Revanchism and Novorossiya: Russian Politics and Putin's Changing Strategy

Political Science Departmental Honors Thesis



Mher Arutyunyan

Faculty Advisor: Richard D. Anderson Jr.

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Department of Political Science
University of California, Los Angeles

Power does not corrupt. Fear corrupts… perhaps the fear of a loss of power.

John Steinbeck

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Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has fundamentally reconfigured the geopolitical landscape. Reversing years of atrophy and division, NATO and the Western world as a collective force have been consolidated and reinvigorated with a new spirit and a rediscovered purpose. Despite some high-profile intra-alliance disagreements and divisions threatening the cohesion of the Western bloc, Ukraine has seen robust support from a strong coalition of countries, even including initially reluctant players, like Germany, which were traditionally wary about upsetting relations with Russia (Sanger, Schmitt, and Cooper 2023).

Economic ills and an unexpectedly costly and brutal military campaign have also transformed Russian society and economy. Alongside the diplomatic, military, and economic aid provided to Ukraine, the Western powers have unleashed a sanctions regime of unprecedented magnitude against Russia. While the long-term impacts of the sanctions are difficult to predict, Russia has seen the wholesale retreat of Western corporations and investors from the country, in tandem with the banning of several major Russian banks from global financial systems like SWIFT (Sanger, Rappeport, and Stevis-Gridneff 2022). With a partial military mobilization, the broad and visible impact of the sanctions regime, and the hardening of the regime's authoritarian and conservative currents, Russian political society has been dealt deep and damaging blows, which will have a significant and likely long-term impact.

Rolling back years of diplomacy and economic ties, Russia has effectively been rendered a pariah state in the European continent[1]. Russia's invasion has shifted the overall mindset and strategic calculus of European leaders, with a renewed emphasis placed on hard power strategies, as discussion has transformed from considering "the size of tomatoes or the shape of bananas" to

[1] Western leaders and officials have strictly limited appearances and correspondences with their Russian counterparts (Sheftalovich and Gijs 2022).

"tanks and possibly F-16 fighter jets" (Cohen 2023). Russia's relationship with the US has been strained to an extent unseen since the Cuban Missile Crisis, with the Russian President making nuclear threats and ratcheting tensions across the globe (Faulconbridge 2022b). Despite Russia's rise in influence in parts of Asia and the Global South, its increasingly vulnerable sphere of influence has shrunk, with even previously dependable allies like Armenia showing early signs of a pivot away from their historic Eurasian partner (Troianovski 2023).

Ukraine and Russia both have taken tens of thousands of casualties in a brutal and violent war which has annihilated entire cities throughout Ukraine and rendered bustling metropoles into "dead cities" littered with artillery shells and corpses (Kramer and Prickett 2022). The devastation of Ukraine has inspired questions and apprehensions about the efficacy and future of the present world order. Geopolitics has taken center stage for political figures, analysts, pundits, and laypeople alike, who have become careful observers, using the jargon of diplomats and military officials around the dinner table.

In addition to the global explosion of interest in all-things Russia, questions about the role of the Russian Federation in the world system have become commonplace. The future of the present world order is being decided, with the extent of the role of Russia within that system being adjudicated both globally and within Russia. The very nature of Russia's state identity itself is being endlessly debated and consolidated within Russia and abroad as artillery shells and bombing runs ravage Ukraine.

This maelstrom has placed a singular figure in the spotlight of global attention: Russian President Vladimir Putin. An explosion of discourse and analyses have added to the existing canon, seeking to understand his motives, goals, and mental state. Mainstream news sites have been inundated with articles speculating about the President's health conditions, his taste in

interior decoration[2], and a litany of other topics (Sabin 2022). This media folly contributes to a larger, even scholarly body of work describing the catastrophe in Ukraine as "Putin's war" and positing hyper-individualistic explanations to the decision to invade and the course of Russian foreign policy more generally (*The Economist* 2022). Putin has become a mysterious antagonist, simultaneously a cold, calculating agent, and a raging irrational lunatic who has single-handedly brought the world to the brink of annihilation. Regardless of the differences in perspective, analyses have seemingly converged around the view that somewhere within the complex character of Putin is the key to understanding the war and Russia as a whole.

