ANALYSIS

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Does today's Russia have an ideology?

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Content

Does today's Russia have an ideology?

The 20th century was the age of ideologies. Most authoritarian and totalitarian regimes of the last century adhered to a list of ideas about the internal structure of the state and its role in the world. While preaching a certain concept of the future, they relied on real facts from the past or bogus pseudo-historical constructs. The range of ideologies was rather broad, from coherent ideologies like Nazism or Communism to vague concepts such as Estado Novo under António Salazar in Portugal. Even some secular despotic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa that had made it into the early 21st century, continued to rhetorically adhere to some ideological tenets, such as Ba'athism, 'Arab socialism', or 'The Third International (or Universal) Theory' proposed by the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi. Today's totalitarian states such as North Korea are unwilling to give up on their state ideologies either. That being said, a number of Latin American and African dictatorships, as well as personalist regimes of that same period, made do without specific ideologies.

Over the nearly quarter century of Putin's rule, the Kremlin's attitude to state ideology as such has changed multiple times, from highly favourable to sharply negative. Can the various domestic and foreign policy concepts of the Putin era be called ideologies? Is the current Russian sociopolitical model, Putinism, an ideology, or does Russia remain a non-ideological autocracy?

From 'Democracy' to 'Sovereign Democracy'

In the early years of Vladimir Putin's presidency, the question of some 'special' Russian ideology was irrelevant. The Russian Federation continued to position itself as a Western-style democracy under the 1993 Constitution ('The Russian Federation – Russia is a democratic federal state based on the rule of law with a republican form of government'. Article 1.1.). Putin emphasised his adherence to all of the attributes and values of the democratic model. 'Democracy is the dictatorship of the law, not of those who, by virtue of their position, are obliged to uphold that law', he said in 2000, for example. The Kremlin was actively distancing itself from ideologies, from any '-isms', in the parlance of those times. Even if rolling back Yeltsin-era democratic developments, pressure on independent media and opposition politicians, a systematic destruction of parliamentarianism, and hyper-strengthening of the 'power vertical' in general and the presidency in particular were acknowledged, they were explained away as 'statesmanlike steps' to preserve Russian sovereignty, restore Moscow's control over the entire Russian territory, and a need to create favourable conditions to accelerate economic growth or political development. When the music of the old Soviet anthem had been readopted in 2000–2001, and disparate elements of the Soviet past had made their way into the Russian public life, these steps did not mean going back to the USSR ideologically and were 'counterbalanced' with anti-Soviet and anti-Stalinist rhetoric from top officials.

Debates on a new ideological outline for the Russian state began during Putin's second term in office. A first attempt to create a visionary framework for a transformed nation dates back to 2005–2006. This was undoubtedly related to a string of developments, such as a palpable authoritarian turn, terrorist attacks in Russia, most notably the Beslan school hostage crisis, the relative stabilisation of the situation in Chechnya, and the international context, in particular the 2004–2005 Orange Revolution in Ukraine that the Kremlin perceived as a challenge to its influence in the post-Soviet space. The concept of 'sovereign democracy' is usually attributed to presidential aide Vladislav Surkov, who presented it to United Russia activists in February 2006 and sought to incorporate this doctrine into the party's programme as a new ideological tenet. However, the term had been used even earlier by one of the key Kremlin ideologists, Gleb Pavlovsky, political scientists Vitaly Tretyakov and Vyacheslav Nikonov, among others. Formally, the new doctrine had much in common with the widespread American [concept of] 'sovereign democracy'. It was an attempt to combine democratic institutions with 'defence of national interests' and 'Russia's intention to independently determine the path of its development in accordance with its own ideas, without looking to the West'. Mr Tretyakov was explicit about this, listing the criteria for the state under construction, 'simultaneously democratic, free (sovereign) and just', and even claiming a 'Putin's political philosophy' existed, that is, raising this new concept to the highest possible level. Mr Surkov suggested four main criteria for this model: 'Intellectual leadership, cohesion of elites, a nation-centred and open economy and the ability to defend ourselves'. Aleksey Chadaev expressed a similar opinion. Putin's model, according to him, would neither allow 'erasing Russians as a nation and culture from the political life', nor 'deciding on issues of Russian sovereignty' outside Russia, in international [decision-making] centres'.

