



Sowing the Dragon's Teeth: The Kremlin's Reactionary Policies

By Leon Aron

The 2008–09 financial crisis demonstrated that gas and oil exports could no longer serve as Russia's engine of economic progress and the source of a steady rise in personal incomes. Russia needed to dramatically change its investment climate through deep institutional reforms that would boost economic liberty, expand the rule of law and property rights, diminish corruption, and create more political choices for its citizens. Such reforms are all the more urgent now as Russia's economy is slowing to a crawl and trust in President Vladimir Putin is steadily declining. Yet the Kremlin has chosen to address these challenges with authoritarian consolidation, buying short-term stability at the expense of the country's longer-term prosperity and progress. Elements of the Kremlin's massive propaganda campaign include militarized patriotism and patriotic education; a selective recovery of Soviet symbols and ideals; the ultraconservative Russian Orthodox Church as the moral foundation of the regime; the promotion of a culture of subservience; and the intimidation, stigmatization, and repression of civil society and its vanguard, nongovernmental organizations. Yet instead of producing the consolidation and unity expected by the Kremlin, this campaign may yield polarization, radicalism, and violence that will prevent the country's peaceful and inclusive transition to a more dignified version of citizenship.

After the impressive growth of national and personal incomes between 2000 and 2008, Russia's economy has slowed sharply: at most, only 1.5 to 2.0 percent growth is projected for this year.¹ Some experts believe that recession now looms because of a failure to effectively address stagnation.² There is virtual consensus among leading Russian analysts and experts, including Minister of Economic Development Alexei Ulyukaev, that a sizable and sustained expansion is impossible without a radical improvement in the climate for private investments. That, in turn, will require fundamental institutional reforms.³ Vladimir Putin also publicly endorsed this opinion at the

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Key points in this Outlook:

- Confronted with economic slowdown, mass middle-class antiauthoritarian demonstrations, and an eroding political base, Vladimir Putin's Kremlin has opted for policies of repression and reaction to ensure short-term stability at the expense of long-term progress.
- The Kremlin's strategy is characterized by selective recovery of Soviet symbols and ideology, doctored history, patriotic education, anti-Westernism, and intolerance.
- The regime's systematic assault on civil society seeks to stigmatize, demoralize, and marginalize the vanguard of the urban middle class: nongovernmental organizations and their leaders.
- These policies will only encourage polarization, radicalism, and zero-sum politics of hatred, further complicating the post-Putin transition to long-term democratic stability.

St. Petersburg International Economic Forum this past June.⁴ Diversification away from the commodity export model of development would require stronger rule of law, private property rights, reduction in red tape and corruption, greater transparency, enhanced economic liberty, and eventually, wider political choice.

At the same time, the rise of the post-Soviet urban middle class has led to the emergence of an anti-authoritarian political and civic culture of democratic transparency and accountability, which is increasingly incompatible with the Putin regime. The mass demonstrations that erupted in more than 80 Russian cities and towns in the winter of 2011–12, following the blatant rigging of the parliamentary election results, signaled the coming of age of the middle class.⁵

Even more troubling for the regime has been the erosion of support among its political base, which has primarily consisted of a conservative electorate. In addition to their perennial gripes about corruption, Russians outside the larger cities are increasingly dissatisfied with the rising prices of food staples and utilities, the low and deteriorating quality of health care and education, and the shortage of affordable housing—problems that, in the words of a leading Russian expert, the Putin regime does not know how to solve.⁶

The Regime's Response: A Reactionary Wave

Confronted with an array of serious and potentially destabilizing problems, the Putin Kremlin has opted for short-term stability and authoritarian consolidation.⁷ Along with direct repression, the key element of this strategy has been an ideological campaign. Kirill Rogov, a leading independent political sociologist, described it as “a sharp and systematic change in strategy by the Kremlin in the direction of reaction” with a goal of consolidating the elites and population.⁸ Leading independent Russian experts have called this strategy a “conservative turn” and a “reactionary wave.”⁹

“We are witnessing an open attempt of the regime’s political technologists to play on prejudices, myths, and other dark sides of human values,” wrote Evgeny Gontmakher, a leading expert and member of the management board of the Institute for Contemporary Development, previously known as former president Dmitri Medvedev’s think tank. “We are seeing a conscious attempt to counter a fairly large and open protest sensibility with the state’s encouragement of nationalism and xenophobia, isolationism and imperial mentality, Stalinism, religion and

other such hidebound-ness (*kondovost*).”¹⁰ Lev Gudkov, director of the Levada Center, Russia’s oldest and most authoritative independent polling organization, contends that the Putin regime compensates for its immorality with anti-Western rhetoric, xenophobia, and a show of national strength in the face of alleged threats and plots from the West.¹¹

