

LATE-STAGE PUTINISM: THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND RUSSIA'S SHIFTING IDEOLOGY

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June 2024

SUMMARY

- The Russian regime's political ideology – both its content and role in the political system – have evolved since the all-out invasion of Ukraine.
- The Kremlin has increasingly adopted a more hostile stance towards the West, made a particular interpretation of Russia's historical role and global position, and placed growing emphasis on ultra-conservative values, promoting a new kind of 'patriotism' in Russia.
- While the Kremlin continues to use ideology as a tool for bolstering regime legitimacy among citizens and elites, this is also becoming a core element of Russia's domestic and foreign policy.
- Domestically, the Kremlin needs ideology to gain at least 'performative support' from its population for the war in Ukraine. In foreign policy, the Kremlin is using this to attract the countries of the global south with the aim of forming a new conservative alliance.
- To support this new ideology, the Kremlin is refining its previously varied ideological narratives into a more unified discourse and establishing new infrastructure for disseminating its ideology among the Russian population.
- This ideological infrastructure already penetrates deeply into Russian society, including into the education system, the healthcare system – and even the personal lives of Russian citizens.

Nakedly political

At the end of last year, a scandal erupted in Russia over a new phase of the state's promotion of traditional and conservative values. Prominent figures from the Russian cultural sphere were denounced by pro-war activists and the Russian media for their attendance at a “almost naked” party. The event was privately organised, but the dissemination of images online led to the ostracising of these celebrities. The fallout included financial losses approximating €3m from cancelled appearances at new year events and shows, one attendee sentenced to 25 days in detention, and the event's organiser facing scrutiny from the Federal Tax Service. Subsequently, a Russian court characterised the gathering as “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations,” associating it with the LGBT movement, which Russia declared “extremist” in autumn 2023.

This incident underscores a significant ideological shift in the Russian political landscape, in the third year of the country's extensive conflict in Ukraine, which those involved had doubtless failed to notice and adapt to promptly. Members of the cultural elite who chose to remain in Russia after the country's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine without explicitly supporting the war believed they could maintain their pre-war lifestyles and business activities. Yet practices once deemed standard in the cosmopolitan cultural life, where state intervention was minimal, must now adapt to the transformed ideological landscape.

The party attendees at the centre of criticism issued apology videos, performed concerts in the occupied territories of Ukraine, and showcased their presidential election votes on social media. Reports suggest that the push for their cancellation had backing from the presidential administration and received personal endorsement from Vladimir Putin, who subsequently revisited the party's theme during his election campaign events.

Since February 2022, the Russian political regime's ideology has indeed evolved: it has adopted a more hostile stance towards the West, increasingly reflecting a particular interpretation of Russia's historical role and global position. Moreover, there is a growing emphasis on ultra-conservative values, permitting intrusions into personal and familial spheres. Notably, ideology is transitioning from a tool for the regime to bolster legitimacy among citizens and elites, to being a defining element of Russia's domestic and foreign policy. This, in turn, is influencing the Kremlin's decision-making.

In this context, the regime is refining its previously varied ideological narratives into a more unified discourse, and establishing new infrastructure for disseminating its ideology among the populace. Notably, this involves the middle- and street-level of Russian bureaucracy.

New ideological objectives

Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, its political regime was emblematic of post-Soviet authoritarian systems; an example of what Russian political scientist Grigory Golosov calls an "electoral autocracy." Such regimes often blend co-optation mechanisms and targeted repression of adversaries with the aim of achieving comprehensive control over the media and the information landscape. Contrary to classic dictatorships, these regimes lack a consistent state ideology, instead employing various ideological narratives on an ad hoc basis. Policies are rationalised post hoc through diverse narratives to optimise appeal across different segments of the population and elites, leading to ideological eclecticism within electoral autocracies.

Along these lines, researchers have frequently observed that ideology in post-Soviet Russia has been highly variable. In Putin's early presidential years, the regime constructed Russian ideological narratives around pro-Western and modernisation themes alongside sovereignty and independence in foreign policy. Following Putin's 2007 Munich speech, and particularly after Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, anti-Western and anti-American sentiments gained prominence. Since the country's 2014 annexation of Crimea, Russian ideology has emphasised conservative values and nostalgia for empire, delineating Russia's distinction from the West and outlining Russia's "special path".

Over the ensuing eight years, Russia's purported 'unique historical mission' became intertwined with the concept of sovereignty. Putin's deep interest in history led him to pen several articles in which he articulated his distinct perspective on post-war European history and the dynamics of Russia-Ukraine relations. Ultimately, these 'historical' justifications underpinned many of the Kremlin's subsequent actions; from recognising the independence of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions, to initiating a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The Russian regime's ideology over the past two decades has not coalesced into a unified, comprehensive framework – but rather, according to political analysis by Andrei Kolesnikov, "snippets of it can be found throughout Putin's speeches, articles, and interviews." A recent study agrees that Russian ideology has proven enormously adaptable while noting its foundational themes of statism, anti-Western sentiment, and a Russian "special path".

Since February 2022, the Kremlin has escalated its efforts to forge an official ideology, both by enhancing the coherence of its existing narratives and by cultivating new ones. The key shift in the Kremlin's ideological approach post-2022 is the expansion of agents disseminating this ideology. Previously, state media, the Russian Orthodox Church, and state-sponsored cultural

initiatives were the primary instruments. Now, the main ideological narratives are also propagated through the Russian bureaucracy, particularly within the education and healthcare sectors.

The simultaneous refinement of ideology, and the expansion of its dissemination infrastructure, are driven by three pivotal factors that have reshaped the Kremlin's approach to ideological challenges since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Firstly, polling data indicate that the war in Ukraine is least popular among Russia's younger population, specifically those aged 18-39. This demographic was notably visible in trying to exit the country to avoid military service during Russia's partial military mobilisation in autumn 2022, as evidenced by the long queues at borders. The Kremlin likely recognises that traditional ideological mechanisms, particularly state media, are insufficient to sway this segment of audience. To captivate the upcoming generation – today's pupils and students – a more robust ideological infrastructure is necessary, especially within educational institutions. Since February 2022, Sergei Kirienko, the presidential administration's deputy head in charge of ideological matters, has underscored the Kremlin's intent to engage in an "information and psychological war for the minds of the younger generation" against the West.

Secondly, Russia's strategy for victory in Ukraine involves extending the conflict into a "long war," necessitating a prolonged state of societal and elite mobilisation against perceived external threats. To alleviate growing war-weariness and counter grassroots anti-war movements, such as the "mobilised wives" initiative that surged in popularity in late 2023, more sophisticated and compelling ideological narratives are essential. Framing Russia's engagement in Ukraine as part of a broader "civilisational" clash with the West and casting Russia as a bastion of traditional values may bolster ideological support. Researchers argue that, through such narratives, the Kremlin seeks to transform passive wartime approval into at least "performative support" – if not active endorsement.

Finally, Putin appears to want to cement his ideological legacy. He secured re-election for another presidential term in March 2024. By end of his term in 2030, Putin will be 78, setting a record as the oldest leader in Russian history. Politicians and officials close to the president are increasingly examining Putin's ideological contributions; the president has shown a growing tendency to ponder his legacy in Russian history in recent years. This introspection is likely to steer Putin towards refining the ideological underpinnings of his regime in the next six years. Indeed, in contrast to previous efforts, the 2024 presidential election campaign was more ideologically driven, larger in terms of the number of events held, and more centred on foreign policy narratives than on domestic concerns.

Consequently, the emerging need for ideology as a critical element of Russia's political regime is compelling the Kremlin to enhance its ideological consistency, and is prompting further investments in ideological infrastructure. This shift underscores a strategic pivot towards solidifying an ideological framework that aligns with the regime's objectives, ensuring a more unified and persuasive narrative to support its governance and policy directions.

The ideology characterising the later stages of Putinism will probably not fully crystallise until the end of the current presidential term. However, a noticeable shift in the role and core narratives of this ideology is already evident.

To understand the new ideological framework of the Russian regime, this paper first describes the three main new narratives the Kremlin is promoting. The first, "state-civilisation," narrative creates a special role for Russia among nations as a civilisation rather than a mere state; the second "citizen serves the state" narrative redefines and vastly expands the definition of patriotism in Russia; and the third "new anti-colonialism" narrative seeks to recast Russia's international image, portraying it as a global player defending conservative and traditional values from Western, especially American, universalism.

The paper then examines how the Russian state is disseminating these narratives through the development of ideological infrastructure in the secondary and higher education systems, through the adoption of new regulations in social and personal life, and in its efforts at cooperation with the countries of the global south.

The paper concludes with ideas about how those outside Russia might respond to the new ideology. They cannot change Russia, but they are also not powerless in the ideological struggle.

New ideological narratives

The evolving narratives of the Kremlin's ideology are discernible through an examination of changes in government documents, comments made by Putin and other officials at public events, certain legislative acts, and textual materials created to inculcate the new ideology – particularly in the education system.

To reconstruct and interpret these narratives, we combined two methods of analysis. Firstly, we collected 24 official Russian documents that reflect the position of the state or its individual representatives on Russia's current or desired position in the world. These documents included national strategies, foreign policy doctrines, annual presidential addresses to parliament, and presidential speeches about important public events (for

example, the annexation of Crimea).