Debates on 'sovereign democracy' were pretty intense. This project even became a kind of demarcation between the two contenders for the interim Russian presidency in 2008–2012, with the hawkish Sergei Ivanov, who supported the idea and the 'liberal' Dmitry Medvedev, who criticised it. This was how the 'sovereign democracy' concept grabbed attention of Western researchers and politicians. Some of the specific features of the 'Russian path' allowed Ivan Krastev to characterise Russia as a 'non-trivial autocracy', while Peter Schulze still saw a certain ideological background in the Surkov's initiative. The West was generally quite restrained in its response to the internal Russian debates, even recognising to some extent the validity of a 'distinct Russian path'. Except perhaps for George W. Bush, who pointed out that 'sovereign democracy' did not exist.

In practice, 'sovereign democracy' did not even mean 'limited' or 'managed' democracy. It did not denote any new ideology, but marked the end of the old, democratic one, which was only beginning to establish itself faintly under Boris Yeltsin. On the world stage, however, Putin continued to call himself an 'absolute democrat' and claimed there was no way back to totalitarianism in Russia (see his interview with Der Spiegel in 2007). Inside the country though, he was becoming more candid. In his 2005 presidential address, Putin has insisted on securing Russia's exclusive right to 'independently determine the terms and conditions for implementing the principles of freedom and democracy'. Two years later, at Valdai, he praised efforts to look for a new concept and emphasised the priority of sovereignty again. In the second half of the 2000s, Putin's team, completing the reformatting of the country, no longer needed the conventions and rituals of his first term. In rhetoric, political expediency replaced the 'dictatorship of the law', and adherence to democracy was replaced by a particular understanding of it, a 'Russian interpretation' of definitions. In other words, the Kremlin assumed the right to decide for itself what 'the Russian-style democracy' was. Surkov, in his major policy article 'Nationalising the Future', while generally approving of democracy and considering it a natural form of government for Russia because of it being part of European culture, has still stated quite openly that Russia's greatest successes had been achieved under authoritarian government. Neither he, nor the pro-Kremlin political scientists have set out to devise a set of future-oriented guidelines. It was more important for them to create a quasi-ideological rationale for a fait accompli and add some cosmetic embellishments to the ever-strengthening authoritarianism, while increasingly dismantling even the façade of democratic procedures. There was still a need for these 'embellishments' at that time. Eventually though, quite prophetic were the words of Andrey Kazantsev, who, back in 2007, had identified another function in 'sovereign democracy' as an advertising tagline that was 'easy enough to forget in case it would not prove effective'.

'Russian World'?

The concept of the 'Russian world' could be called another contender for being the ideology of Putin's Russia. Its origins lie in Russia's imperial period, when, just as today, the country's leadership was tempted to justify its political and military expansion with humanitarian and cultural reasons or a religious mission ('defence of Orthodox Christians', 'the spiritual duty of the Great Russians'). In the 1990s, the concept of the 'Russian world' was popular among conservative and nationalist philosophers and commentators. It stemmed from a desire to 'support [ethnic] Russians' who found themselves in the [newly independent] nations outside the former Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic after the break-up of the Soviet Union. The prevailing stance in these milieus was a rejection on the part of [ethnic] Russians living in Central Asia, Caucasus, Baltics, and Ukraine to integrate into the emerging new communities, and their unwillingness to become part of [new] political nations. Protection and strengthening of special ties with Russia and a pro-Russian identity were proposed instead. Pyotr Shchedrovitsky wrote in 1999 about Russia as the 'core of the Russian world' and the 'erasure of boundaries' between Russian citizens (россияне) and Russian-speaking diasporas in the post-Soviet space. In it, he saw Russia's path to the 'world-power' status. His co-thinkers suggested similar ideas, often focusing on the 'trinity of East Slavs', Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, as the 'foundation of the Russian world'. A logical conclusion was drawn on this premise: Russia 'has a right' to protect 'compatriots' by means available to it, if the nation's leadership concludes that they need protection. However, this concept did not have access to the corridors of power until the mid-2000s. Moscow did not want to be accused of trying to restore the Soviet Union and rhetorically recognised the geopolitical reality that had emerged in Eurasia after 1991.