Research Question and Significance

Despite the endless attention paid to Russia and the personal figure of Vladimir Putin in relation to the country's foreign policy decision-making, there has been comparatively little effort expended to understand the broader political order which Putin is embedded in. The decision to become militarily involved in Ukraine, and then to fully invade in 2022 has often been treated in a limited context – analyzing the individual decisions as singular points in time, fully undertaken by Putin himself. However, this individualist approach neglects to contextualize the decisions, and fails to note the patterns in Russian discourse, elite politics, and domestic and foreign policy which accompany and set the parameters around which decisions are made.

In this paper I will seek to explain *how the domestic political order and associated discourse of Vladimir Putin's regime has changed in the years leading up to the 2022 Ukrainian War, and how those developments can explain the decision to invade Ukraine.*

My research will primarily utilize a qualitative mode of analysis. It is centered around the development of both rhetorical strategies as well as tangible institutional and political

[2] The Kremlin's comically large table has been a particularly fascinating topic for pundits.

developments which ground those changing discourses within power structures. Changes in the regime's makeup will be tracked by analyzing differences in the party lists of the dominant political party in power, United Russia, over the course of two critical election periods: 2016 and 2021. I will also reference developments and statements made by key figures during the war itself, in so far as they elucidate broader trends and explanatory variables.

The dimension of public support is a vital component in elaborating this causal chain. Despite the Russian Federation being described as an illiberal, authoritarian state, decision-making is still conducted with respect to domestic political strategy. Analyzing the ways in which public support has informed the drastic changes discussed herein will require some references to electoral returns, protest incidents, and public opinion polling. While Russia's authoritarian qualities make this information more difficult to glean than in a free and open democracy, various independent pollsters and research organizations like the Levada Center offer valid and reliable data frequently utilized and cited by the scholarly community.

This research question has direct relevance to the world security landscape. Explaining the broader trends that have enabled and influenced the direction of the Russian Federation can activate predictive potential to better anticipate the country's trajectory and better understand broader dynamics which shape decision-making and identity-building. Thus, the findings presented herein are crucial in both scholarly and policymaking contexts.

Contending Perspectives on Russia and its Foreign Policy

The foreign policy decision-making process of the Russian Federation under the leadership of President Putin has been the subject of a wealth of literature seeking to analyze the ideational and practical reasons for the regime's increasing hostility to the US, its neighboring countries, and the West writ large. Explanations for the nature of the decision-making process

and the underlying motives of state actors remain fiercely contested by foremost scholars. Furthermore, there are clear gaps in understanding the interplay between discourse, policy, and political contestation. Key developments in foreign and domestic policy alike pivot around this intersection point and explain the ultimate course of a polity.

The Realist school of thought has perhaps been the most prominent within the existing political science and international relations literature in examining and comprehending Russian foreign policy motivations. Realists have long held that the Kremlin is primarily driven by cold considerations of realpolitik, manifesting in a sensitivity towards "potential threats near [its] home territory" (Mearsheimer 2014, 82). Realist analysts have thus explained changes in Russian foreign policy since the 1990s as having resulted from the state's changing military and economic capabilities and from the Western powers' encroaching threat, embodied by the continued expansion of NATO and the EU (Lynch 2001, 23). Western intransigence around the issue of NATO enlargement and the alleged American political interference in the domestic affairs of countries bordering Russia, particularly in Ukraine and Georgia, have been cited by Realists as having greatly contributed to Putin's recent belligerence. While Realist analysts of Russia have succeeded in identifying and predicting the state's response to the actions of adversarial powers, they have been less adept at analyzing the inherent linkages between domestic and foreign politics which inform the ways in which the state responds to international crises. Furthermore, with the Russian Federation possessing the world's largest nuclear arsenal, the credibility of an offensive threat from NATO, a defensive alliance, is highly questionable despite Mearsheimer's emphasis on the critical importance of analyzing foreign policy decision-making with regard to how each actor defines their own security interests (Faulconbridge 2023). What Realists neglect to explain are the reasons and ways in which actors view their threats and

security interests, which are inextricably bound to leaders' and elites' domestic power plays and the ideational environment coloring the society.

