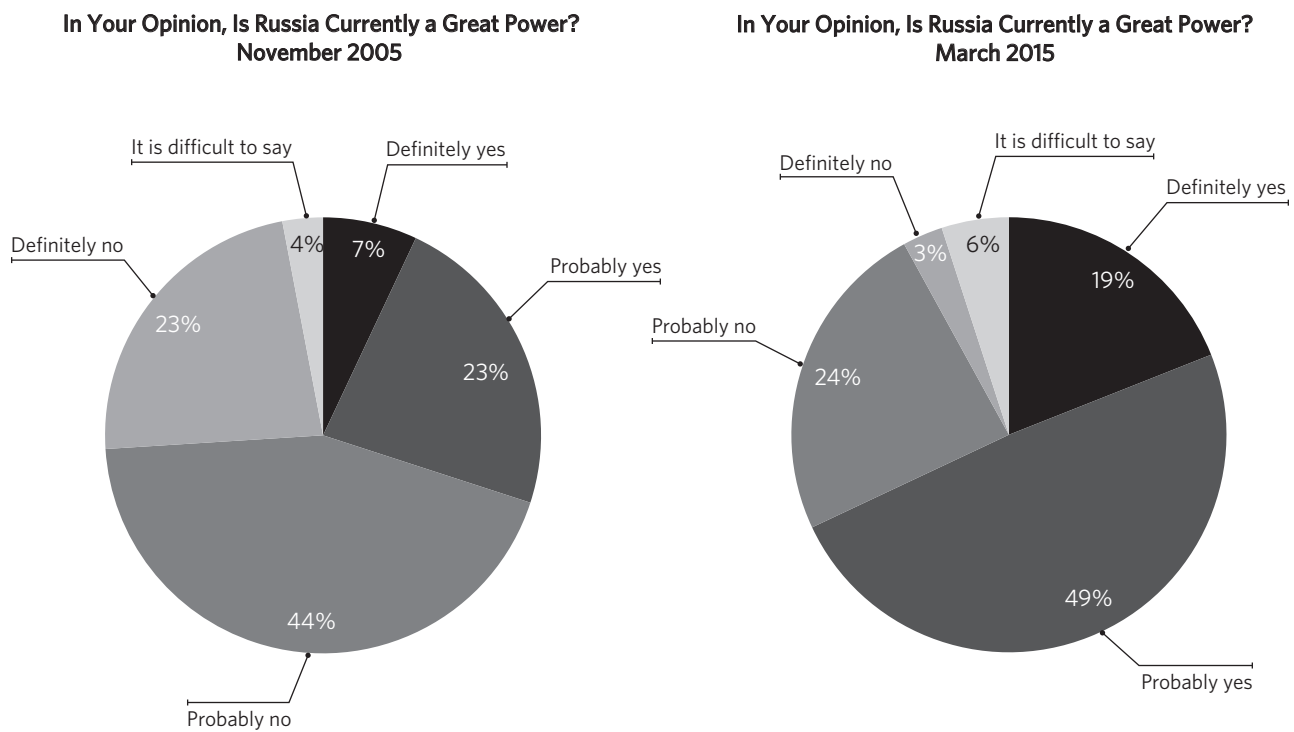
**Figure 4: What Kind of Country Do Russians Want Russia to Be?**



Source: Levada Center, "Bol'shinstvo rossiyan schitayut Rossiyu velikoy derzhavoy" [Most Russians consider Russia a great power], March 24, 2015, [www.levada.ru/24-03-2015/bolshinstvo-grazhdan-schitayut-rossiyu-velikoi-derzhavoi](http://www.levada.ru/24-03-2015/bolshinstvo-grazhdan-schitayut-rossiyu-velikoi-derzhavoi).

Answers to the question “Is Russia currently a great power?” reveal changes in how Russians identify themselves (see figure 5). Though 31 percent of respondents to a Levada Center poll saw Russia as a great power in 1999, that number increased sharply to 53 percent in 2000 after Putin assumed the presidency; the number subsequently declined during his reign, then gradually increased to 55 percent by 2010.<sup>31</sup> In March 2015, 68 percent of respondents said that Russia is a great power.