The documents were manually coded at two stages. We first used open coding with the Noticing, Collecting, Thinking model of qualitative data analysis to extract the most common meaningful semantic fragments in the documents. “Meaningful” in this context implies that the fragments describe the reasoning behind either the actions taken by Russia, or the Russian vision of political or social processes taking place globally. We then added further context and background information to individual elements of the narratives through the use of documents in state media, and selected prior publications that have shaped the current conservative narrative in Russia (see an example here).

The second type of analysis – topic-modelling using Latent Dirichlet allocation – was used to analyse five large texts: four school history textbooks, and a textbook for a new ideological subject in universities. Topic-modelling is an unsupervised machine learning technique that identifies the most common topics (combinations of related semantic fragments) in texts, and the most frequent words in these topics. The method is used to detect latent meanings and relations of topics and words in topics in large texts, which are extremely laborious to examine manually. In each of the five large texts, we configured Latent Dirichlet allocation to split the text into ten topics. We then analysed each of these topics by lexicon-based sentiment analysis to ascertain the emotional undertones they convey: positive, negative, or neutral.

The narratives distilled from the analysis can be categorised into three primary groups.

State-civilisation

The “state-civilisation” concept emerges as the pivotal idea, integrating various other narratives. This concept’s fundamental tenets are delineated in the new Russian Foreign Policy Doctrine, adopted in March 2023, and further elaborated by expert groups aligned with the government. Putin first invoked the term “state-civilisation” in a 2012 election article and referenced it several times during the 2024 election campaign.

The concept posits that unique “civilisation-states” exist among nations, distinguished by their authenticity – defined by their capacity for the independent creation of values, culture, and institutions without borrowing or copying from others. The rejection of imitation is a deliberate choice by the population and elites of “civilisation-states,” safeguarding their values from other state-civilisations’ expansionist endeavours and positioning themselves as beacons for other, more ordinary states.

The “state-civilisation” notion expands and integrates two significant themes previously

emphasised by the Russian political regime: sovereignty and Russia’s “special path”. These concepts now acquire additional layers of meaning.

From about 2000 to 2018, sovereignty, as interpreted by the Kremlin, pertained to “state sovereignty,” affirming every UN member state’s right to an independent foreign policy, free from external pressures, notably from America. Presently, sovereignty was ascribed to both “the state and the people”. This dual ownership furnishes the Kremlin with an additional rationale for enacting ‘independent’ decisions which are, in reality, often confrontational towards the West, asserting that these decisions now represent not just the state, but the people as well.

The notion of “peoplehood” within sovereignty introduces two novel aspects. Firstly, there is a historical dimension: sovereignty transcends different state formations within the same territory (for example, from Kievan Rus to the Russian Federation). Secondly, there is an extraterritorial dimension: a single people divided by state borders may aspire to unify within one state. Through this lens, such reunification is deemed legitimate, even if it contravenes international law, because the people are safeguarding their “civilisational” identity against other civilisational states’ encroachments.

This interpretation of sovereignty underpinned the rationale for the Kremlin’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and was prominently invoked to legitimise the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The Kremlin posits that the “divided Russian nation” seeks reunification within a singular state – “historical Russia” – and, by virtue of its sovereignty, possesses the right to this unification.

The idea of “historical Russia” asserts that, despite fluctuating official borders, a core territory inherently belongs to Russia, home to the “all-Russian nation” of Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians, bound by shared language, faith, and values. Politicians referenced “historical Russia” in the 2010s, but since February 2022 this concept has been leveraged to justify the invasion. This narrative frames the Kremlin’s actions as a bid to prevent Ukraine, under Western influence, from detaching from “historical Russia” and to mend the “artificial divide” within this united people. This perspective also helps reframe the Ukrainian conflict as a civil war, depicting it as fraternal strife within “historical Russia”.

Putin frequently references the historical and extraterritorial facets of sovereignty when describing the reasons for war in Ukraine, including in discussions with international figures such as Tucker Carlson. With these efforts, Putin is developing a new element of the ideology – historicism – following the historical dimension of sovereignty. Historicism means the rootedness of the “state-civilisation” in history, advocating that state decisions should be anchored in a sense of duty to its historical legacy. For instance, if historical injustice or harm

has befallen a state or its citizens, it is incumbent on the contemporary political leadership to rectify these in the present.

Historicism helps Putin to push the idea of the reluctance of some political actions. Within the framework of historicism, the political elite is perceived as being encumbered by historical responsibilities, constraining their freedom in decision-making. Decisions, therefore, are seen as the culmination of lengthy historical trajectories. The Kremlin employed the 'we had no choice' narrative to rationalise Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

This approach also allows Putin to mask (or legitimise) the seeming irrationality of his foreign policy decisions by presenting them within a nuanced historical framework, suggesting complexity and depth that he implies is only discernible through a broad, macroscopic view of global political dynamics. Putin's purported ability to "discern the logic of history" is viewed by some of the Russian political class as a distinctive skill, aligning with the responsibilities befitting the leader of a "state-civilisation".

The concept of a Russian "special path" has also been further elaborated within the state-civilisation framework, marking a significant aspect of the Russian political regime's ideology. During Putin's initial presidential terms, Russia's "special path" was perceived as a special adaptation of essentially Western institutions. This led to the emergence of concepts such as "sovereign democracy" to explain strong state involvement in the economy, termed "Putinomics." Until 2021, the Russian populace mainly linked the "special path" with economic aspects of governance, viewing the state as a protector against capitalist excesses. Since 2014, however, the Kremlin has increasingly tied Russia's "special path" to conservatism and traditional values.

This ideological evolution has now culminated in Russia positioning itself not merely as a non-Western entity, but as a distinct civilisation where traditional values and conservatism are paramount. This value-based differentiation from the West is considered intrinsic, delineating Russia as a state-civilisation and distinguishing it from other civilisations (officials and ideologues propose the existence of up to seven "state-civilisations", including Russia and the West), and "ordinary" countries.

The Kremlin now views the propagation of Western-associated values within Russia as "destructive ideological influence," leading to the securitisation of values over the last two years. In other words, the dominance of certain values in society has become a national security issue. Whereas traditional and Western values once coexisted in Russia – with the state not impeding the latter but often supporting the former – there is now direct opposition to Western-associated values such as LGBT tolerance and gender fluidity, which have been criminalised

The citizen serves the state

The second cluster of narratives within the Kremlin's revised ideology contains an expansive interpretation of patriotism, encapsulated in the concept of "the citizen serves the state." Since February 2022, there has been a marked increase in state intervention into the private life of citizens, with efforts to constrain individual choices in matters of family, social circles, occupation, and more. These state intervention efforts often take the form of calls for displays of patriotism from the population.

Unlike the "state-civilisation" concept, Russian politicians do not explicitly use "citizen serves the state" as a term. However, its elements are prevalent across numerous documents analysed, notably the presidential decree on state policy "to preserve and strengthen traditional Russian spiritual and moral values". Through such mandates, the Kremlin crafts the archetype of the ideal Russian citizen: someone who establishes a "strong family," upholds patriotism and "service to the Fatherland", favours collectivism over individualism, and champions "generational continuity" and "interethnic unity within Russia".

While the Kremlin previously endorsed these traditionalist and conservative values, the decree now enshrines them as the pillars of "all-Russian identity", viewing deviations as potential threats to the state, instigated by "unfriendly countries." Furthermore, the mission to "fortify traditional spiritual and moral values" has been incorporated into the revised National Security Strategy, Russia's principal strategic blueprint.

Since Putin's first term, the Kremlin has championed patriotism as service to the state, effectively monopolising the concept and marginalising any dissenting interpretations of patriotic activity. The state alone began to define the parameters of patriotism, equating it with allegiance to the Kremlin.

Prior to the 2022 war in Ukraine, patriotic sentiment was promoted but not mandated across the citizenry. Currently, the state expects citizens to exhibit patriotism by engaging in activities prioritised by the government. Patriotism has transitioned from a state-encouraged exception to a norm. Consequently, the Kremlin has not only appropriated the concept of patriotism but also mandated it for all citizens, broadening the domains under its influence. Authorities classify these areas as matters of national security, thereby politicising and placing them under the purview of state oversight.

The realm of family policy exemplifies this gradual politicisation of daily life. Family policy now has the national security mission of "saving the people of Russia". While patriotism and

traditional family values previously coexisted as parallel yet distinct facets for the Kremlin, the traditional family is now being incorporated into a broader definition of patriotism, effectively becoming a state concern.

A significant portion of Putin's recent address delineating his new term's agenda, focused on bolstering state support for families, positioning a large family with lots of children as a societal ideal and cornerstone of state strategy. His election campaign also frequently emphasised the call for citizens to have more children. Additionally, the government has designated 2024 as the "Year of the Family" in Russia, with a dedicated national project "Family" receiving 75 billion roubles from the state budget to encourage and support large families.

The Russian Orthodox Church has also endorsed the state's right to delve into family and private matters, aligning with this demographic focus. The church's latest resolution from the World Russian People's Council advocates for a new demographic strategy to bring Russia's population to 600 million people by 2130 in order to "preserve Russia's sovereignty and civilisational identity". This strategy would include restricting abortion, banning gender transitions, and supporting the immigration to Russia of Russian people from other countries of the "*russkiy mir*".