The issue of '[ethnic] Russians abroad' has made it into Putin's speeches at the very beginning of his second term. His infamous remarks about the collapse of the Soviet Union as 'the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century', uttered in April 2005, were precisely related to this: 'Tens of millions of our compatriots found themselves living outside the country, a true drama for the Russian people'. Following Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 and a number of other similar statements, the Kremlin has openly embarked on a course to change its status in the post-Soviet space. The concept of the 'Russian world' became attractive for the regime. In 2008, Putin declared a need to 'consolidate and structure the Russian world', singling out this issue as a 'foreign policy priority'. The Russian World Foundation, formally an NGO with permanent government funding under the supervision of the Presidential Administration, had been established a year earlier by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education. Working jointly with Rossotrudnichestvo, a government agency in charge of foreign aid and cultural exchange, and a network of Moscow-affiliated foreign-based organisations, the Foundation, whose

official mission was to support Russian culture and language abroad, has in practice become one of the Kremlin's main 'soft power' vehicles. The Foundation's original website even had an ultimatum-like definition in its 'Ideology' section: 'Russian world is Russia's world'. Today, the definition of who falls within the target group of the Russian World is less expansionist, but much wider, going well beyond the diaspora: 'The Russian world means not only [ethnic] Russians (русские), not only Russian citizens (россияне), not only our compatriots in the countries near and far abroad, émigrés, natives of Russia and their descendants. It also means foreign citizens who speak, study or teach Russian, all those who are genuinely interested in Russia, who are concerned about its future'.

At that point, however, the Kremlin avoided publicly discussing irredentism, that is, annexing territories of other countries with significant portions of ethnic Russians and/or persons using Russian as their primary language in everyday life. This discourse was confined to nationalist and populist groups who supported the Kremlin but were not among the decision makers. In a number of interviews, also to Western media, Putin has assured that he was not planning to change the borders in Europe, while the 2008 recognition of South Ossetian and Abkhazian 'independence' had been the result of a unique situation and would not become a precedent. He also emphasised [Russia's] commitment to treaties with Ukraine. The 2014 annexation of Crimea, military support for the 'DNR' and 'LNR' in 2014–2022 and finally the 2022 large-scale invasion of Ukraine have revealed that the concept of the 'Russian world' was not an abstraction for the Kremlin, but an action plan that Putin had repeatedly referred to over the past 10 years.

The idea of the 'Russian world', included in Russia's foreign policy concepts, does contain certain ideological elements, given its historical origins and how it is put into practice by way of external aggression. But it cannot be considered a full-fledged ideology for it has no worldview or values of its own. 'Russian world' does not offer answers to questions on society or politics, such as transformation or, on the contrary, preservation of the current system of relationships; it also lacks economic theory. The concept is merely supposed to give Russia exclusive rights on the former Soviet territory, enabling it to 'protect Russian-speaking citizens' of other countries without their consent and serving as a screen for the Kremlin's attempts to change the post-Yalta world order, for its confrontation with the West and aggression in the post-Soviet space.

Putinism?

'Putinism' as a term was first coined by the Russian newspaper Kommersant as far back as in 2001. However, what it meant back then was the new president's managerial style rather than an outline for an [ideological] model. As a system of social and political relationships, Putinism took shape by the end of Vladimir Putin's second term as president, but especially after 2012. Experts generally recognise the high degree of its structural completeness, while Andrei Kolesnikov even wrote about 'scientific Putinism', drawing a parallel with the 'scientific Communism' of the Soviet era.

Here are the five main features of Putinism. First, Putinism means authoritarianism, rejecting democratic principles or reducing them to mere rituals, such as regular 'elections' held without any free competition or equality of candidates, or rights and freedoms remaining enshrined in the Constitution. Putinism straddles the line between authoritarianism and dictatorship, that is, it suppresses any active or passive resistance to the regime, but does not require all citizens to actively endorse its actions.

Second, Putinism means ultra-conservatism, traditionalism, and state nationalism. It gives these concepts a chance for revenge and seeks to vigorously resist pluralism and globalisation. Putinism's objective is to freeze the situation inside Russia and maintain the status quo for as long as possible.