Figure 5: Is Russia Currently a Great Power, in Russians’ Opinion?



Source: Levada Center, “Pozitsii Rossii na mezhdunarodnoy arene” [Russia’s position in the international arena], March 23, 2015, [www.levada.ru/23-03-2015/pozitsii-rossii-na-mezhdunarodnoi-arene](http://www.levada.ru/23-03-2015/pozitsii-rossii-na-mezhdunarodnoi-arene).

The Russian political establishment has been eager to supply the ideology called for by the masses. In March 2015, 49 percent of Russians gave Putin credit for restoring the country to its great-power status.<sup>32</sup>

The regime has generally benefited from a stable yet relatively high level of demand for conservative ideology over the past fifteen years. After almost a decade of sociopolitical transition, a transformational crisis, and a rupture of the socioeconomic order, popular demand for something abstractly conservative was poised to come to the surface.

Against the backdrop of patterns in Russian politics and ideology over the past decade and a half, the Putin majority's strong support for the Russian leader should come as no surprise.

The presidency is the only functioning institution in this political system. The rest of the system exists largely to support the leader. All of the constitutional institutions of government—that is, the parliament, courts, ministries, party system, and civil society—are merely “transmission belts,” to borrow Vladimir Lenin's term.

Ideology and the Russian Orthodox Church “sanctify” this political system, which closely resembles a corporate state. It is a system in which every community—professional, gender, and others—is controlled by governing bodies and cannot exist outside the state.

In such a system, the state proffers its own version of “civil society” to suppress or thwart actual grassroots politics (for example, the Civic Chamber, a supervising group for civic activities; the United People's Front, a quasi-civil society group that resembles Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's corporations; and government-approved and government-sponsored nongovernmental organizations). The state legally enshrines concepts such as “foreign agent” and “undesirable nongovernmental organization,” among others, which gives it plenty of tools to exert complete control over real civil society.

The state takes a similar approach to the party system, where parliamentary groups prop up the party in power (United Russia) from different sides, making politics resemble an acrobatic circus routine. United Russia plays to mainstream voters—the electorate with abstract patriotic tendencies and no independent worldview. The Communist Party (CPRF) and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR), as well as the ostensibly social democratic Just Russia party, in essence serve as the departments of the party in power responsible for the left- and right-wing electorates, making sure these voters do not radicalize and continue to support the system. For its part, the CPRF channels votes from the left-wing and socially disenfranchised electorate, thus keeping it from joining nonparliamentary parties and preventing left-leaning voters with nostalgia for the Soviet past from radicalizing. The LDPR attracts and sterilizes the nationalist vote. Any other nonmainstream nationalist, patriotic, ultra-left, or ultra-right views are blocked or declared extremist. The only option voters are left with is to support government-approved parties; otherwise, they will be marginalized.



The free-for-all multiparty system of the 1990s and the relatively free arrangement of the 2000s are long gone. The 2010s offer one a simple choice: you are either for the regime and its satellites and ideology, or you are against it.

The government-sponsored ideology is broad enough to keep any political force or view that supports the current regime under one umbrella. The rest end up outside of the system, occupying a marginal, niche role, and sometimes supporters of these views are sent to prison.

## The Liberal Question

The views expressed by opponents of the system are often called “liberal” in Russian political discourse. This is an obvious overgeneralization. In a similar fashion, supporters of a Westernized path of development were all called “democrats” in the 1990s.

There are some important differences among opponents of the regime. On the one hand, in the eyes of state propaganda, anyone defending Western understandings of human rights (for instance, same-sex marriage, which is a divisive issue in Russia) is a liberal. Anyone who stands up for Ukraine-inspired, Euromaidan-like protests, which invariably are portrayed as financed by the hostile West, is also branded a liberal. On the other hand, there is the “Atlantic lobby” in the ruling elite, and it consists largely of loyalist liberals. These people are trying to reshape the contours of the system’s development (or, rather, degradation) from within. They are also occasionally referred to as the “sixth column.”

The public embraces a loosely articulated but clearly understood premise supported by state propaganda: the so-called liberalism of the 1990s was responsible for the breakup of the country, widespread poverty, wild capitalism, and oligarchic rule. In many ways, Putin’s charisma rests on the extremely important ideological basis that he alone brought order and stability to the country after the chaos of the 1990s.