Recent aggression by the Russian Federation vis-à-vis the West has also been analyzed by prominent scholars through the Constructivist lens. The increasingly confrontational Russian foreign policy is understood with reference to the peculiar "cultural turn" in Russian political discourse and statecraft in the 2010s, which is said to reflect a greater commitment to policies informed by a particular ideational framework emphasizing a distinctly Russian traditionalism (Robinson 2017). Actions taken by Western powers which are perceived by Russia as aggressive are said to actively provoke and animate an ideological narrative which casts the country as a vulnerable conservative power being marginalized by a liberal, immoral West (Roberts 2017, 30). The effects of this animation extend far beyond the realm of ideas, as they are claimed to have a direct impact on the actions taken by high-ranking officials. Thus, rather than focusing on state capabilities and the isolated actions of adversaries as the explanatory variables of Russian foreign policy changes, Constructivists have instead identified the intersection between perception and identity as the fundamental axis around which foreign policy pivots. Liberal examinations of Russian foreign policy occupy a much narrower segment of the existing scholarly literature than do Realist and Constructivist analyses. Both preeminent camps evidently agree on a clear shift in Russian foreign policy towards greater confrontation with the West beginning at some point during the Putin regime, with exact temporal estimates varying.

Analyzing the motivations of Russian foreign policy evolution also requires a study of the institutional mechanisms through which decisions are made. Discussions surrounding Russian foreign policy decision-making have centered on the question of centralization and responsiveness to public opinion. Some prominent scholars have posited a belief that foreign

policy is a field relegated solely to the whims of President Putin and a narrow set of advisors. Russian elites have gradually lost confidence in their ability to actively influence foreign policy decisions made by the President (Petrov and Gel'man 2019, 452). Nonetheless, researchers have been able to successfully identify a clear correlation between Russian public opinion and official Kremlin policy, which is additionally supported by President Putin's astounding personal popularity. The Russian public has gradually become more distrustful and disdainful of the West, with opinions shifting in line with perceived Western injustices like the Yugoslavia bombings and the Iraq War (Efimova and Strebkov 2020, 101–2). These shifts towards an overtly anti-American and militant perspective on international politics have also been observed among Russian elites, who have grown significantly more disillusioned and hostile towards the United States and its foreign policy machinations (Sokolov et al. 2018, 545).

The importance of political competition and bargaining over foreign policy has also seen treatment within the existing literature. Despite a focus on the Soviet period, a key theory developed by Anderson 1993 posits the central role of building stable constituencies around a particular defining vision of domestic and foreign policy, as competitors fight in the political arena to capture significant public and elite support to incorporate their visions into official policy (R. Anderson 1993, 61–62). There appear to be strong linkages between political competition and the actions undertaken by the Kremlin, with foreign policy decisions made by the regime fitting into a larger configuration of political order. The notion of President Putin making decisions detached from the political bargaining game is a figment of many analysts' imaginations. The existence of influential elite and public voices are critical in influencing the regime's decision-making and attempting to answer questions about what Putin is thinking is an exercise in futility conducted in a contextual vacuum.

Thus, though the scholarly community has analyzed the changes in Putin's discourse while also pondering the exact nature of Russian foreign policy decision-making, it has failed to deliver a perspective synthesizing the push-and-pull of elite politics and the resulting discursive and policy changes noted by researchers. Elucidating these dynamics opens the door to a broader understanding of Russia's trajectory and the nature of the perplexing shifts that analysts have sought to explain.

Putin's Regime: Russian Politics as Spotlighted by the War

To properly analyze Russian politics, one must first consider the contest between the key players and factions involved in the Kremlin's bid for control and political success. Many latent dynamics and unraveling changes have been accelerated and revealed in the weeks and months immediately following the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As Russian society and the political apparatus were each pushed to their limits, the voices of those most invested in maintaining and benefiting from the system's continued existence swelled to a roar.