Third, Putinism means a continuation of the 'TV instead of refrigerator' pact, an informal 'compact' that had been 'concluded' [between the regime and the population] back in the 2000s. The Putin regime guarantees economic stability to large swathes of the population while enjoying absolute political loyalty in return, as well as commitments not to interfere with the political processes beyond the prescribed rules of the game. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this 'compact' began to crack, and the economic situation of millions of Russians began to deteriorate. Still, by preventing the collapse of the economy in the face of Western sanctions, the Kremlin secured a propaganda coup highlighting the survivability of its model.

Fourth, Putinism means the 'defence of national interests', or rather an aggressive foreign policy involving a deliberate violation of the post-1990 map of Europe and the world. The concept of the 'Russian world' has become an integral component of Putinism, its carte blanche, enabling it to expand Russia's sphere of influence, use military force, and annex parts of other countries with scant and phoney 'justifications' ('requests' from illegitimate rulers of Moscow-governed territories or sham 'referenda' conducted without international observers).

Fifth, Putinism (and this is what makes it similar to the 'Russian world') seeks its origins in historical facts, be it real and construed in the way the Kremlin wants, or distorted and outright fabricated. Histories of the Soviet Union, the Russian Empire and even of older polities in Eurasia framed as isolated fragments outside the general historical context, such as the victory in the Second World War disconnected from the crimes of Stalinism, are showcased as sources of legitimacy for the regime, which, in fact, has no relation to them whatsoever.

There is a debate in Western political science and among Russian colleagues in exile as to whether Putinism can be considered an ideology. Maria Snegovaya and Michael Kimmage identify certain elements of Putinism and recognise its ideological essence on this basis. For them, it means statism, anti-Westernism, cultural conservatism, and a reliance on past events, primarily the cult of the 'Great Patriotic War'. Another evidence of ideology, seen by these scholars, is the 'patriotic education' and how it is actively promoted in Russian schools. Nikita Savin, on the contrary, does not see Putinism as a Russian ideology, at least not yet. His main argument is that there is no stable pattern in society shared by the majority or a noticeable portion of the population. Anti-Westernism and conservatism rather act as emotional factors, while Soviet nostalgia is related to mentality, today's insecurities and, consequently, a search for stability based on a model from the past, rather than support for Soviet ideology or a desire to build a Communist classless society.

Putinism cannot be currently considered an ideology. It was not developed as a coherent concept, but rather came into being spontaneously, alongside the strengthening Russian authoritarianism. It offers no vision of the future and lacks clear definitions or novelty. Putinism is marked by mimicry and adaptability to the political agenda pursued by the current Kremlin administration. Ideologies can just as well be malleable and subject to change, but they would always retain a certain core, some central messages directed at the population, as well as allies and adversaries in the international arena. For example, when Stalin-led group had defeated Trotsky's faction [within the Soviet leadership], Moscow quickly abandoned the concept of world revolution in favour of strengthening Stalinism and building a Stalinist version of 'socialism' inside Soviet Russia. But it still demonstrated a commitment to the ideological foundations of Marxism-Leninism both in politics and economic policy. As soon as the opportunity arose in the aftermath of the Second World War, it seized it to export its ideology elsewhere in Europe and beyond. Putinism, on the contrary, is based on the puzzle principle, a set of ad-hoc talking points, with each of them subject to change to suit the political situation.

Does Russia Have a State Ideology or an Ideology in General?

A need for a state ideology in Russia has again become a subject of discussion in recent years. In May 2023, for instance, justice minister Konstantin Chuichenko said in an interview: 'We should finally come up with a clear legal doctrine for a state ideology and, accordingly, determine the correlation between ideology and moral norms'. Head of Russia's Investigative Committee, Alexander Bastrykin, expressed a similar stance and openly suggested 'writing the state ideology into the Constitution'. But these statements met with Putin's outright disapproval. Officially, he denies that the Russian Federation has an ideology in the sense of a comprehensive state project and expresses his negative attitude to such ideas. In 2021, the Kremlin spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, answering a direct question on whether Putin had an ideology, has said: 'Vladimir Putin's ideology means development, stability, and prosperity for Russia and every Russian citizen'. Putin himself mentioned it at least twice in 2024. In June, speaking at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum, he has emphasised that it would contravene the Constitution, meaning the ideological diversity enshrined in the Article 13, and added: 'We used to have a dominant ideology — you mentioned the Soviet period. But a state ideology did not prevent the Soviet Union from collapsing'. In October [2024], he has said again that 'no attempts were being made in Russia to build an ideology'. Putin thus indirectly criticised those key Russian officials who considered a new dominant ideological concept could be possible. On the other hand, this issue is clearly of peripheral importance to the regime, as neither Bastrykin nor Chuichenko, the country's top officials, were reprimanded for their proposals. This is the reason why the absence of a state ideology in Russia can be considered a fact; otherwise, it would have been proclaimed officially.