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Patriotism and Spirituality

As in the Soviet Union before it, the current regime equates a love of Russia with a devotion to the regime and has made patriotism synonymous with political loyalty. The manifesto of the All-Russia People’s Front, which Putin created in 2011 and which held its founding congress this past summer, called on “everyone who is for Russia to join us,” implying that anyone who does not is *ipso facto* against Russia.¹²

“Patriotism” and “spirituality” [*dukhovnost*] were leit-motifs of Putin’s December 12, 2012, annual address to the Federal Assembly. According to the Russian president, the country badly needs “spiritual staples” [*dukhovnye skrepy*] to consolidate society in the face of vaguely outlined internal and external threats.¹³ Putin has urged “patriotic education” of Russia’s youth as necessary to “shape a system of values among young people [and provide the] moral foundation” on which to build political culture.¹⁴

In fall 2012, a new agency, the Directorate for Social Projects, was created within the presidential administration to promote and strengthen the “spiritual and moral foundations” of Russian society and to improve government policies in the field of “patriotic upbringing.”¹⁵ The Duma followed up with a series of ultraconservative, bordering on xenophobic, legislative recommendations. The proposed laws would strictly limit marriages between government employees and foreigners, ban anyone with foreign citizenship from criticizing the Russian government on television, bar the children of officials from studying abroad, and require that movie theaters screen Russian-made films at least 20 percent of the time.¹⁶

The Culture Wars

As a “political culture of citizenship” emerges in Russia—a culture characterized by the resentment of despotism and protest against it—the regime is betting on its opposite: the “traditional culture of subservience.”¹⁷ The campaign is aimed at the political mobilization of the more conservative and paternalistic electorate.¹⁸ According to Gudkov, the Kremlin’s goal, at least initially, may not have been to establish a permanent traditional and religious consciousness. Instead, the Kremlin seeks to discredit civil society and its liberal and democratic values, including the idea of inalienable rights, personal dignity, and the desacralized notion of a state—that is, the state as an instrument of society set up with the consent of the citizen, rather than “an unchallengeable entity from God.”¹⁹

“Cultural policy” and “moral education” have been propelled to the top of the regime’s agenda. In September 2012, a long-moribund Presidential Council for Culture and Art was refurbished by an executive order: its membership was overhauled to ensure political loyalty and, for the first time since May 2007, the council met in the Kremlin. In his speech to the council, Putin warned that the country was in danger of “losing our cultural identity, our national cultural code, our moral code,” and thus of weakening.²⁰

In the same month, speaking in the southern city of Krasnodar to activists of patriotic education of young people, Putin warned that “cultural self-awareness, spiritual and moral values, and value codes are an area of fierce competition [and worse yet of] informational hostility and well-orchestrated propaganda attacks.”²¹ Apparently, one of Russia’s preemptive responses to such attacks was the 2005 launch of the Russia Today international news channel that, as Putin explained this past June, was created “not only to provide objective information about what happens in our country but also [to] try to break the monopoly of Anglo-Saxon mass media on the world informational flows.”²²

The Unique Civilization and Soviet Ideological Tropes

Just as the Soviet Union declared itself the world’s trailblazer on the road to Communist paradise, Russia is now professing to be a unique civilization with exclusive predestination. Such a definition implies the abandonment of the “European choice,” which in the past, Russia’s leadership, including Putin, had repeatedly affirmed as the country’s strategic direction. The Kremlin has moved

from mimicking democracy to outright rejecting Western values;²³ anti-Westernism [*anti-zapadnichestvo*] has thus become a pillar of the new reactionary political culture.²⁴ In freeing itself from the necessity to imitate Europe, said Gudkov, Russia could go on to “disavow obligations . . . assumed vis-à-vis the European community, and reject international law.”²⁵

Suddenly, “traditional values” became the mantra of Russia’s president, who until 2012 had not publicly mixed politics and morality,²⁶ and the Soviet “tradition” became a key one to emulate.²⁷ Although no one advocates a return to the state’s complete ownership of the economy or to totalitarian politics (at least not yet), the political sociologist Alexei Makarkin sees a return to “an amended and corrected USSR” where ideology, culture, and society are concerned.