Despite popular sentiment in Western countries viewing him as a radical outlier competing against pro-European liberals, Putin is a centrist who is often competing for support against candidates and forces who represent a more authoritarian, ideological perspective on ruling Russia. These disparate forces each consolidate around particular highlights of key issues and are held together by a loose worldview which explains the past, present, and future of Russia. Putin's political stratagem lies in balancing these factions and preventing any of them from eclipsing the combined weight of the others.

Attempting to strictly identify the various factions involved in political competition would imply that factions are static and specifically identifiable phenomena, instead of loose,

dynamic patchworks. The overarching key in understanding Russia lies in understanding the struggle for power and influence between these patchworks. Despite Russia's authoritarian and undemocratic system, elite and public interest groups fight for a larger share of the pie – consisting of both monetary gain and influence over official policymaking. Putin relies on the (at the very least) tacit support of a grouping of these key players to govern effectively. Powerful elites and laypeople working in important positions must be receptive to the conduct of the leader, or the state apparatus crumbles. Even in the closed and insular decision-making processes of the Soviet Union, different factions and individuals representing key interest groups and demographics still went public with their ideas and vied for power (R. Anderson 1993). In the Russian Federation, the all-encompassing game for power and influence continues to be fought throughout society. The concept of Putin operating unilaterally and ignoring the desires of those key voices which make up his ruling coalition is a shallow fiction. Even repression requires some level of coalitional support, and rulers even then do not have endless repressive capabilities.

Since the war has begun, the jockeying for power and influence among these factions has moved into the foreground. The Russian Federation has a storied past of high-profile elite conflicts, some of which have occasionally bled into the public eye. In these cases, sharp words and the weaponization of the justice system are usually enough to adjudicate and resolve these conflicts (Sakwa 2020, 107–8). However, as Russia has found itself mired in a ground war which has been started and perpetuated by questionable incumbent decision-making, these political struggles and intra-elite conflicts have become increasingly pitched. Both domestic allies and distant political forces have frequently alluded to the presence of important interest groups which influence policy vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine and beyond. While public denunciations and statements may be dismissed as unreliable and solely political in nature, the widespread

reference to these conflicts closely tracks the wisdom that many scholars have advanced regarding the importance of factional struggles in determining the course of policy and rhetoric.

Yevgeniy Prigozhin, an oligarch and occasional confidante of President Putin, has gained notoriety as the head of the brutal Wagner Group, a private military outfit participating in the most intense hotspots of the fighting in Ukraine. Prigozhin has taken full advantage of his newfound status in the public eye by frequently criticizing segments and key institutions of the incumbency. He made a particularly revelatory remark in November of 2022, complaining about the presence of "unfinished agents" of the liberal elites who were sabotaging the war effort ("Prigozhin accused St. Petersburg enterprises of sponsoring Ukrainian nationalists" 2022). He also later called for "urgent Stalinist repressions" against elites who were not sufficiently supportive of Moscow's invasion due to his apprehension over their influence on the policy line ("Rise of Russia Hardliners Sows Fear In Putin's Elite" 2022).

Similar statements have also been made by political outsiders like Igor 'Strelkov' Girkin, an infamous military commander who played a vital role in initiating violence in the Donbas in 2014. On his personal Telegram page, Girkin referred to an ongoing battle between a "patriotic group" and a "liberal oligarchic group" within the Kremlin, claiming that his arrest would be a harbinger of the liberals' victory, and his being sent to the front would be a harbinger of the patriots' victory (Kondratyeva 2022). Girkin has long lambasted the liberal elite and discussed their influence within the Kremlin's decision-making, openly calling for their destruction (Jensen 2014). Much to his jubilation, the infamous Strelkov was apparently summoned to the warzone at the end of 2022, and then later seemingly removed from the front - a microcosm of the push-pull politics that has defined the war and beyond ("Russian Propagandists: Warlord Girkin Sent to Frontline in Ukraine." 2022).