Collectivism, lauded as a key component of Russia's "traditional spiritual and moral values," is also gaining increased emphasis in the Kremlin's public discourse. Based on the presumed collectivist nature of Russians, the state is now developing new mass political initiatives, such as the "Movement of the First". This is akin to the Soviet-era Young Pioneers, a de facto mandatory membership movement for all Soviet school students that indoctrinated youths in communist ideology and assisted in co-opting them into the Communist party structure

This Russian brand of collectivism is positioned in contrast to Western individualism and puts organisational, societal, and state interests ahead of personal goals. Putin heralded collectivism as a virtue of the Russian people since well before the current war in Ukraine. But the context of the war has allowed the Kremlin to amplify expectations for collectivist behaviour to levels that necessitate much greater self-sacrifice.

During a 2022 interaction with soldiers' mothers, Putin asserted that a soldier's death in the war in Ukraine "is meaningful", contrasting it with the "senseless" deaths due to alcohol or accidents among other Russian men. This perspective accords with views from Russian ultraconservative philosophers, in which the essence of life is framed not around individual freedom, but in serving a collective purpose.

On one level, the Kremlin portrays collectivism as a core element of the "all-Russian

civilisational identity”. On another, it is subtly morphing collectivism into a form of heroism that aligns with state interests. When paired with the expanding scope of patriotism, this shift could accelerate the adoption of stark anti-modernisation measures in Russia. For instance, leveraging traditional gender roles and the state’s demographic concerns could place indirect pressure on women’s educational pursuits to promote early motherhood. Some [Russian politicians](#) have already floated such ideas.

The new anti-colonialism

The third narrative strand in the Kremlin’s revised ideology seeks to recast Russia’s international image, portraying it as “[leader of oppressed countries](#).” This aspect accentuates Russia’s legacy as the successor to the Soviet Union in combating Western, especially American, colonialism.

This ideological pivot is more aligned with the Kremlin’s foreign policy goals and is primarily targeted at international, rather than domestic, audiences. In its rivalry with Western nations and Ukraine for global alignment, particularly in the context of the war, the Kremlin leverages anti-colonial narratives to garner support from the global south.

This narrative is externally focused, but the Kremlin does seek to integrate it with other ideological components, especially the “state-civilisation” concept. The new [Foreign Policy Doctrine](#) outlines Russia’s objective in Africa as aiding the continent’s evolution into a “authentic hub of global development”. Pro-Kremlin [commentators](#) have highlighted this strategic shift, suggesting that Moscow’s approach uniquely acknowledges the civilisational identity of African nations, setting it apart from Western powers such as the United States, Germany, or France which have Africa strategies, in this view, rooted in Western universalism.

Criticism of Western universalism, particularly regarding human rights, is a cornerstone narrative of the Kremlin’s refreshed anti-colonial stance. Since the late 2000s, Moscow has championed the supremacy of particularist, traditional values over the universalist concept of human rights. In 2011, Russia played a pivotal role in the [UNHRC’s adoption of a resolution](#) aimed at reinterpreting human rights through the lens of “deeper understanding and respect” for traditional values. This resolution suggested that nations could independently define human rights violations, referencing traditional values that, for instance, denounce gender transition. Notably, the majority of EU countries opposed this resolution.

Since 2011, Moscow has released [special reports](#) scrutinising human rights practices, particularly in Western nations. [The 2023 report](#) highlights alleged modern colonial practices

in Western countries, branding many as “characterised by racist, neocolonial attitudes”. By challenging the United Nations’ human rights framework as opposed to traditional values, the Kremlin provides a shield for Russia and other non-Western regimes to deflect Western criticism on issues like LGBT or women’s rights.

Moreover, the Kremlin is broadening the spectrum of areas where traditional values may diverge from Western norms. In an [article](#) for the Russia-Africa Summit 2023, Putin emphasised the principle of “African problems – African solutions,” advocating non-interference in countries’ internal matters and contrasting this approach with Western stances on democracy and civil conflicts. More broadly, the Kremlin has actively engaged in a reframing of colonialism, defining global issues and institutional challenges in the global south – such as poverty, inequality, and the impacts of climate change – as consequences of Western actions against non-Western countries. It has then labelled these actions as “neocolonialism”. Pro-Kremlin ideologists [even suggest](#) re-evaluating fundamental concepts such as “woman,” “space,” “time,” and “death,” arguing they have been “colonised” by Western thought.

The Kremlin’s longstanding advocacy of a multipolar world, traditionally rooted in state sovereignty, is now increasingly tied to “cultural and civilisational diversity,” as highlighted in recent statements by [Putin](#) and [Lavrov](#). The evolving narrative asserts that the legitimacy of a multipolar world stems from each civilisation’s right to its unique trajectory.

Leveraging its UN Security Council membership and highlighting its alignment with the global south through shared traditional and civilisational values, the Kremlin aims to position itself as a hub for alternative, “non-Western” interpretations of international law. The Kremlin appears keen to attract non-democratic regimes in Africa and Asia to this viewpoint, potentially building a coalition that views Moscow as a global champion of traditional values.

In February 2024, the Kremlin convened an international forum bringing together “[supporters of the struggle against modern practices of neocolonialism](#),” with attendees from 30 states across Africa, Asia, and south America. The [forum’s concluding statement](#) decried various forms of neocolonialism, including monetary, financial, cultural, carbon, and digital neocolonialism. Russia’s foreign minister [attributed](#) practices such as sanctions, unequal distribution of covid-19 vaccines, and the propagation of gender diversity and transhumanism ideas as facets of neocolonialism.

The Kremlin uses this approach to neocolonialism for two purposes. Firstly, it distances Russia from Western colonial legacies, effectively asserting that Russia or the Soviet Union [never engaged in colonialism](#) but instead supported nations fighting for freedom from

Western influence, both financially and militarily. This framing of neocolonialism seeks to cleanse Russia's historical image and to establish a foundation for its contemporary anti-colonial stance, suggesting a continuation of Soviet-era policies .

Secondly, framing the discourse around neocolonialism feeds into broader anti-Western and anti-American sentiment within Russia, particularly in the context of the Ukraine war. The Kremlin portrays the war as a battle against Western efforts to make Russia a "Western colony", framing Moscow as a defender against Western "neo-colonial" tendencies globally. This framing is used to justify why Putin's engagements are now more focused on leaders from African nations, signalling a strategic pivot in Russia's international relations and a message tailored for domestic consumption.

Through these strategies, the Kremlin is not only attempting to reshape Russia's global image but is also aiming to consolidate its internal support base by positioning itself as a global champion against modern forms of Western dominance.

New ideological infrastructure

New ideologies do not usually generate their own adherents. They require careful nurturing and can greatly benefit from state efforts to use its societal reach and coercive powers – the infrastructure of the modern state – to ensure that people believe what they are supposed to believe. Understanding this, the Kremlin is intensifying its efforts to consolidate and expand its ideological infrastructure in the realms of media, religion, education, and the regulation of social and personal life.

Before February 2022, state media served as the primary vehicle for disseminating ideology at a mass level, echoing, elaborating, and continuously reiterating ideologically charged statements from top Russian officials. The Kremlin sporadically funded cultural projects with ideological underpinnings aimed at broad audiences, but it struggled to secure a monopoly over ideological expression, particularly in fields such as cinema and art. Since February 2022, the criteria and rules for state funding of cultural initiatives have become more stringent , favouring overtly propagandist content.

The Russian Orthodox Church also plays a crucial role in propagating conservative and traditional values, aligning closely with the Kremlin's ideological stance. The leadership of the church, particularly after Patriarch Kirill's ascension in 2009, has made efforts to consolidate ideological influence across church parishes. Despite this, anti-war sentiment has surfaced among some clergy members, posing a challenge to the Kremlin's unified narrative.

The increased oppression of civil society since February 2022, combined with the ideological efforts of the state media, cultural projects, and the church, has effectively marginalised alternative ideological voices. Nevertheless, the war with Ukraine has revealed to the Kremlin that existing mechanisms are insufficient to sustain loyalty, especially among the youth, and to garner “performative support” from the broader populace.

In response, the Kremlin is developing an expanded ideological framework. It is actively involving the lower levels of the Russian bureaucracy, particularly within the education sector, but also in the healthcare system. The promotion of anti-colonial ideology is also increasingly delegated to the party and state bureaucracy.

Moreover, the bureaucracy itself is undergoing further ideologisation, with the introduction of new deputy heads in state agencies specifically tasked with ideological oversight. This structural adjustment signifies a deepening of ideological control, reflecting the Kremlin’s commitment to embedding its narratives across different layers of society and governance.

Primary and secondary education

Putin has recently highlighted the vital role of school teachers in disseminating state-endorsed ideas, particularly under the exigencies of “wartime” conditions. This push towards the “militarisation” of education is orchestrated from the very top, with directives emanating from the presidential administration. Indeed, Sergei Kirienko, the administration’s deputy head responsible for ideological matters, has emphasised the importance of “fighting for the minds of the younger generation” since the outset of the conflict.