One of the Soviet ideological tropes the regime has reached for is what Professor Igor Klyamkin, dean of the Russian political sociologists, called “militarized patriotism *in peacetime*.”²⁸ Putin ordered the reintroduction of the Ready for Labor and Defense (of the USSR) fitness program for schoolchildren, complete with the silver- and gold-colored badges for those who passed the tests. Another recovery from the Soviet era has been the Hero of Labor medal: except for the two-headed eagle in place of the hammer-and-sickle embossment, the five-point gold star is identical with the Hero of Socialist Labour badge, the Soviet Union’s highest civilian award. The Hero of Labor medal was ostensibly introduced at the behest of a tank foreman from Yekaterinburg, who during Putin’s annual call-in show in 2011 offered to help Putin crush the political opposition (and was subsequently made the presidential envoy for the Urals region). Putin handed out the first batch of these medals on May 1, 2013, at the Spring and Labor Day celebration, renamed from the former International Workers’ Day.

The Symbols of Authority and the Whitewashing of the Soviet Past

The search for symbols of authority and national strength that help validate the newly authoritarian political order has produced another element of the conservative Russian ideology: the whitewashing of the Soviet past.²⁹ In February 2013, Putin called for a single and mandatory history textbook that would be “free of internal contradictions and confusing interpretations” and filled with “respect for all the pages of our past.”³⁰ This is not the first attempt at an official history textbook; I discussed an earlier effort in

a 2008 *Outlook*.³¹ Never before, however, has a Russian president so persistently and publicly advocated what he called “a canonic version” of Russian and Soviet history.³²

Finely attuned to the president’s wishes, the United Russia majority in the Duma has eagerly taken up the cause of creating a canonic history. Alexander Detyarov, chair of the Duma’s Committee on Education, averred that “history is a subject of state policies . . . And part of such policies is to create this textbook that is aimed at normalizing the patriotic education process.”³³ To protect the uplifting harmony of the official Soviet past from inconvenient facts, the Duma has also contemplated passing a bill that would impose fines of up to \$15,000 and a prison term of up to five years for the dissemination of deliberately false information about the Red Army’s role and behavior in World War II, the victory that was perhaps the key legitimizing symbol of the Soviet regime.³⁴ (This past September, Russian authorities detained and expelled a Finnish author whose books were sharply critical of the Soviet Union’s invasion of Finland in 1939, which Putin had declared a “correct” means of changing the border between the two nations.³⁵)

Inevitably, the creeping rehabilitation of Joseph Stalin, which started shortly after Putin’s election in 2000 and became a key theme of the new history textbook endorsed by Putin in 2007,³⁶ has since been gathering speed. Conforming to the pre-Mikhail Gorbachev Soviet stereotype, Stalin has been increasingly identified with such successes as the WWII victory, nuclear superpower status, and national unity.³⁷

This past June, Putin suggested Stalin’s moral superiority over US leadership. According to Putin, Stalin would not have used a nuclear bomb against Germany in 1945. Putin went on to compare Stalin’s and America’s morality: “they [the US] dropped the bomb on Japan, a country that was a non-nuclear state and was very close to defeat. So there are big differences between us.”³⁸

The Besieged Fortress

Among the values that the regime seeks to inculcate, there is another Soviet ideologue: portraying the country as a fortress besieged by virulent enemies. The deployment of this ideological stereotype of the Cold War era has several objectives: to rally around the flag in the face of the potential loss of sovereignty and to soften the blow in advance of severe economic complications by enabling Russian leadership to point a finger at foreign malfeasants.³⁹ Perhaps most important, however, is that

the alleged external hostility perpetuates the pretense of an endangered society that only Putin’s skillful and courageous leadership can protect.

It is not enough for the regime to try to put thousands of civil society organizations and movements out of existence by harassment, taxes, fines, and lawsuits; it must also engage in what Igor Klyamkin called “moral suppression” by stigmatizing nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as “foreign agents,” a shibboleth that is synonymous with espionage in Russian.⁴⁰ This hateful label, imposed by a 2012 law on most Russian grassroots organizations that receive foreign support, follows seamlessly from one of the central propaganda themes: since the West is conspiring against Russia, those who take money from abroad are, by definition, working against Russian interests regardless of the nature of the organization.