Joining Prigozhin and Girkin in their denunciations of the powerful and influential liberals within and outside the Kremlin is Western media darling Alexander Dugin. Dugin, strongly associated with the Eurasianist[3] wing of public discourse, has made several inflammatory statements calling for a consolidation of support behind the 'patriot' wing of the Kremlin, who would strengthen Russia and confront the West with renewed fervor. He has even gone so far as to identity the fifth and sixth columns, made up of those outside the Kremlin who are opposed to Putin, and those within the Kremlin who nominally support Putin but who urge him to take undertake liberal steps, respectively. Naturally, the so-called 'sixth column', the group embedded within the Kremlin who are said to be "almost dominant" in their presence within the elite and their influence on Putin's decision-making calculus, are identified by Dugin as being the most dangerous force - an "existential enemy" (Dugin 2017).

While the power plays over policy are not unique to Russia, they attain a greater degree of importance when contextualized by the ongoing nation and state building process occurring throughout the post-Soviet space. Though it has been over 30 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the nation-states which have emerged in its wake have each undertaken different nation-building projects to define themselves against the international arena that they have been thrust into. As the successor state of the USSR, which itself succeeded the Russian Empire, Russia has a distinctly relevant and critical task in articulating an identity as an independent state. As Eurasianists, liberals, and other forces battle over their visions of domestic and foreign policy, they are also each advancing a particular understanding of Russian identity and how that influences the way the country ought to relate to the rest of the world and to world history in a

[3] The 'Eurasianists' are those who proclaim Russia's distinct civilizational composition, and how that makes it fundamentally incompatible with the West.

more abstract sense. The clash of these various interest groups and their incorporation into decision-making circles by the incumbent regime is thus not only influencing state discourse and policy, but is also participating in the active creation and articulation of the meaning and destiny of Russia. This emerging, consolidated identity then influences policy prescriptions, as current and future leaders are brought up in an intellectual and political space which inculcates a distinct matrix of national priorities, concerns, and categories of importance.

Expectedly, Ukraine has also undergone a similar process since its independence in 1991. Analysts and scholars have extensively discussed the influence of nationalist forces in affecting Ukrainian policy and identity. The struggle between the often radically minded nationalist figures, the centrists, and those who have historically leaned towards cultural plurality and pro-Russian sympathies has been a frame of analysis in understanding Kyiv's decisions and overall outlook amidst the push-pull between monist and pluralist views of the country's state and future (Sakwa 2016). Analysts have failed to apply a similar framework to Russian politics and decision-making and have effectively conceded that either Russia or Ukraine are exceptional cases. However, despite obvious differences in the level of incumbent political consolidation, both Russia and Ukraine are forced to deal with the issue of identity and state construction in a new post-Soviet era, which has facilitated the emergence of a multitude of diverging public perspectives.

Too often, foreign and domestic policy are treated as separate domains with regards to both the conduct of a leader, as well as within the realm of political competition. Rather, members of the elite interested in accumulating power and sway over the official line communicate integrated grand strategies, consisting of a domestic social order and its extension into international politics, identifying threats, enemies, allies, and a preferred course for dealing

with these various categorizations. Foreign policy must be at least symbolically consistent with one's announced preference for a domestic political order in order to maintain cohesion and attract maximum public support (R. Anderson 1993, 70–71). With each candidate declaring a strategy for policy and a particular configuration of ideational strands, society is naturally inundated with a diverse variety of individual visions and converging factions. The politics of identity articulation, domestic policy, and foreign policy are all intertwined, as these grand strategies posit individual interpretations of Russian identity, flooding the contest with differing perspectives. As with all political contests, the struggle to maintain political power amidst the multiplicity of perspectives in Moscow is ultimately a fight for the political center of the various perspectives and ideologies advanced by elites and influential public voices. By occupying a median strategy, leaders consolidate support and tactically appeal to the most possible stakeholders (R. Anderson 1993, 83–85). Thus, surveying the changes between and within various blocs can offer a new lens through which to better understand Putin's decision-making.