Approximately 98 per cent of Russian schools (about 40,000) are state or municipal institutions. Even private schools operate under state licences, placing every school system under government control. This allows the Kremlin to implement its ideological agenda across the educational spectrum, ensuring that the next generation is brought up in alignment with the state’s priorities and values.

The integration of ideology into Russian school education has been significantly marked by the introduction of a new, unified history textbook in September 2023. History, being a mandatory subject in all Russian schools, previously offered a variety of textbooks selected from a ministry-approved list. However, this list was drastically reduced in 2014, sparking widespread discontent among teachers. Now, a single textbook has been mandated for the senior grades; by 2024, this uniformity will extend from grade five through to grade nine.

Independent analysts have highlighted the textbook’s ideologically charged content, noting a

single narrative for many historical events without presenting alternative perspectives.

The team behind the new textbook was led by Vladimir Medinsky, a figure known for his military-patriotic stance and head of the Russian delegation in the 2022 negotiations with Ukraine. Historians have criticised Medinsky's interpretations of Russian history and accused him of manipulating historical documents to support his viewpoint.

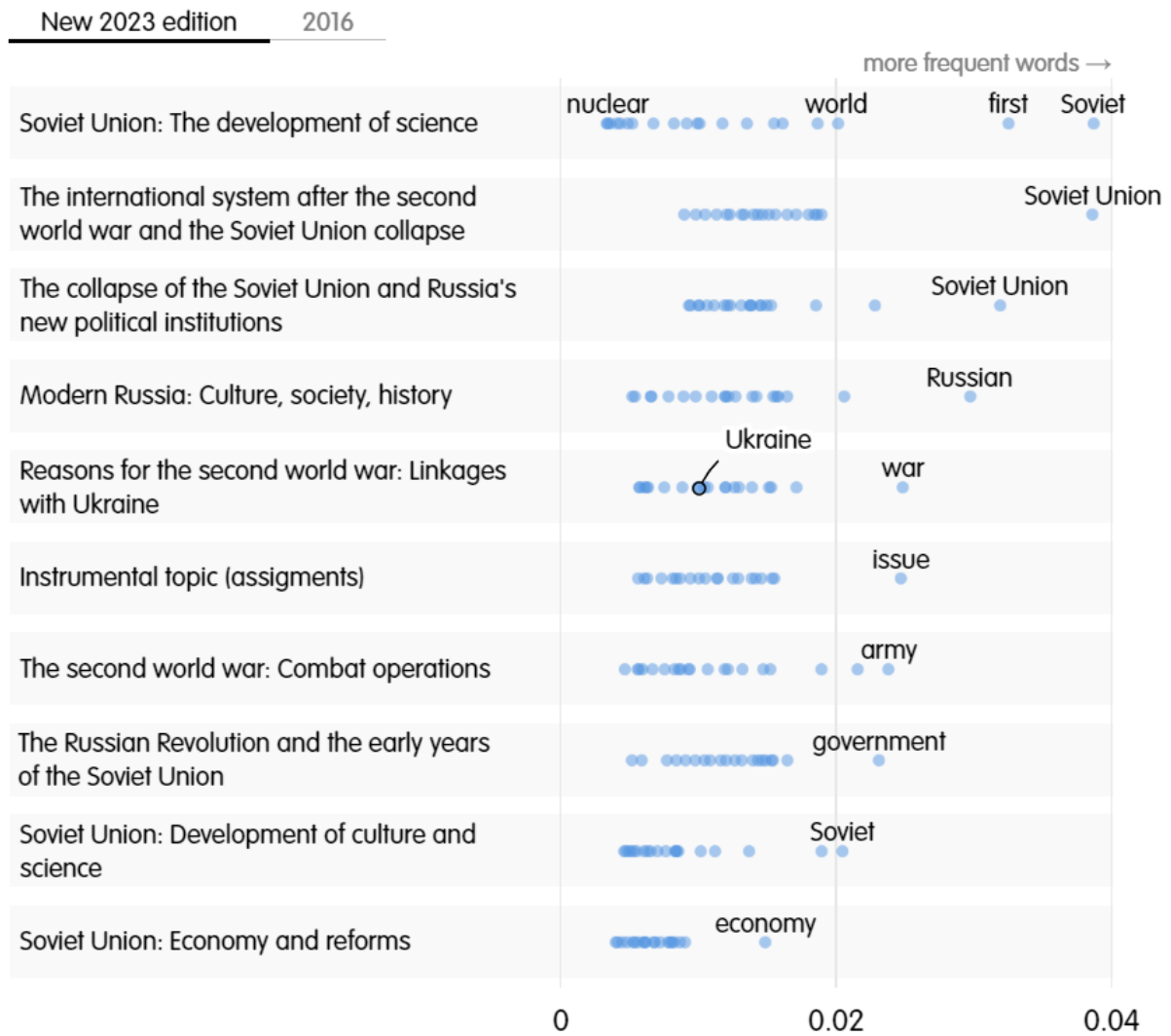
The textbook comprises five documents – which cover Russian, and other countries', history from 1914 to 2022 – and a methodological guide for teachers with visual aids. The guide, in particular, underscores the ideological emphasis, suggesting the use of visual materials and official government resources to reinforce the narrative, notably regarding the second world war and the portrayal of the Soviet Union as a global power subsequently sharing influence with other major nations. Medinsky noted that the new 2023 editions have entirely revamped sections on the 1970s-2020s, incorporating justifications for Russia's actions in Ukraine.

To better identify the changes in history textbooks, we analysed them using Latent Dirichlet allocation. This method helps to find the most common topics in the text (bunches of words related and linked with each other) and the most frequent words in the topics. Using Latent Dirichlet allocation on Russian history textbooks reveals nuanced shifts in content when comparing the latest editions to the most recent previous textbooks, which were authored in 2016 under the guidance of Anatoly Torkunov, the rector of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO). Torkunov also collaborated with Medinsky on the new textbook.

A significant distinction in the new textbook is the blending of second world war narratives with discussions of Russia's conflict in Ukraine, as inferred from the frequent occurrence of terms like “Ukrainian” and “territory” within the first cluster. Conversely, in the prior Russian history textbook, the terms “Ukraine” and “Ukrainian” appear infrequently within the war-themed topics.

This blending of narratives in the updated textbook could indicate an attempt to frame contemporary geopolitical events within the context of historical military achievements: possibly to draw parallels, or to infuse the current conflict with a sense of historical continuity or legitimacy. Such an approach aligns with broader trends in the Kremlin's messaging, seeking to embed modern actions within a grander historical narrative, thereby influencing public perception and understanding of current events in relation to the past.

LDA analysis of the new “History of Russia” textbook, 2023



10 topic Latent Dirichlet allocation model, top words in each topic.

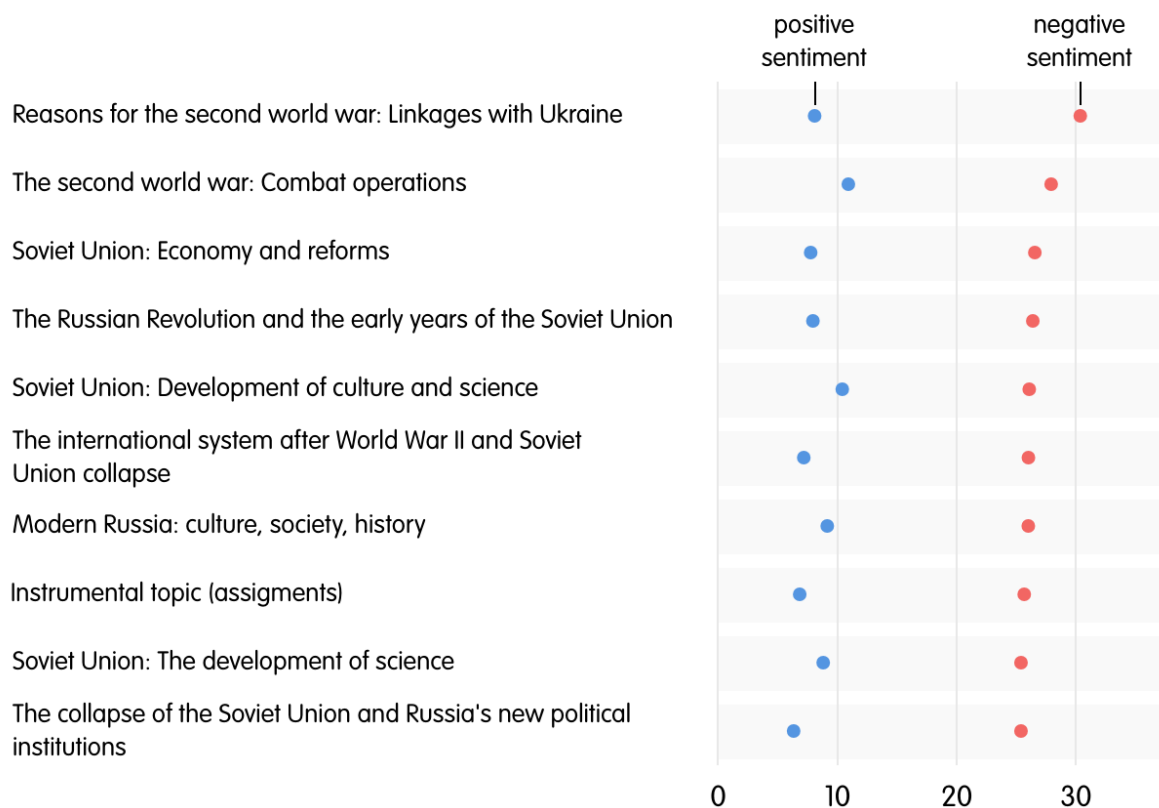
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Results of the LDA analysis corroborate the connections frequently drawn by official Russian narratives between the second world war and the current conflict in Ukraine, echoing the Kremlin’s stance that Russia is combating “Nazis” in Ukraine and portraying Moscow as “finishing” a war initiated by Kyiv, not as the aggressor.