America the Enemy

As the Soviet Union’s enemy number one, the United States was a logical choice to cast as the prime target of the propaganda campaign. A signal for a no-holds-barred propaganda campaign was given from the top in 2011 when Putin accused the US Department of State of playing the lead in organizing the first protests against the falsification of the Duma election results.⁴¹ This was followed by media attacks on and harassment of US Ambassador Michael McFaul.⁴² Then, in fall 2012, the Kremlin ordered the expulsion of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), even though it had spent more than \$2.6 billion over the previous 20 years on assistance to Russian civil society organizations, on health care, on environmental initiatives, and on the promotion of economic and democratic reforms.⁴³ This past June, Putin again accused US diplomats of aiding the opposition.⁴⁴

After the death of an adopted Russian boy in Texas in early 2013 (an autopsy later proved the death was accidental),⁴⁵ another propaganda campaign portrayed Russian orphans adopted by US parents as subjected to all manners of abuse and even murder. The Duma rushed to pass a law banning all US adoptions. Political scientist Tatiana Stanovaya placed this reaction into a larger context:

Why did the Kremlin decide to pass an odious and discrediting law that bans adoptions of Russian orphans by U.S. citizens? . . . The answer is only partially connected to America’s Magnitsky Act [which targeted Russian officials guilty of human rights abuses]. The problem is much deeper: with the

‘anti-orphan law’ the Kremlin is trying to mobilize Russian society against the U.S., which it considers a threat to its regime.⁴⁶

According to Russian officials, the American enemy does not limit its cruelty to Russian children: adults are in danger as well. Last month, the Russian foreign ministry advised Russian citizens to refrain from traveling to countries that have mutual extradition agreements with the United States because they might be abducted by the US authorities and subjected to unjust trials in America.⁴⁷

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At its most extreme propaganda iteration, the alleged US plot against Russia acquires the contours of an existential threat. A few months ago, Dmitry Rogozin, former leader of the nationalist Rodina party (or Motherland-National Patriotic Union) and current deputy prime minister in charge of the Russian defense industry, claimed that Russia is a natural “magnet for the predatory aspiration of certain states and organizations” because of its abundant natural resources. The planned US Prompt Global Strike, Rogozin continued, would be capable of destroying 90 percent of Russia’s nuclear arsenal with high-precision conventional warheads on 4,000 strategic delivery vehicles—a number that, according to a leading Russian defense expert, Rogozin had exaggerated by a factor of four.⁴⁸

Alexei Pushkov, another notorious anti-American propagandist, has been rewarded with a seat in the Duma and the chairmanship of the Foreign Affairs Committee. For years the host of the weekly foreign affairs show *Postscriptum* on a network owned by the Moscow city government, Pushkov once suggested that a cabal inside the US government might have been responsible for 9/11.⁴⁹ Reacting to last month’s shooting at the Navy Yard in Washington, DC, Pushkov tweeted: “Yet another shooting at the US Navy Headquarters. A lone gunman and seven [sic] dead

bodies. No one is surprised. Clear evidence of the ‘American exceptionalism.’”⁵⁰

Stanovaya concludes: “The conservative wave [inside Russia] is now negatively affecting not just the symbolic reset, but also the actual content of Russian-American relations.” With Russia becoming more isolationist and anti-American, the regime is willing to risk aggravating US-Russian relations to boost domestic support.⁵¹

Enlisting the Church

In a bid to consolidate its conservative electorate by positioning itself as a defender and promoter of traditional values, the Kremlin has increasingly identified itself with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Headed by Kirill (a very conservative patriarch even by the ROC standards) since 2009, the ROC hierarchy has been vocal in both its increasingly antimodernist stance and its unrestrained support of the regime.⁵² (When Putin campaigned for reelection in February 2012, Kirill called Putin’s first two terms in office a “miracle from God.”)⁵³

Echoing a key propaganda theme, the Patriarch has repeatedly proclaimed the peculiarity [*osobost*] of the Russian civilization and stressed its differences from the West.⁵⁴ In turn, Putin has advocated for the church having a greater say in family life, education, and armed forces,⁵⁵ and has insisted that the ROC “anchor the moral framework of public life and national statehood.”⁵⁶ In the words of Dmitri Trenin, a top independent observer of Russian politics and the director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, “profession of universal values or common European norms and principles has stopped. In lieu of the Council of Europe, the Moscow Patriarchate is now the principal norm-setter.”⁵⁷

In another sign of its newfound allegiance to the ROC,⁵⁸ the Kremlin meted out the widely disproportionate sentence of two years in labor camps to the two members of the Pussy Riot punk band, who were convicted of “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred” following an anti-Putin protest at the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Savior in early 2012.⁵⁹ Their trial and sentence have apparently inspired what became known as the “blasphemy bill” that was signed by Putin this past June. The law stipulates prison sentences of up to three years, additional fines, and compulsory correctional labor as punishment for public actions that offend religious feelings.⁶⁰

Another law, enacted at the same time and also designed to curry favor with the ROC, prohibited “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations to minors.”⁶¹

With “propaganda” defined in nebulous terms and with minors capable of accessing Internet sites and watching gay parades and demonstrations, for example, the law in effect bans gay narratives and events in virtually all media and public venues. Although the law has caused a highly negative reaction abroad, including calls for a boycott of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, the Kremlin seems to have found the damage to Russia’s international image an acceptable price to pay for bolstering loyalty to the regime at home and rewarding a key ally in the moral struggle against opponents of the regime.