The conventional wisdom forwarded by many 'Kremlinologists' often entails the cordoning off of foreign policy as a "sacred cow" which is off-limits in the public and elite debate over decision-making (Petrov and Gel'man 2019, 451). However, foreign policy is far from a separate distinction for those making the case for their chance at leadership. All broad strategies about a state's behavior inevitably involve said state's conduct abroad. Particularly in the case of Russia, geopolitics has been even uniquely important to its politics and discourse, and the thought of that realm existing in a hallowed Kremlin Hall outside the influence of highly committed and ideologically minded forces is ludicrous. Russian discourse and strategic thinking has historically been driven by a sense of a special mission for itself which is manifested in territorial and geopolitical terms (Kotkin 2016). Figures like Dugin have also expressed the

vitality of this connection between foreign policy and broader nation-building projects and social orders. In his mission to forward a revisionist geopolitical strategy for Russia, Dugin has been transparent about his hopes of regenerating the Russian nation at home through the "total - and totalitarian - transformation of the Russian state on the international scene" (Laruelle 2018, 97).

All of this is to say that foreign policy will always be perceived as a primary priority and component of a faction's overall strategy, and the incumbent regime will have to respect these wishes to avoid a breakdown of power and stability. The key task then for President Putin and other regime officials is to compile a stable coalition of various segments of the political arena, balance their relative power, and engage in discourse and policies which fall in line with their demands. In carefully surveying the words and actions of key incumbent players, it appears exceedingly clear that the underlying coalition sustaining the Kremlin has shifted, and its policies and increasingly erratic, violent words have changed along with it.

From Chubais to Borodai: 'Personnel is Policy'

The grand strategy expounded by President Putin during the early years of his rule differed vastly from the strategic vision which is advanced by the regime today. His stated relationship with the West, Russia's place in history and the world, and the steps the state must take to stabilize these factors have seen a marked change when compared to earlier periods. Despite the pronunciations by various Kremlinologists suggesting that Putin has pursued a "consistent, persistent policy", the evidence shows otherwise (Rumer 2022).

While President Putin's recent posturing as an illiberal figure determined to undermine the US-led liberal world order has attracted myriad headlines, his combative rhetoric emphasizing conservatism and resilience in the face of American hegemony is a recent

development. Hand-picked by the reform-minded Yeltsin, Putin historically identified himself as a centrist politician, neither fully embracing the liberal capitalist reforms advocated by the Russian right nor joining the Russian left in advocating for a restoration of a domestic order resembling that of the Soviet past (R. Anderson 2010, 402–3). This cautious and moderate approach at home was joined by a foreign policy which also emphasized a balanced attitude towards the West. Despite concerns being raised early in his term about the threat of NATO expansion, Putin ultimately eschewed open confrontation and pursued friendly relations with Western powers[4].

Beyond this, the reign of President Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev who followed were associated with a mimesis of stability domestically and internationally. Putin's bargain with the Russian public consisted of his ability to ensure that the country would not return to the "chaotic 90s". High-ranking officials frequently used the 90s as a "decade synonymous with social disorder and economic collapse" – a framing which evidently motivated the support of Putin by millions of Russians who were in the throes of societal malaise in the wake of the Soviet collapse. (Pyle 2021, 3). The term 'stability' was ubiquitous in the addresses of both Putin and Medvedev, the latter of whom went so far as to use the term nearly every day of his four year long presidency (R. Anderson 2013, 11). The decade following the Soviet collapse was a traumatic period of upheaval for Russian citizens, denoted by extreme financial destabilization and a fall in living standards, amounting to an extended economic collapse (Aslund and Djankov 2014, 96–102). While Putin sought to distance himself from the chaos of the period, he continued much of the same liberal economic programs spearheaded by Yeltsin, refusing to

[4] For example, Putin was the first head of state to call President Bush following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and later made key concessions to the US, such as the withdrawal of Russian forces from a surveillance post in Cuba (Glasser 2001).

reverse the transition to a market economy, and instead managing to assure macroeconomic stability and financial due diligence within the capitalist framework. This came as countless mainstream voices decried the new reforms and sought a return to collectivism.

While the effects of the economic collapse were most directly felt by the Russian public, the loss of territory and empire were no less dramatic and staggering. Moscow lost control over nearly a quarter of the Soviet Union's landmass and nearly half its population, leaving over 25 million ethnic Russians living outside the borders of the newly established Russian Federation (Diamant 2017). This spurred President Putin to famously describe the Soviet collapse as a "major geopolitical disaster of the 20th century" (Putin 2005). Beyond aiding greatly in the recovery from the economic collapse, Putin also prevented the further loss of Russian territory by forcefully reintegrating the Republic of Chechnya in 2000 after a brutal military campaign, reversing the precedent of secession which had annihilated the Soviet empire. Putin's support came from his identification with the halting of the conditions which were rapidly annihilating the Russian state, society, and economy. For years he was content with maintaining and refining the status quo without displaying an overtly ideological or revisionist tendency.