Moreover, the frequent recurrence of words such as “great” and “people” in the new Russian history textbook – terms scarcely present in the war-related parts of the older Russian history textbook – suggests a notable ideological shift. This change emphasises the war’s “popular” essence and its significance or “greatness” for Russian statehood. The narrative aligns the new Russian history textbook’s portrayal of the war with official discourse, underscoring a unified, state-endorsed perspective on the conflict.

Additionally, lexicon-based sentiment analysis (figure 3), reveals this to be a highly emotionally charged cluster (almost 40 per cent of emotionally coloured lexicon), with a predominance of negative sentiments (30.3 per cent), reflecting the new Russian history textbook’s role in shaping perceptions and attitudes towards the conflict.

LBSA of the new “History of Russia” textbook, 2023. In per cent



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Other clusters in both the old and new Russian history textbooks are largely similar, echoing the conventional components of history textbooks such as reforms, revolutions, and inter-ethnic relations, both in thematic grouping and word frequency.

A manual examination comparing history textbooks from various publication years supports the LDA findings. While the new Russian history textbook largely mirrors the structure and primary arguments of its predecessors, it diverges at points sensitive to the Russian authorities, offering alternative conclusions or implications. For instance, while the 2010 edition mentions Josef Stalin's repression in the context of his death, the 2023 version highlights the extensive queues to pay respects at his coffin. The portrayal of the Soviet Union's increase in energy exports, depicted rather negatively in the 2010 Russian history textbook as the onset of "raw material dependence," is recast positively in the 2023 edition. Here, it frames Russia as an "energy superpower."

The topic of Crimea's transfer to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954 is absent in the 2010 textbook, but is addressed in the 2016 edition, noting the lack of consultation with Crimea's residents. By 2023, the narrative evolves further, stating that Crimea was "unjustly severed from Russia" and asserting that the events of 2014 finally rectified this "historical injustice".

In contrast to Russian history textbooks, world-history textbooks have undergone more substantial changes. Alexander Chubaryan, principal editor and author of many previous editions, specifically highlighted that the new versions pivot the focus from European and American history towards the history of the global south.

This shift is corroborated by LDA results. Of the ten most distinct topics identified, four are dedicated to countries in Africa, Asia, or south America, while only two focus on Western nations. Moreover, the LDA indicates that the topics associated with the global south frequently feature terms likely linked to the adverse effects of Western influence in these regions, such as "colonial", "struggle for independence", "military operation", and "intervention".

LDA analysis of the new “World History” textbook, 2023

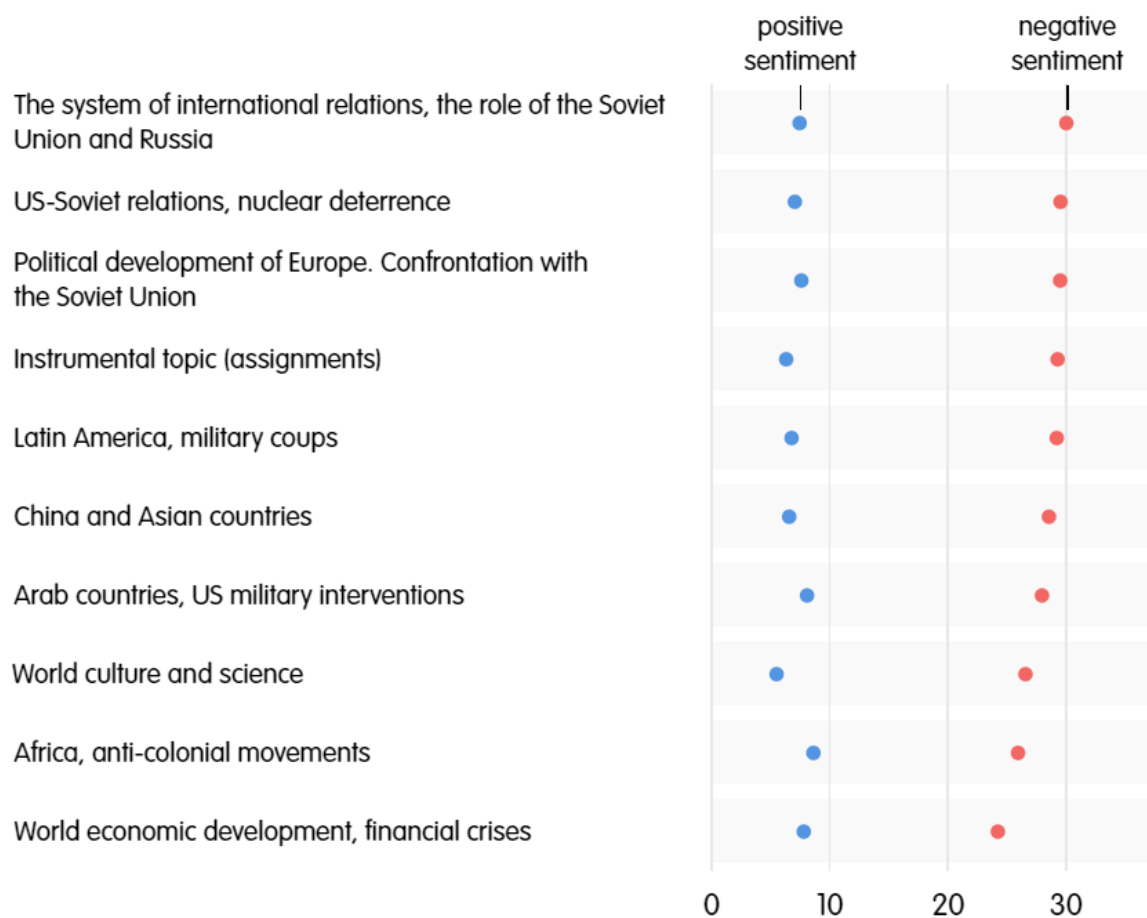


10 topic Latent Dirichlet allocation model, top words in each topic.

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The lexicon-based sentiment analysis also demonstrates that the new world-history textbooks are relatively strongly emotionally coloured (35.33 per cent in the top ten clusters), with a predominance of negative expressions (28 per cent). This probably corresponds to the Kremlin’s new ideological guidelines, which describe the history of the 20th century as the struggle of various “oppressed” countries against the domination of the West.

LBSA of the new “World History” textbook, 2023. In per cent



The lexicon-based sentiment analysis (LBSA).

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However, textbooks are not the only mechanism for pushing ideology in schools. A new subject titled “conversations about important things” was introduced in Russian schools from September 2022. This takes place every Monday, following the compulsory school-wide assembly that includes the Russian national anthem and flag-raising ceremony. Mandatory across all grades, these lessons are conducted by class teachers, and reach approximately 800,000 individuals across Russia who typically lack specialised education in history or social studies.

The course’s official programme aims to shield society from “destructive informational and psychological influences”, and to promote patriotism, family values, “historical memory”, and the “continuity of generations”. While many lesson topics focus on significant dates in

Russian history, notable figures, or global observances, some are distinctly ideological, exploring themes such as “traditional family values,” “Russia’s allies” (meaning Belarus, the BRICs, and the global south in general), “Crimea and Sevastopol: ten years in their native harbour”.

An analysis of the programme suggests that the development of patriotism in students is intended to progress incrementally from one grade to the next, beginning with cultivating a love for nature, extending to family, and ultimately to the nation. Themes of heroic patriotism and the notion of defending the country are emphasised in the senior grades. Initially, the curriculum included discussions on “special military operations”, although these references were subsequently omitted.

Putin himself led the inaugural session of “conversations” on 1 September 2022. Subsequent lesson materials often feature contributions from politicians, officials, and media figures. This high-level engagement underscores the Kremlin’s significant investment in, and attention to, the content and delivery of this education initiative.

Heightened political focus on “conversations”, coupled with the fact that the subject is often taught by educators without specialised training, leads to a reliance on officially sanctioned methodological guidelines. This reliance likely contributes to the notable ideologisation observed within this subject. For example, in 2022, there were several reported incidents where teachers overtly propagated the Kremlin’s ideological stances – particularly regarding the war in Ukraine.

The Kremlin views “conversations” as a successful initiative and plans to expand it beyond schools, introducing similar sessions in pedagogical universities and incorporating segments into a regular morning television show. Discussions are also under way to involve students’ parents in these conversations.