Nuanced understandings of politics start from these premises.

According to the Levada Center’s research, people consider greed to be the main characteristic of the country’s current elites.<sup>33</sup> In mass consciousness, the idea that everyone on top steals serves as both an axiom and an excuse for political apathy, because it is commonly believed that nothing can be done anyway.

Over time, all of this somewhat reduced Putin’s approval ratings (see table 1). That is, until 2014, when his approval ratings skyrocketed.

The level of mistrust toward the system diminished as the president’s approval ratings soared.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who were integral to some of Putin’s “accomplishments,” also saw their approval ratings go up between 2014 and 2015.<sup>35</sup>

So-called liberals and proponents of the Euromaidan revolution and Western values will remain scapegoats, blamed for undermining the central accomplishment of the era, Russia’s return to great-power status.

**Table 1: Attitudes Toward Putin**

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2010	2011	2012	2013
Admiration	4	5	4	4	4	6	9	9	4	3	3	2
Like	34	37	38	30	32	32	38	40	31	28	20	18
Cannot say anything negative about him	38	37	39	35	36	36	34	31	38	36	33	30
Neutral/indifferent	11	9	10	14	11	13	9	10	11	18	19	22
Cautious	8	6	4	7	5	4	4	3	7	4	11	10
Cannot say anything positive about him	3	3	3	7	8	5	2	3	6	5	8	8
Antipathy/loathing	1	1	1	3	2	1	1	1	2	3	5	5
Sum of indifferent and nonnegative responses	49	46	49	49	47	49	43	41	49	54	52	52

**Note:** Numbers indicate the percentage of the total people polled. The sample size (nationwide representative sampling) was 1,600 individuals aged eighteen or older.

**Source:** Lev Gudkov, "Resources of Putin's Conservatism," in *Putin's Russia: How It Rose, How It Is Maintained, and How It Might End*, edited by Leon Aron (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2015).

What makes liberal ideology, the liberal parties that disappeared from the federal parliament in 2003, and liberals themselves so unpopular?

First, against the backdrop of sweeping socioeconomic reforms, all post-Soviet countries that implemented liberal economic reforms faced a natural conservative backlash from elites and the general population. In almost all states in transition, liberal reformers were held accountable for delays in starting the reforms even though most of the culpability lay with either the Communist or quasi-Communist *nomenklatura*. Still, the social and emotional price that had to be paid for reforms was ultimately quite high, particularly in Russia.

A large number of social groups were not included in the process of reform, leading many of them to view the country's transformation as hostile. When liberal reforms eventually led to growth (boosted, no doubt, by high oil prices and the feeling of a fresh start after the Yeltsin-to-Putin transition), liberals were not given credit: they lost out in the 2003 parliamentary election despite the success of their economic policies.

Second, the peculiar characteristics of the transfer of power from Boris Yeltsin to Vladimir Putin and the bungled creation of a system of private property in Russia (in particular, the rigged loans-for-shares auctions and the barring of foreign investors from the first stages of privatization) led to an oligarchic takeover of the top of the economic system and the fusion of financial and political elites.

However, after making the destruction of the oligarchy one of his main political goals and eliminating the most prominent and defiant figures, Putin changed nothing else about how the system fundamentally worked. He hung onto the old loyal oligarchs and redistributed a significant portion of assets among the new

oligarchs, sometimes called “Putin’s friends” or, in reference to the country’s security agency, the “Russian Orthodox KGB officers” (this somewhat simplified name nevertheless aptly describes these people’s ideology). As a result, Russia saw a return to a state-controlled economy, a lack of competition, and a paltry number of small and midsize businesses.

Third, many Russians interpreted the state, social, and economic transformation of the 1990s as a continuation of decay and the formation of a new order—one of chaos and disorder. When the pendulum of public opinion swung toward conservatism, the regime did not just follow trends but also contributed to greater statism and patriotism. On the one hand, this reflected the actual views of the ruling elite; on the other hand, this ideological tilt contributed to the preservation and strengthening of paternalism and personalized power. Such a system required the image of an enemy, and the liberals and liberal ideology fit the profile. The patriotic wave, which became a tsunami after the annexation of Crimea, compensated for Russia’s defeat in the Cold War and the abandonment of Soviet-era social perks. Long-awaited victories were finally won, at least in the Russian mass consciousness.