The question remains, however, whether Putin's Russia has an ideology in principle, even without an official status. Between 2000 and 2024, two political concepts, 'sovereign democracy' and 'Russian world' that can also be called doctrines, and one system of social and political relationships, Putinism, incorporating the former to a greater or lesser extent, emerged in Russia. However, none of them qualify as a political ideology.

First, they lack consistency, stereotypification, and robustness. This is due to their function, that is, to serve as mere tools to legitimise the personal rule of Vladimir Putin and his entourage, individual steps or a system of actions as part of Russia's domestic and foreign policy. The primary goal is to protect the regime, to maintain the status quo rather than to implement any concept.

Second, these concepts aren't dogmatic; even if there is some dogmatism in them, its manifestations are insignificant. All definitions or descriptions are extremely vague and can be easily replaced or adapted depending on what the interests of those who profess this dogmatism are or how the situation evolves.

Third, both 'sovereign democracy' and 'Russian world' remain elitist and alien to globality. These doctrines do not spread beyond the realm of just a segment of the Russian power (even those in charge of the economy, for instance, are disconnected from them) and the nationalist or ultra-patriotic milieus interested in them. The majority of Russian society has tacitly accepted Putinism as an established set of rules. It also benefits many outside the Kremlin, but it has not become the subject of genuine interest or support on the part of social groups of any significant size. According to the Russian constitution and other laws, Russia remains a 'democratic state' with quasi-democratic procedures, such as elections.

Fourth, the above concepts lack a scientific or, at least, a pseudo-scientific theoretical basis. For instance, Russia's 'special right' to 'protect compatriots abroad' may well be justified by claims of 'state interests' or 'historical community'.

Fifth, the concepts only address the present and seek foundation in the past. The future lies outside of their scope. The Kremlin offers no 'new world' to the groups it targets or where it wants to pursue its expansion. For example, residents of the occupied and annexed Ukrainian territories are only supposed to receive Russian citizenship and integrate into the Russian political, economic, cultural, and legal space. They may also see some Soviet monuments reinstalled or some place names restored, which means the society is just being frozen in the here and now.

Sixth, the Kremlin lacks an original economic model of its own, a frequent 'companion' to ideologies. No goal to devise any such model has ever been set. Russia is dominated by state capitalism with liberal market elements in the economy that help maintain stability and ensure survival of [Putin's] system. For example, left-oriented economic experiments that could have been a logical consequence of the 'Russian world' were harshly suppressed by Moscow in 2014–2015 in Ukraine's occupied Luhansk and Donetsk regions.

Seventh, an important factor in any ideology is a conviction about it being the right thing, the faith in it or even sometimes fanaticism. Russian 'candidates' for the status of ideology aren't emotionally charged and boast a very limited number of passionate supporters. This is due to the fact that these doctrines have very weak visions or worldviews.

Today's Russia has neither a state ideology, nor even a clearly defined list of its own ideological attitudes. The Kremlin does not even seek to become 'ideological', for that would mean placing restrictions on its own actions. Putin invokes the painful Soviet experience and believes that adherence to ideology played a significant role in the country's stagnation, while a rapid demolition of this ideology ultimately led to its collapse. Moscow is acting as an epigone as it borrows fragments of existing ideological theories or currents, recontextualising them the way it wants, and deliberately avoiding any attempts to create a new 'vision of the future'. In terms of some arbitrary comparatism, this strategy of Putin's makes Russia more akin to a number of Latin American statist authoritarian regimes of the 20th century as in Chile or Nicaragua. These weren't ready for fundamental transformations, saw themselves outside any ideological frameworks, or played fast and loose with existing ideological theories as they were trying to protect the existing system by linking power and the public good to a particular individual, suppressing dissent and rejecting democratic mechanisms.

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