Furthermore, “conversations” is being tested by the authorities as a tool for shaping public attitudes towards current events. Following a recent terrorist attack, a subsequent session was altered to discuss interethnic unity and discourage “succumbing to provocations,” with the authorities attributing the attack to Ukraine. This immediate application of the programme to address specific events highlights its role as another channel, alongside state media, for disseminating the government’s ideological stance, a practice that is likely to be further developed by the Kremlin.

The Kremlin is also seeking to influence the next generation even beyond schools. The “Movement of the First,” a modern counterpart to the Young Pioneers, was inaugurated in Russia during summer 2022. By February 2024, almost 5 million children had enrolled. This

movement superseded the “Russian Schoolchildren Movement” initiated in 2015, and more explicitly aims to imbue youth with “traditional Russian spiritual and moral values”.

The organisation’s primary objective is to fill children’s after-school time with a range of state-sanctioned activities. Each school must establish a local chapter and engage in at least one of the 12 endorsed activities. Independent reports have often highlighted coerced participation.

Despite the overarching ideological undertones at major “Movement” events – which include forums featuring Putin, ministers, and politicians – only two of the 12 activity sectors are explicitly ideological: “diplomacy and international relations” and “patriotism and historical memory”. In these domains, activities range from military training camps, some conducted by soldiers with experience in Ukraine, to sessions focused on “the unity of the peoples of Russia and Belarus”.

Other sectors, though less overtly political, often repurpose standard extracurricular activities under the “Movement” banner, with educators aligning existing programmes to the organisation’s themes. Nonetheless, political elements can sporadically infiltrate even the apolitical areas, with students automatically involved by association. For example, schoolchildren involved in environmental activities may be asked to send letters to soldiers fighting in Ukraine.

Independent outlets note that the most active participants of the “Movement” often hail from underprivileged backgrounds, attracted by the availability of state-funded extracurricular options and the prospect of travelling to events in other regions. Such forums and festivals often present more ideologically charged content than the day-to-day activities of these new-era ‘pioneers’.

The “Znanie” society, another revitalised Soviet initiative, serves a purpose akin to the “Movement of the First”. Its relaunch in 2021 aimed to displace various opposition and independent educational endeavours, which had gained significant traction in Russia. Maxim Dreval, the young entrepreneur behind Foxford, one of Russia’s most successful educational startups, was tasked with revitalising the organisation to promote public education.

“Znanie” primarily offers online lectures and educational marathons. Although its target audience encompasses young individuals generally, not just schoolchildren, the lecture topics initially tended to be apolitical. However, the array of speakers has been predominantly composed of politicians, officials, and personnel from state corporations. Since February 2022, there has been a noticeable uptick in politically themed content and activities. Regular speakers now include “heroes of the special military operation” and the majority of lectures focus on Russian history, geopolitics, and international relations. The organisation has also initiated

activities in the occupied territories in Ukraine.

The intent of the “Movement” and “Znanie” is to permeate the extracurricular landscape of youth. The Russian government wants monopolise or exert more substantial federal oversight over existing initiatives in this domain, and phase out alternative offerings, integrating ideological content into originally non-political activities. This tactic may encounter resistance at the grassroots educational level, with schools potentially repurposing existing activities under new branding with minimal substantive change. But the comprehensive engagement of students in these projects is hard to evade. Consequently, the ideological saturation within these initiatives is likely to intensify over time.

Since 2021, the Kremlin has been embedding new roles in schools – director’s advisers for education and work with public organisations – with the mission to bolster students’ “civic and patriotic stances”. Initially, the rollout was gradual, with advisers introduced in only ten Russian regions by the end of 2021. However, this initiative has now expanded significantly, with advisers operating in over 25,000 of Russia’s 40,000 schools. They play a pivotal role in forming “Movement of the First” cells and engaging students in its activities.

New federal guidelines ensure that the new director’s advisers are chosen according to Kremlin criteria. They have thus become instrumental in the Kremlin’s strategy to strengthen the teaching ideology in schools, overseeing the execution of federally mandated educational plans and ensuring teacher compliance. Colloquially, these advisers are often referred to as “pioneer leaders,” reflecting their role in orchestrating activities reminiscent of Soviet-era patriotic education, and their perception as dynamic, externally influenced agents within the school ecosystem.

The successful integration of these roles in schools has prompted their introduction in technical colleges, with some regions even considering appointing veterans of the conflict in Ukraine to these positions, thereby deepening the ideological imprint on educational environments.

Higher education

By 2020, Russia had 724 universities, of which almost 70 per cent were state universities. Like private schools, non-state universities must obtain state accreditation to operate, allowing the government to exercise control over them.

Experts view 2023 as the apex of militarisation and ideologisation in higher education in Russia. The Kremlin has consistently used various repressive tools to weaken the country’s

most liberal universities, affecting state institutions such as the Higher School of Economics (HSE), the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences (MSEES), and institutions such as the European University at St Petersburg (EUSP).

The cutting of Western ties after the all-out invasion of Ukraine also had significant repercussions for the higher education system. Russia's 2022 decision to exit the Bologna process, a European effort to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher education, was a rejection of Western educational norms. The stated aim of this exit was for Russia to revert to a "unique Russian system of education."

A key tool for the ideologisation introduced across Russian universities, which started in September 2023, is the mandatory course "Fundamentals of Russian Statehood". The Russian Ministry of Higher Education mandated that this course take place in the first semester for all first-year bachelor's degree students. Nearly 6,000 individuals underwent retraining at a federal university to instruct in this new subject, with the majority already lecturers in history, philosophy, or economics.

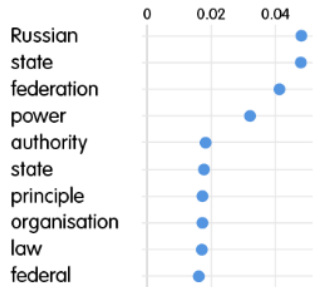
To accommodate different fields of study, three versions of the course's textbook were devised, each tailored to "technical", "humanities", or "general" specialties. Despite this differentiation, the core content remains consistent, varying primarily in the depth of topic exploration. The creation of the textbook was influenced by the ideologically charged organisation "DNA of Russia", associated with Sergei Kirienko. Contributors include pro-government political scientists, ex-officials, and Orthodox intellectuals linked to the Russian Orthodox Church.

The textbook's five chapters primarily explore Russia's history and geography from the perspective of Russia as a "state-civilisation" and delve into traits attributed to the 'Russian people' such as "solidarity and spiritual harmony" (collectivism), "unity", and "healthy conservatism". References to Russian conservative philosophers such as Berdyaev, Danilevsky, Leontiev, and Ilyin are prevalent, providing a foundation to advocate Russia's "civilisational confrontation" with the West and depict contemporary Western states as in decline.

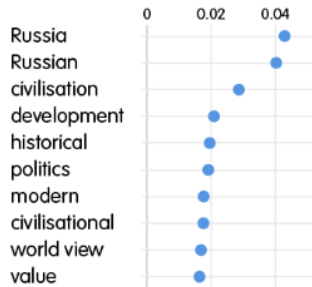
LDA analysis of the textbook reveals several ideologically driven topics: notably, the portrayal of Russia as a state-civilisation (topic three); the promotion of traditional values (topic five); and the interconnection of familial and national love with sovereignty (topic eight). These form distinct and coherent clusters. Less ideologically charged clusters focus on Russia's political (topic seven) and territorial organisation (topic ten). Remarkably, the topic on state civilisation emerges as one of the most emotionally charged (34.17 per cent) and predominantly positive (10.94 per cent).

LDA analysis of the “Fundamentals of Russian Statehood” textbook, 2023

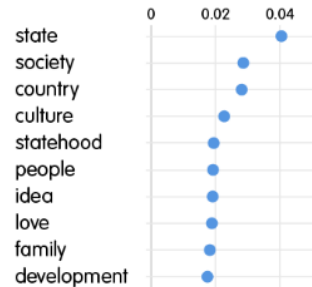
Political organisation of modern Russia



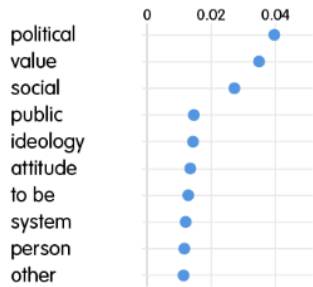
Russia as a state-civilisation



Family values and sovereignty



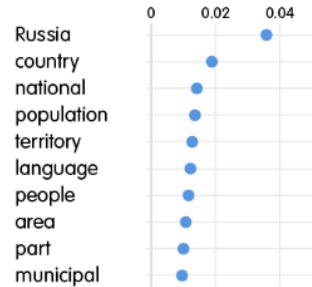
Determination between societal values and political system



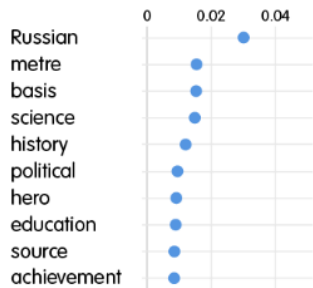
Russian people as traditional-values keepers



