

Vladimir Putin's Alt-West

Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Ben Forney

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Liberalism is not a sin, it is a necessary part of a great whole [...] Liberalism has just as much right to exist as has the most moral conservatism; but I am attacking RUSSIAN liberalism; and I attack it for the simple reason that a Russian liberal is not a Russian liberal, he is a non-Russian liberal.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*

When Vladimir Putin became Russia's acting president on December 31, 1999, the country was in shambles. The sixty-plus year experiment with communism had left the country bankrupt in every sense of the word. Boris Yeltsin's flawed foray into liberalization during the 1990s had only further undermined state institutions. While the Russian people struggled under this political and economic turmoil, they also faced the greater challenge of forging a new national identity.

While there were those who harbored dreams of a liberal, democratic Russia modeled on the European and American systems, the country's new president had a different vision for Russia's future. Rather than be subsumed into the globalist West, Putin foresaw a Russia that was both culturally distinct and militarily powerful, a neo-Soviet empire competing with the U.S. in the post-Cold War world. Over the past seventeen years, he has pursued this vision, and in the process, he has transformed Russian society and the country's role in the global order.

Putin glorifies a Russian identity founded on religious values and a strong central government. By examining Putin's words and actions, it becomes clear that this is not merely his personal leadership style, but the early manifestations

of this century's ideological struggle between liberal democracy and autocratic traditionalism. As the liberal international order trembles under the weight of its own internal crises, Putin has emerged as the loudest and most subversive voice for an "Alt-West" model of governance and philosophy. His opposition to the liberal values-laden narrative of globalization has resonated with a large swathe of the world's population, left behind by the blind progress and "flattening" of the world. Together with authoritarian regimes like the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), populist movements like the UK Independence Party (UKIP), and influential nationalists like Steve Bannon, Putin is at the forefront of a worldwide backlash against the fundamental principles of liberalism itself.

If the champions of the liberal West are to respond, they must first understand the origins of Putin's ideology and the thinkers who influenced him. Putin draws inspiration from some of Russia's most prominent thinkers, as well as some of its most obscure dissidents. By delving into their works, one can begin to glean a sense of where Russia, and by extension, the illiberal world, is heading.

The Origins of Russian Identity

In 2014, Putin assigned Russia's regional governors three books to read as homework over the winter holiday: Vladimir Solovyov's "Justification of the Good," Nikolai Berdyaev's "The Philosophy of Inequality," and Ivan Ilyin's "Our Mission." Written in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, these works are a window into Putin's views on the Russian identity and Russia's place in the world. While the three writers themselves came from diverse backgrounds and held divergent beliefs, Putin has selectively drawn key principles from their works to shape and mold his policies.

The central element of Putin's philosophy is the uniqueness of Russian identity. "Russianness" blends both Eastern and Western civilizations, imbuing the Russian people with a character that has been fundamentally misunderstood by Europe and the West for centuries. Berdyaev wrote: "The Russian people is[sic] not a Western European people [...] The soul of the Russian people is a

complex and tangled soul, within it have clashed and intermixed two currents of world history, the Eastern and the Western.”¹ Ilyin elaborated: “[The] reason why Western Europe doesn’t know us is because the Slav-Russian contemplation of the world, of nature and of man, is alien to it. Western Europeans are driven by will and reason, Russians above all by their hearts and imaginations and only after that by will and reason.”²

These descriptions of Russian identity contrasted with the ethnic and race-based identities for most European countries at the time. For centuries, Russia’s vast territory was comprised of disparate and far flung ethnic groups. The country remained united by cultural and religious customs, not any shared ethnicity. Thus, these three philosophers’ works contain a sense of universal spirituality that applies the Russian Orthodox Church and its system of ethics as a unifying agent for the formation of the Russian identity.

Until the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the Russian Orthodox Church for ages had played a central role in the lives of the people and the state. In short, the Church helped define Russian culture. In the 19th century, while Europe was becoming increasingly secular, the Russian Orthodox Church continued to wield significant influence over Russian politicians and artists. Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, for example, were deeply religious, imbuing their literary works with explicit spiritual themes. As Berdyaev wrote, “The Russian people received a different religious upbringing than the peoples of the West. The Russian people was [sic] raised religiously in the cult of the saints and sanctity. The orthodox church gave the Russian people the possibility to carry out its [sic] grievous historical lot.”³

Ivan Ilyin was more elaborate in his description: “Orthodoxy nourished in Russia the sense of a citizen’s responsibility, that of an official before the Tsar and God, and most of all it consolidated the idea of a monarch, called and anointed, who would serve God [...] All humane reforms in Russian history

¹ Berdyaev, Nikolai. *The Philosophy of Inequality*. Translated by Fr. S. Janos. Frsj Publications. 2015. p. 14

² Ilyin, Ivan. *Against Russia*. Retrieved from <https://irussianity.wordpress.com/2015/01/07/against-russia/>.