These early patterns are immensely at odds with Putin's recent behavior. Building upon the overt traditionalism and paternalism he has espoused since 2012, Putin has reneged on his earlier commitments to technocratic, moderate politics. Particularly since 2020, Putin has leaned instead into more conservative and imperialistic discourse, casting his regime and its associated goals in ideological terms, which necessitate the pursuance of policies which inherently disturb the stable status quo. Accompanying and informing this shift is his direct empowerment of militant voices and conservatives who were initially sidelined from the regime.

Liberal and moderate voices who were important constituent elements of Putin's ruling coalition have departed the ruling structures – either voluntarily or involuntarily. In opposition to the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Anatoly Chubais, perhaps the most prominent liberal voice in the regime, departed the state and the country (Troianovski 2022a). Chubais was a key architect of the post-Soviet economic structure, and his departure is emblematic of a larger liberal brain drain given his recognizability and long years of service as an early Russian policymaker.

Similar dynamics were clearly visible leading up to the war. Vladislav Surkov, ideological architect and key personal advisor to President Putin on Ukraine policy was instrumental in managing the behavior of the Donbas rebels and attempting to prevent an escalation which would draw Russia more directly into the conflict, even at the expense of the rebels' position in Eastern Ukraine (Sakwa 2016, 181, 284). Surkov was a key enemy of Eurasianists and would-be imperialists seeking to transform Russia into a firmly revanchist state with a more aggressive policy of violent power projection. Dugin in particular identified Surkov as being the leader of the aforementioned 'sixth column' of regime officials who were committing treason in their bid to influence policy in a more liberal, moderate direction (Laruelle 2018, 121, 205). In 2020, Surkov was fired from his instrumental position after a number of years of waning influence (Standish 2020). The coup de grace of the Surkov affair came in 2022, when the Kremlin infrastructure that he helped build and justify was mobilized against him in his alleged placement under house arrest for the embezzlement of funds intended to be transferred to Donbas rebels (Anglesey 2022).

The Surkov affair has several analogs throughout recent years. Former Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Kudrin was another of the prominent liberal policymakers which sought to advance the moderate socioeconomic development path instead of the 'patriotic' path favored by

militant figures. Kudrin had been vocal about Russian foreign policy, issuing a prescient warning in 2014 that deeper involvement in Ukraine would precipitate a "historic confrontation" which would hold back Russian development in all spheres (Sakwa 2016, 172). Kudrin was gradually squeezed out of the regime, first appointed as the Chairman of the Accounts Chamber in 2018 even as onlookers consistently floated him as a potential option for the position of Prime Minister. His appointment to this position signaled to observers that there would be a lack of serious liberal reform in the administration (Sakwa 2020, 207–8). After a brief tenure, Kudrin announced his resignation from the position and escaped the regime entirely, transitioning fully into the private sector (Marrow 2022).

While liberals yet exist within and without the Kremlin, they are increasingly pressured to fall in line to avoid detainment and removal. Career technocrats and moderates are often relegated to narrow policy spheres where they are expected to simply do their jobs without commenting on broader political currents (Prokopenko 2022). In this sense, even though the moderate voices have not been fully cleansed from the halls of power, they have been sidelined from participating in the full range of political discourse and greatly weakened as a result.