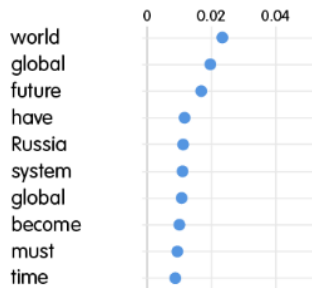
Territorial organisation of modern Russia



Development of science and education in Russia



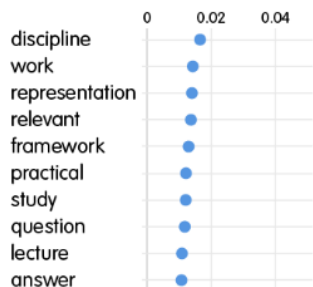
The role of Russia and traditional values in the world



International development problems and crises



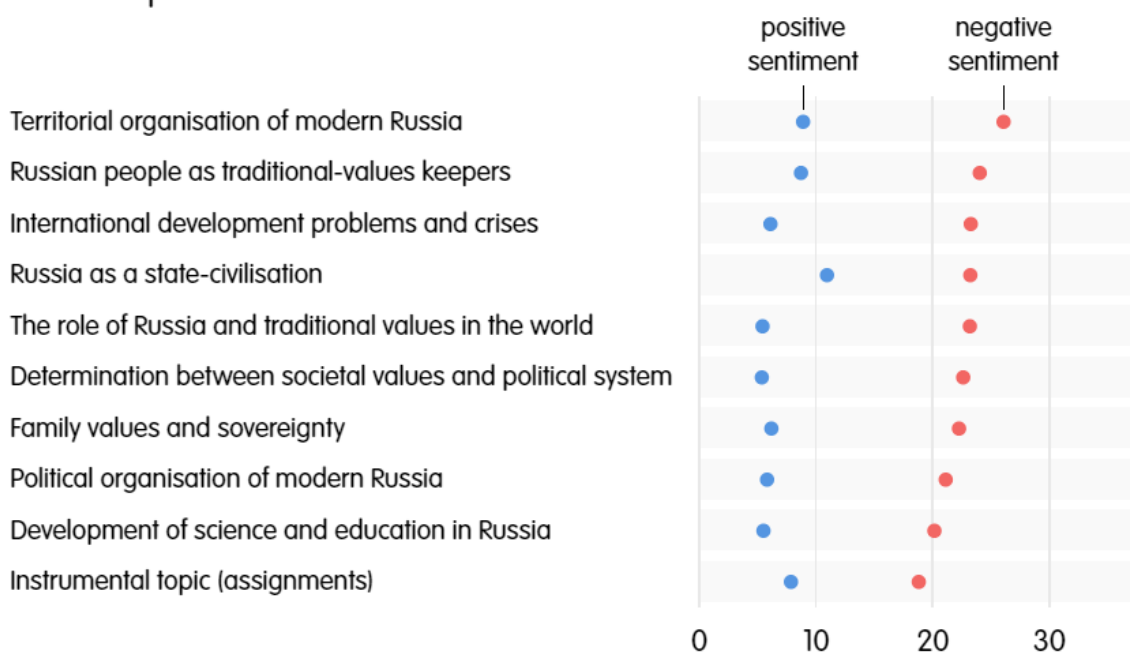
Instrumental topic (assignments)



10 topic Latent Dirichlet allocation model, top words in each topic.

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LBSA of the new “Fundamentals of Russian Statehood” textbook, 2023. In per cent



The lexicon-based sentiment analysis (LBSA).

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An official from a federal university has characterised^[1] the “Fundamentals” course as “encapsulating the Russian political class’s interpretation of Russia’s past, present, and future.” Independent media have suggested that the presidential administration views this course as a contemporary equivalent of “scientific communism” in the Soviet Union, which underpinned the historical mission of the proletariat and provided a grand narrative for the former superpower’s objective of building communism. But in “Fundamentals”, the concept of the proletariat is replaced by the notion of Russian civilisation, with the mission being the preservation of traditional values amid a clash with the West.

The structure and intent of the course seem to be an extension of the “Conversations” programme, prolonging its reach into higher education for an additional semester with

weekly lessons. Consequently, the impact of this university course on students may significantly depend on their prior engagement with ideologically driven content during their school years. If students had limited interaction with ideologised school projects, the influence of a semester-long university course on “Fundamentals” might be minimal.

Instead, the course serves to reinforce the perception that the narratives of “state-civilisation” propagated by the political and official domains are underpinned by a rigorous academic foundation also acknowledged in higher education settings. Therefore, while “Fundamentals” may support the Kremlin’s principal ideological narratives through various channels, it is less likely to serve as a standalone tool for ideological indoctrination.

There are several other strands to the reform of higher education. In 2023, a mandatory course called “Basics of Military Training” was introduced in higher-education institutions, teaching students weapon handling, grenade throwing, and first aid for combat injuries.

In March 2024, the Ministry of Education and Science announced the introduction of “History of Religions of Russia” in all Russian universities, a course designed to foster “traditional Russian spiritual and moral values and a pan-Russian civic identity.” The course, currently piloted in 28 universities, aims to complement existing Russian history courses. It is anticipated that theologians and possibly Russian Orthodox Church priests will teach this course, similar to a comparable course in schools.

Moreover, in 2023, one of Russia’s federal universities inaugurated the Higher Political School named after Ivan Ilyin, a philosopher often referenced by Putin. The school, led by ultraconservative philosopher Alexander Dugin, is tasked with developing a new educational programme based on “civilisational identity and traditional values”. This initiative suggests that Russian universities might introduce more ideologised subjects or integrate ideological components into classical humanities disciplines based on the outcome of the Dugin centre’s efforts.

Traditionally, Russian universities have informal political overseers linked with regional security bodies or the presidential administration. Commonly, these overseers occupy positions such as vice-rector for security or, less frequently, vice-rector for international affairs. From 2021 to 2022, all state universities also appointed vice-rectors for youth policy and educational work.

A significant post-February 2024 development in ideological infrastructure in universities is the establishment of “coordination centres for the formation of active citizenship and the prevention of extremism”. These centres collaborate with regional anti-terrorism committees, organised by the Federal Security Service, the internal state-security service.

Officially, these centres organise educational events, strategic sessions on Russian civic identity, discussions on interethnic relations, and celebrations such as the anniversary of Crimea’s annexation. However, their primary function has evolved into formalising and broadening previously informal practices of monitoring oppositional or non-conformist sentiments among students. Specifically, centre staff scrutinise students’ social media for potential ‘disinformation’ about the Russian military or other content considered discrediting by the authorities. By the end of 2023, such centres had been established in nearly all regions, based at leading universities.

Therefore, these centres serve as surveillance and suppression tools within the student community, supplementing the ideological framework enforced through new disciplines.

State regulation of social and private life

Schools and universities stand out as the most direct and manageable channels for the Kremlin to disseminate its revised ideological narrative. In other sectors, similar tools either lack the same widespread impact or are not as tightly controlled by the government. This context partly explains why conservative values and the emphasis on traditional family structures are being also propagated through restrictive legislation.

In 2023, Russia enacted a law prohibiting gender transition procedures. Subsequently, the “LGBT movement” was classified as an “extremist organisation” by the Russian justice ministry, effectively outlawing any public expression of LGBTQ+ identities. The Supreme Court of Russia upheld this classification, asserting that the LGBT movement, purportedly linked to the US, “propagates the ideology of destroying traditional values of family and marriage”. This stance has led to police raids on gay bars, intended to pressure these establishments to shut down.

Later in 2023, the momentum for imposing abortion restrictions began to build among Russian legislators. This consideration is especially striking because, even in the Soviet Union, abortion was legal and widespread. At the national level, Anna Kuznetsova, deputy speaker of the state Duma with known affiliations to the Russian Orthodox Church, spearheaded this initiative. Prior to this, several Russian regions had already announced various restrictions: some private clinics allegedly ‘voluntarily’ ceased offering abortion

services, while some other regions introduced fines for 'encouraging' or 'promoting' abortion.

However, during one of his campaign events in December Putin expressed opposition to restricting abortion, also pausing the gradual advance of conservatism in the regions. In his last presidential address, Putin focused on promoting large families, announcing several government initiatives aimed at supporting this goal.

Given the general unpopularity of abortion restrictions in Russian society, the Kremlin seems to prefer to incentivise large families over enforcing abortion bans. Instead of the 'stick', it is using the 'carrot' in the form of additional state support for large families, as well as to gradually introduce 'hidden' measures to impede abortions. For example, from September 2024, Russia will implement a new regulation that introduces a special accounting system for drugs used in medical abortions, likely complicating their distribution.

Moreover, state-supported organisations promoting large families and traditional values are actively growing in Russia. While their primary mission is to prevent divorce, they also develop "family studies" programmes that advocate for a patriarchal family structure, potentially marginalising women's role in society. The state Duma has even proposed incorporating family studies into school curriculums as part of social studies classes.

Intensifying cooperation with the global south

Elements of the Kremlin's renewed ideology, which positions Russia as the epicentre of a new anti-colonial movement, are primarily disseminated to the Russian public through state media and the educational infrastructure within schools and universities. Additionally, the Kremlin is expanding its ideological outreach by enhancing cooperation with countries in the global south, with a particular emphasis on Africa.