³ Berdyaev p. 17

were inspired or suggested by Orthodoxy.”⁴ To thinkers like Ilyin, the Church provided the sole legitimate system of ethics on which to build Russian civilization.

In addition to Orthodox values, Russian identity is intertwined with the concept of a strong, central authority. Neither a welfare state nor a socialist utopia, this form of government would unite the nation by providing security and cultural cohesion. Though responding to Marxism, Ilyin and Berdyaev did not turn to a European or American style of liberalism. Rather, they proposed an authoritarian and inward-looking conservatism that could rebuke foreign attempts to influence Russian culture or threaten its physical boundaries. A deep-seated fear of Western incursions, including the memories of Napoleon’s 1812 invasion, instilled in the Russian psyche the belief that a strong state was the only way to keep their country secure and ideologically united. While the Bolsheviks offered similar assurances, their atheism rendered them essentially anti-Russian to thinkers like Berdyaev: “The state reflects a certain value, and it pursues certain great aims within the historical fate of peoples and of mankind.”⁵ For him, these “great aims” were not those of a global communist revolution, but of spiritual enlightenment and national strength – with Russian characteristics.

Putin has used the narrative of restoring and celebrating this Russian identity as the ideological framework to justify his continued rule. Steeped in the ethics of the Orthodox Church and controlled by a strong central authority, Putin’s view of the Russian soul permeates through his speeches and policies.

Putin’s Time in Office

While difficult to believe today, Putin was first elected as a non-ideological candidate. By 1999, Yeltsin had failed to provide prosperity and hope. Russians needed to shed the postpartum blues of the Soviet empire’s spectacular collapse

⁴ Ilyin, Ivan. “Ivan Ilyin on Orthodoxy.” Translated by Mark Hackard. Retrieved from <https://souloftheeast.org/2015/08/07/ivan-ilyin-on-orthodoxy/>

⁵ Berdyaev p. 69

and reconstruct a nation that took care of its own citizens and advanced its national interests. To this end, Putin governed as a pragmatist in the early years of his rule. Yet the longer he has been in power, particularly after his controversial return to the presidency in 2012, the more his rhetoric has relied on his favorite philosophers to justify his actions. Putin often quotes Solovyov, Berdyaev, and Ilyin during his speeches, and he frequently elaborates on the themes of their works.

As Russia's political and ideological leader, Putin is restoring a Russian identity based on the historical roots of spirituality and strong central authority. In 2013, Putin declared, "In order to maintain the nation's unity, people must develop a civic identity on the basis of shared values, a patriotic consciousness, civic responsibility and solidarity, respect for the law, and a sense of responsibility for their homeland's fate, without losing touch with their ethnic or religious roots."⁶

To promote these "religious roots," Putin has sought to make Russia the last bastion of conservative Christianity against a liberal, secular Europe. He was unabashedly theological: "We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilisation. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan."⁷

Western human rights groups have criticized Russia's attempts to crack down on homosexuality. Yet this has only further emboldened Russian conservatives, eager to present Russia as the antithesis of Western secularism. By championing religious values, Putin offers an alternative system of traditional, religious-based ethics to that of communism or progressive liberalism. Its momentum has grown since the reestablishment of the Russian Orthodox Church as a major force in society. Under Putin, the church has been transformed into a powerful

⁶ Putin, Vladimir. "Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club." September 19, 2013. Retrieved from <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/19243>

⁷ Ibid.

voice of conservatism. Through its increasing influence and close ties with the Kremlin, the church provides Putin with an unassailable claim to moral legitimacy.