## The New Social Contract

The key questions are: Where are the limits of the ideology’s effectiveness? And when will its capacity to mobilize and anesthetize the public begin to dissipate?

About 30 to 35 percent of the Russian workforce is employed in the public sector or government-connected enterprises. According to estimates prepared by economists Nikita Maslennikov and Boris Grozovsky, 60 to 70 percent of Russian citizens depend on the state. These people know that they are living off of oil rents; the regime’s revenues come from oil and gas sales, and by voting for the regime, they are voting for their wallets. As a result of the economic crisis Russia is facing, as seen, for instance, in the rising inflation rate and falling gross domestic product,<sup>36</sup> their wallets have been seriously depleted and will remain so for quite some time. Thus, the “sausage in exchange for freedom” social contract will start to wither away, while the “Crimea and spiritual bonds in exchange for freedom” contract will be unable to maintain long-term social harmony.

In an ideal world, the state might have recognized the imperative to help make the public less dependent on it. However, the rent-redistribution state failed to create the instruments or the environment necessary for most of Russian society to thrive in a market economy.

Rent revenues were not distributed equitably even during the period of economic growth—although they were distributed relatively equally to people at the bottom. At the top of society, political leaders and oligarchic insiders captured an outsized share of these revenues. This, it can be said, was a period

of trickle-down growth. The economic slump seems to have made some outside the halls of power happy; they can now rejoice in the fact that everyone—even the rich—are suffering. Still, the recession does not guarantee equality—while the crisis has affected everyone, the most socially vulnerable segments of the population have been hardest hit. Various types of rent are distributed to an increasingly narrower circle of people and corporations.

Consequently, the social contract engineered during the period of high oil prices will begin to lose its ability to spur mobilization of society; its ideological component—a unique brand of Russian isolationism—will wither as well.

Nevertheless, “information-based dictatorships,” as economics professor Sergey Guriev and political science professor Daniel Treisman have called authoritarian regimes that rely on propaganda and information warfare, can stay in power for a long time. However, the worse the economy is doing, the tougher political repression becomes. Guriev and Treisman used Turkey as an example: “As the Turkish economic growth declined from 7.8 percent in 2010 to 0.8 percent in 2012, the number of jailed journalists increased from 4 to 49.”<sup>37</sup> In a separate paper, they noted that in information-based dictatorships, “Repression is used against ordinary citizens only as a last resort when the opportunities to survive through co-optation, censorship, and propaganda are exhausted... Difficult economic times prompt higher relative spending on censorship and propaganda.”<sup>38</sup>

Ideology and spiritual bonds substitute and cover up for defunct institutions. This is, in fact, the key function of the Russian state’s (or quasi-state’s) ideology.

In this sense, present-day Russian ideology lacks a strategic mandate. It accomplishes the immediate, tactical goals of mobilizing and consolidating public opinion. This is precisely why the ideology of isolationism and statism derives its strength from the past—it looks to the energy of the state’s bygone glory rather than the energy of future glory. Thus it lacks key elements of Communist ideology: grand goals and new horizons. In short, contemporary Russian ideology offers no overriding concept for the future and cannot provide the nation a path to development.

The post-Crimea social contract leaves Russians few choices. Political economist Albert Hirschman’s exit-voice-loyalty model of organizational behavior is an appropriate theory to apply to this situation.<sup>39</sup> According to this theory, citizens can make their voices heard through protests and demands for change. They can choose an exit strategy through internal migration or emigration. People can also display loyalty by adjusting to the circumstances, even if they are not desirable. (In one of his early works, former U.S. national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski noted that under authoritarian regimes, one adjusts by complying with prohibitions, while under totalitarian regimes, one also has to do what is prescribed and required.<sup>40</sup>)

When people’s opinions fail to bring about change or are forcefully suppressed (for example, the events of 2012 in Russia), they choose between exit (the dominant strategy in Russia before March 2014) and loyalty (the dominant strategy

after 2014). The latter option is justified and supported by the isolationist ideology that bears out its moral rectitude.