In 2023, Russia resumed the Russia-Africa Economic Forum after a break, touting participation from 48 nations despite Western pressure on African leaders not to attend. However, the representation level from several key African nations was notably lower than expected. The forum concluded with an action plan that consisted of 177 bullet points, outlining a partnership between Russia and Africa. But the plan was mainly made up of broad statements about enhancing cooperation with scant detail on specific economic or cultural projects.

Russia has also set up other platforms to engage with African nations, including the Russia-Africa Interparliamentary Forum. Spearheaded by the state Duma, this aims to foster legislative exchange between Russia and Africa – albeit with so far little effect. Another event,

the For the Freedom of Nations! forum, was organised by the United Russia political party and saw participation from countries across Africa, south America, and China. Despite its strong anti-colonial message, this forum too lacked substantive results – its primary outcome was a proposal to the UN General Assembly to designate 14 December as a day to remember victims of colonialism.

In addition to organising events, the Kremlin aims to bolster the visibility of African nations within the Russian public domain through cultural initiatives. A specific presidential directive mentions the inauguration of the Museum of African Culture in Moscow, alongside the arrangement of film festivals, exhibitions, and similar ventures throughout 2023 and 2024. The isolation of Russia from the West means that longstanding Russia-French and Russian-German cultural projects are no longer possible. Such collaborations are thus naturally pivoting towards other regions, including Africa. Nonetheless, the state publicly frames these efforts as a conscious shift towards embracing “non-Western culture”.

Another pragmatic dimension of deepening engagement with the global south is the notable expansion in the number of so-called Russia Houses established in these regions. The Russia Houses function as adjuncts to the Russian embassy, tasked with promoting Russian culture, science, and language primarily through events hosted on its premises. They run under the guidance of Rossotrudnichestvo, the Russian government agency responsible for implementing humanitarian cooperation projects abroad and promoting a positive image of Russia in other countries.

Before February 2022, the Russia Houses predominantly emerged in post-Soviet states and the European Union. But from 2022 to 2024, Russia inaugurated at least 12 new Russia Houses in global south countries, including Sudan, Mali, Algeria, South Africa, Angola, and an additional facility in Brazil.

Typically, establishing such a facility in a new country is a protracted process, contingent on forming intergovernmental accords. Nonetheless, given that some host nations might resist such agreements, the Rossotrudnichestvo federal agency has devised an alternative strategy via partnering with local NGOs. Consequently, these newly established Russia Houses adopt a non-state guise, diminishing their stature as Russian representations abroad and also curtailing potential state budget allocations.

An aspect of advancing the Kremlin’s revamped ideology in Africa might also involve the longstanding practice of offering African students education in Russian universities under government quotas, a tradition hailing from the Soviet era. After February 2022, the quota for such students surged two times, to 4,700 annually. Presuming these students, immersed in

Russian language and now encountering the ideological mechanisms within universities such as the “Fundamentals of Russian Statehood” course, will serve as conduits fostering closer ties between Russia and their home countries upon their return. However, this impact is likely deferred, and the present quota figures for these students in contemporary Russia remain at least five times less than those during the late-Soviet period.

Taken together, the existing infrastructure dedicated to propagating the Kremlin’s fresh anti-colonial stance appears under-developed. The orchestration of forums and cultural endeavours enables politicians and state media to exhibit a ‘pivot to the global south’ for domestic audiences. But these and other external influence mechanisms – even if augmented by the Kremlin – are unlikely to significantly enhance Russia’s image as an anti-colonial force.

The discourse surrounding the anti-colonial agenda, even if regularly addressed in forums with global south nations, will persist as a domestic-orientated tool. As ECFR’s Kadri Liik has highlighted, the disparity between narrative emphasis and genuine investment in Russia’s global south engagement could open the door for effective responses from EU countries.

Dealing with a more ideological Russia

Since February 2022, the Russian state has enhanced the role of ideology within Russia’s political framework, particularly in its foreign policy. The Kremlin has crafted a more nuanced and cohesive ideology, which revitalises previous narratives such as sovereignty, traditional values, and notions of “historical Russia”, while incorporating new elements, notably positioning Russia as a vanguard against colonialism.

This evolution implies that Western countries should prepare for Russian foreign policy actions increasingly rooted in this deep-seated ideology. This greater ideological component means that foreign decisions might appear less rational and more emotionally charged. The West should be vigilant and ready for unforeseen moves by Russia, akin to the unexpected full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The Kremlin has effectively established a comprehensive infrastructure to instil its ideology, particularly focusing on the educational sector. This indoctrination, combined with a crackdown on dissent, is poised to enhance the population’s loyalty to the regime and reduce the likelihood of regime change brought about by grassroots protests. In the coming decade or more, the Kremlin might successfully cultivate ‘performative support’, where the populace actively engages in state-endorsed and militaristic initiatives, reflecting a deeper ideological alignment with the government.

The increased ideological indoctrination of Russia's political elites and the general public is likely to diminish the chances of restoring relations between Russia and the EU, even when Putin leaves office. The Kremlin's extensive ideological grooming of the youth and new demands for political elites to align more closely with state ideology may lead to a pervasive resistance to Western influences across various sectors, including in more unexpected places such as healthcare and social services. This shift could create long-term barriers to engagement and collaboration between Russia and the West.

It will be very difficult for Western actors to counter these trends in Russia. Given the Kremlin's stringent measures against Western influences within Russia, including humanitarian and cultural engagement efforts, the EU and its member states should consider supporting proxy projects that aim to mitigate indoctrination and anti-Western sentiment among Russian youth. These projects would operate indirectly, perhaps through intermediaries in former Soviet states such as Armenia, Georgia, and Kazakhstan, or via Russian organisations that have relocated to the EU. They could adapt the Erasmus+ programme, supporting Russian students in pro-Western universities in the post-Soviet space, rather than directly in Western institutions. The EU could enhance this strategy by regularly communicating to the Russian population that the West remains open to Russians, with the hope of fostering long-term engagement and understanding.

Another possible way to influence Russian society is through the Russian diaspora. The Russian regime's ideology is beginning to impinge on even personal and family spheres, and imposing stricter controls on those with past Western engagements. These trends will likely increase the inclination to emigrate among the nation's most qualified professionals and even certain government officials in economic sectors. European countries have a strategic opportunity to design specialised programmes aimed at facilitating these individuals' transfer to the West. These initiatives could include comprehensive visa support, career transition services, and recognition of their qualifications and experiences, thereby enabling them to continue their professional journeys in a new environment. This approach not only offers sanctuary for these individuals, but also enriches the receiving countries with valuable expertise and insights.

As Kadri Liik has noted, the West can also counter Russia's anti-colonial ideology. Despite the Kremlin's efforts to weave anti-colonial rhetoric into its ideology, this strategy is largely aimed at a domestic audience and is unlikely to significantly influence countries in the global south. The Kremlin may continue to seek an international 'anti-colonial' front, including efforts at the UN. However, the EU and Western nations can counteract this influence by offering these countries practical, economic, and trade-orientated incentives that provide tangible benefits

over ideological alignment.

Over the next six years, during which Putin will continue to hold the presidency, the level of ideologisation by the Russian regime will inevitably intensify. The Kremlin will increasingly justify its foreign policy decisions with pseudo-historical and “civilisational” arguments while ramping up domestic repression and state intrusion into Russians’ private lives. Ultimately, this will solidify the three pillars of the renewed ideology – “state-civilisation”, “the citizen serves the state”, and the “new anti-colonialism”. The supporting infrastructure will help the Kremlin to more convincingly portray the conflict in Ukraine not merely as a territorial war, but as part of a “global spiritual confrontation” between Russia and the West.

This increased ideologisation is likely to garner “performative support” from the population, particularly outside major cities, thereby enhancing the regime’s long-term stability. However, the growing ideologisation, especially in matters of private life, will likely irritate Westernised elites and the non-state-affiliated, modernised middle class in metropolitan areas. The Kremlin will deal with such dissenters as it did with participants in the “almost naked” party – through repression. However, repression alone will not entirely quell the accumulated frustration. If the regime were to weaken, these discontented groups could drive an ideological backlash, potentially steering Russia back towards a more pro-Western and pro-European trajectory.

About the author

Mikhail Komin is a visiting fellow with the Wider Europe programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations. Prior to joining ECFR, he was a senior expert at the Moscow-based Center for Strategic Research, working on a project to develop a new socio-economic strategy for Russia. In 2019, he joined the Center for Advanced Governance, a think-tank conducting research on Russian economic, social, and digital policies and advocating for good governance, transparency, and open data.

Acknowledgments

The author extends his gratitude to the ECFR Wider Europe programme, especially to its director, Marie Dumoulin, for giving him the chance to author this report. Additionally, the author wishes to thank ECFR research director Jeremy Shapiro for his meticulous, rigorous, yet flexible editing. Last but not least, the author expresses heartfelt thanks to doctor of political science and his wife Viktoria Poltoratskaya, whose practical and emotional support was indispensable to the publication of this text. Speaking of emotional support, the author

cannot avoid mentioning his dog, Mr Churchill, who helped the author through some of the darkest times while working on this text. All errors remain the author's own.

[1] Russian university official, presentation at an ECFR workshop, Berlin, December 2023.

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