For *political* legitimacy, Putin has relied on strong-arm tactics to weaken or intimidate the opposition. He has clamped down on the media and free speech and has steadily eroded the frail democratic institutions that were set up in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse. Liberal values are regarded as subversive and foreign, and liberal opposition figures are accused of collusion with the West in a system that increasingly equates allegiance to Putin with patriotism. For Putin, as for Dostoevsky's character in *The Idiot*, "a Russian liberal is not a Russian liberal, he is a non-Russian liberal." And as such, these "non-Russian liberals," from politicians to lawyers to journalists, are increasingly seen by the state as obstacles that need to be removed. Since Putin came to power, there have been dozens of high profile opposition figures who have died under mysterious circumstances and hundreds more thrown in jail.⁸

As Putin strengthened his grip on power, his propaganda machine promoted his narrative about Russia's unique place in the world. In Putin's mind, the West constantly threatens Russia's very cultural and national existence. In this narrative, the unipolar world order has allowed the U.S. to keep Russia weak and fragmented. This worldview obligates him to protect Russian interests, not just within the country's borders, but throughout the regions deemed to be of strategic interest, from the former Soviet republics, to the Middle East, and beyond.

For Putin, liberalism is an encroaching and destabilizing influence that undermines national governments and exports secular values around the world. The only way to combat this is by strengthening the regimes under Moscow's influence. As a result, the past ten years have seen Russia ramp up its military interventions overseas, beginning with the 2008 invasion of Georgia, to the annexation of Crimea, proxy war in Ukraine, and military involvement in Syria.

⁸ Kramer, Andrew E. "More of Kremlin's Opponents Are Ending Up Dead." *New York Times*. August 20, 2016. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/21/world/europe/moscow-kremlin-silence-critics-poison.html?_r=0

These actions illustrate that Putin has the confidence and influence to project power far beyond his borders.

The West's Challenge

What Putin has managed to do over the last seventeen years is not simply the work of an autocrat undermining the democratic structures of his country. It is the story of an ideologue planting the seeds for the great schism of the 21st century. Russia's meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, its support for anti-EU candidates in Europe, and its subversive measures against democratic institutions in Central Asia are harbinger of Putin's efforts to export his worldview. His ultimate goal goes beyond the legitimate aim of protecting Russia's national interests. Rather, Putin is driven by a desire to establish a new, multi-polar world order in which dominant powers control competing spheres of influence. In this system, traditional values and cultures would be preserved at the expense of globalization and neoliberal doctrine. In short, the U.S. would no longer be the sole superpower. The annexation of Crimea is a powerful symbol of this new order, for it was there, in the Black Sea resort of Yalta, that the current international system was conceived in 1945.

The 20th century was defined by the struggles against fascism and communism, both of which resulted in the death of millions. But the clashes of the 21st century will be between more subtle, and ultimately more persuasive, ideologies: democratic liberalism and autocratic traditionalism. The former stands for free trade, human rights, democratic values, and a global system of alliances and institutions that foster a rules-based ordering between nation-states. The latter is characterized by economic protectionism, nationalism, noninterference in other states' domestic affairs, competing spheres of influence, and religious values. The great question of our time is: Can these systems coexist?

Russia's most outspoken critic of America and its values, Alexander Dugin is a radical Russian writer and public intellectual who believes "modernity to be an absolute evil". To Dugin, humankind can only prosper if all forms of liberalism are erased. He has openly called for a global war against the U.S. and was

sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department in 2015 for inciting violence in Ukraine.

Among the many disturbing passages from Dugin's treatises, this one may be most ominous: "The future will be possible *if we manage to destroy the existing world* and to make our norms a reality."⁹ Yet this man, who so vociferously railed against the US, stated that "When Donald Trump won [...] I said this: 'Anti-Americanism is over.'"¹⁰ To Dugin, Trump's victory was the beginning of the end of the US-led world order, for the American people themselves had rejected the system they had built after World War II. It gave credence to Putin's argument that the unipolar system was finished and globalization was in decline.

As the tide of illiberalism rises, will the US and its allies be willing to make the case for preserving and refining the international order? The past seven decades have seen unprecedented global peace and prosperity, even as benefits have been unevenly distributed. Today, mired in its own myriad crises, Europe is not up to the challenge of defending these ideals. If a defense of democratic liberalism is to succeed, it must begin in the White House. A failure of American leadership now is to concede the near future to Putin's Alt-West. That is an alternative which is neither desirable nor inevitable.

* This study was supervised by Dr. Kim Jinwoo, Director, Office of Strategy and Analysis.

⁹ Dugin, Alexander. *Eurasian Mission: An Introduction to Neo-Eurasianism*. Arktos Media Ltd. 2014.

¹⁰ "Must See Russian Coverage of the Infowar." Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KRxOve4EKXg&t=427s>