The regime has reached the limit of its effectiveness because it destroyed institutions. Elites share a large part of the blame for this institutional degradation. After all, the quality of institutions is contingent on the quality of the elites. The excess of oil money is also to blame. These windfalls obviated the need for reform and encouraged rent-oriented redistribution practices that benefited state-affiliated enterprises as well as the defense and law-enforcement sectors.

The regime's increasing authoritarianism points to the fact that the leadership is afraid of losing control—over the nationalists, for example. The regime wants to continue to be Russia's Number One Nationalist, thus monopolizing nationalist ideology and organizations. Overall, the regime's attempt to control everything is one of the key trends of the Putin era: it extends to the economy, politics, ideology, and even people's souls—the Russian Orthodox Church has become one of the leading broadcasters of an isolationist ideology.

Not only is ideology an instrument of consolidation, mobilization, and control, but it also allows the regime to delude itself. Having secured high confidence, approval, and electoral ratings, the regime distances itself from reality and anesthetizes its anxiety and fears.

## Modernization?

Is there a window of opportunity for a modernizing ideology? Is it possible to endow a retrograde authoritarian project with a collective vision of the future? What would such an ideology look like?

Modernization begins with getting rid of mythologizing and sacral thinking; it requires a sober reassessment and a return to truth and a realistic worldview. After that, a vision of the future and a strategic program with an ultimate goal and a road map could emerge. Other Russian reform projects—then economic minister Yegor Gaidar's reforms (1991–1992), the later structural reforms (1997), then economic minister German Gref's program (2000), and the 2020 Strategy (2011)—proceeded from the same reassessment.

The events of 2011 were a turning point in Russia's development. First, elite segments of society realized that the modernization plan announced by Dmitry Medvedev was not only an illusion but also a political ploy that strengthened Vladimir Putin's grip on power. Unfair parliamentary elections followed shortly thereafter. Educated and urbanized segments of society were clearly ahead of the state in terms of their demands for functioning institutions. To use the philosopher Jürgen Habermas's term, the 2011–2012 protests were a “catching-up revolution” (*die nachholende revolution*) caused by the state's refusal to complete reforms and modernize.<sup>41</sup> The state did not agree to such demands, applying repressive laws and using force to prove its rightness. Under these conditions—given

the lack of viable democratic, liberal, or civil-society representation in politics; the dominance of quasi-patriotic ideology; and the adoption of repressive and restrictive laws after the 2012 elections—the liberal project is impossible, at least in the short or medium term.

Political and financial elites are not ready to incur the costs of reforms, including personal costs (such as giving up their power and allowing market competition). Yet, there are signs of a change in public opinion already: despite the conservative shift in mass consciousness and the unpopularity of so-called liberalism in public opinion polls, many Russians still believe that the state should provide social benefits to people while holding onto the market economy, two core tenets of modern liberalism. Although only 9 percent of respondents to an August 2013 Levada Center poll considered themselves liberal,<sup>42</sup> 55 percent of Russians told the same pollsters in March 2015 that they rely only on themselves, which testifies to the state's inefficiency and a continued lack of trust in state institutions.<sup>43</sup> They are ready to be responsible for themselves and in this sense are less paternalistic. This is a good basis for modernization.

Modernization requires a clear signal from the top and demand from the bottom. Elites would likely be able to express their demands by indicating that democratization and further movement away from state capitalism to a more competitive market economy and a freer society are possible. This kind of model worked during perestroika.

It is almost impossible for a researcher to predict at what point the regime will shift from mythological thinking to a pragmatically formulated, strategic vision of the future. However, state repression cannot eliminate the demand for change in 2011–2012 (among other things, liberals have since protested the murder of liberal politician Boris Nemtsov). Sooner or later both those on top and those at the bottom will create the demand for a pragmatically formulated, liberal economic ideology. Historical and political logic suggest that a signal from the top will inevitably meet demand from the bottom at some point. Modernization starts when the lower echelons of society start to see stagnation and underdevelopment as burdensome and the upper segments see them as dangerous.



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