Sowing the Dragon’s Teeth

Political sociologist Klyamkin asserts that the Putin regime is “strategically moribund” and incapable of initiating and stimulating the country’s development.⁶² Instead, the Russian government is taking a page from one of the most reactionary tsars, Alexander III (1881–94), whose ideological motto was “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality” [*pravoslavie, samoderzhavie, narodnost*]. Yet despite Alexander’s zealous implementation of this policy, his attempt to stave off political and cultural modernity by repression and censorship proved worse than futile. Instead, these measures further radicalized and polarized Russian politics: the first revolution broke out 11 years after Alexander’s death and was followed by the Bolshevik takeover 12 years later.

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The Putin regime’s systematic assault on civil society seeks to stigmatize, demoralize, and marginalize its vanguard: the urban middle class, NGOs, and their leaders. Yet, as it was with Alexander’s campaign, this effort may turn out to be the self-fulfillment of the worst prophecy as these policies take aim at precisely the segment of the Russian society most open to nonviolent change, dialogue, and compromise.⁶³ The Kremlin’s campaign is likely to only further erode the liberal values of conciliation and responsibility and narrow the already severely constricted channels of communication between the opposition and the regime.

According to Russian observers, those who once

considered themselves moderate could become staunch enemies of the regime. Boris Makarenko, a professor at Russia’s National Research University Higher School of Economics and the chairman of the board of the Center for Political Technologies, contends that a society that has for so long been barred by the regime from any collective action and political opportunities cannot influence the regime through negotiations.⁶⁴ Such a society “cannot one day start to behave reasonably, to begin developing a strategy for dialogue [with the authorities] and for the [democratic] election of leaders. It lacks the skills.”⁶⁵

At some point, the authorities themselves might be scared by what they have allowed to “crawl up through the floorboards: the clerical, the nationalist, the jingoist.”⁶⁶ But by then, they may not be able to reverse the process. Assiduously sown by the Kremlin, the dragon’s teeth of demagoguery, paranoia, xenophobia, anti-Westernism, intolerance, and obscurantism are bound to yield a toxic harvest when the regime falters or loses control outright. In the worst case, as in the ancient Greek legend of the Golden Fleece, the campaign may yield massive violence that will be an enormous setback for a peaceful and inclusive transition to a more dignified version of Russian citizenship.

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Notes

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45. Betsy Blaney, “Autopsy: Russian Adoptee’s Death an Accident,” *Associated Press*, March 1, 2013, <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/autopsy-russian-adoptees-texas-death-accident>.

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47. Paul Sonne, “Russia Warns of U.S. ‘Abduction’ Threat,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 2, 2013.

48. Alexander Necheporenko, “Russia Beefs Up Arms in Face of New Threats,” *Moscow Times*, June 9, 2013, www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/russia-beefs-up-arms-in-face-of-new-threats/481374.html; and Alexander Golts, “Why the

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Pushkov: You know that there are lots of [political and military] structures in the United States that work in secret. So I don’t think that it was even the leadership of the secret services that organized [the 9/11 attacks]. Who organized the assassination of Kennedy?

Gordon: I don’t know.

Pushkov: And I don’t know. And nobody knows. Which means that there was a group of very influential people, very serious people who needed to do this. And I think the official version [of the attacks] that we have been given is designed by these people in order that no one learns the truth.

Gordon: You mean that there is some sort of powerful organization in the United States, which is above the government and the White House?

Pushkov: Not necessarily. This could have been a group whose participants included members of the government, the Bush administration. And the president may not even have known personally.

Gordon: This sounds like a Masonic conspiracy.

Pushkov: No. Masons have nothing to do with this. There had been an objective to create a critical mass of public opinion [in the United States] in favor of military action in the Middle East, and this objective is being carried out.

Gordon: So, to sum up, if I understand you correctly, there exists a group of people in the United States of America that . . .

Pushkov: It does not exist [permanently]. It just got together specifically for this task.

Gordon: But this group controls the strategic designs of the foreign policy of the United States and, as a result, America’s behavior in the world. . . . So this group, getting together for a short time, decided to execute the [9/11] plot that would give America a free hand [in carrying out these designs], right?

Pushkov: Yes.

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63. Leon Aron, *A Quest for Democratic Citizenship: Agendas, Practices, and Ideals of Six Russian Grass-Roots Organizations and Movements* (Washington, DC: AEI, 2012).

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