This expulsion of prominent moderate and liberal voices has not gone unnoticed from the factions and key figures critical of the Kremlin for previously not going far enough in Ukraine. While the annexation of Crimea was nearly universally lauded by the Russian public and elite, an influential strand of political actors were quite open in calling for the full integration of the Donbas into the borders of the Russian state, a policy proposal which Putin and other regime officials were vehemently opposed to[5] (Allison 2014, 1288–89). It is difficult to overstate the

[5] It is relevant to note that these maneuvers were being conducted precisely at the time when Vladislav Surkov was still the kingmaker on matters related to Russia's Ukraine policy, and as such, proposals to expand the Russian footprint in Eastern Ukraine were consistently rebuffed by the incumbent coalition.

immense disappointment of hardliners and rebel leaders to Putin's perceived inaction vis-à-vis the Donbas rebels. Instead of the Crimean annexation being the first phase of a broader, full-scale struggle against Ukraine and the entire Western political order, Putin seemed hesitant and non-committal (Laruelle 2018, 195). This perceived indecision even prompted some to openly complain that Putin had "betrayed" and "abandoned" both them and the rebels fighting in Eastern Ukraine. A full Russian military campaign in Ukraine was thought by many to be the ultimate culmination of the Crimean gambit, which would be judged according to the extent and success of further Russian aggression (Hoyle 2014).

Thus, the decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022 greatly appealed to these once-fringe voices, who have increasingly found themselves in the mainstream. Radical figures like Dugin have been thrust into the spotlight, fawning with support over Putin and being increasingly involved in crafting the vocabulary used by the president and other officials. Those like Dugin, ultranationalist pundit Alexander Prokhanov, and monarchist Konstantin Malofeev have become important consultants and ideological architects influencing the regime's decision-making calculus (Pertsev 2022). The previous support of the Kremlin by these individuals is frequently overstated by the Western media, which has often sought to identify Putin with hard-right ultranationalist figures. In the case of Dugin, his 2014 dismissal as the head of the Moscow State University's Department of Sociology of International Relations, and Putin's failure to follow through on Ukraine had effectively cast out Dugin from the important annals of power and left him grumbling about his "disappointment" with the President – a sentiment shared by his close confidante Prokhanov and rebel leader turned oppositionist Strelkov (Sonne 2014).

Besides the increase in proximity and support of more radical individuals vis-à-vis the Kremlin, traditional opposition figures have also begun to cozy up to the regime. Gennady

Zyuganov, head of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and perennial presidential contender, has served as the pivotal leader of Russia's opposition to both Putin and his predecessor Yeltsin. Since rising to prominence in the 90s amid the economic and political malaise surrounding Yeltsin, Zyuganov has consolidated support running on a broad platform consisting of economic statism combined with an aggressive, "cultural nationalistic" approach to domestic and foreign affairs (Flikke 1999, 275–76). Zyuganov has built his brand on attacking Putin from the 'left', criticizing his moderate, centrist tendencies, and seeking to push Russia into adopting a more aggressive and authoritarian political schema. In 2014, as events in Ukraine began to spiral out of control, Zyuganov termed the situation a "political Chernobyl" that had consequences "more dangerous than the nuclear one". Zyuganov urged the authorities to escalate Russian military adventurism with the goal of establishing a Russian protectorate elsewhere in Ukraine (R. Anderson 2017, 16–18). Zyuganov has historically been a consistent voice of harsh criticism against President Putin and associated elements. His statements and fiery speeches have torched every element of 'Putinism', from its foreign policy to its domestic political maneuvering. During constant electoral battles against United Russia, Zyuganov has criticized the entire power system, pointing to electoral irregularities as well as significant errors in policy, strategy, and ideology – or lack thereof ("Calling Foul On Election Results, Russia's Communist Party Hopes For Comeback" 2021).

Since the start of the war, however, Zyuganov has struck an altogether different tone. In a July 2022 interview, Zyuganov noted that he had visited that year's annual St Petersburg Economic Forum and listened to Putin's statements, later telling him that "for the first time [he] had no disagreements with him on any of the positions: [he] agrees with his assessments, conclusions, and proposals". While it may be easy to dismiss this as a byproduct of a 'rally

around the flag' effect limited to the President's decision to launch the war, Zyuganov's words and his recollection of the exchange reveal broad agreement on a variety of issues distant from the so-called 'Special Military Operation' (SMO). Zyuganov further added that Putin himself called capitalism a dead end and expressed that "there is nothing wrong with the idea of socialism". An optimistic Zyuganov concludes by mentioning the need to continue pestering the regime to adopt "a new course", after which "everything will be in order" (Polunin 2022). This immensely revealing interview demonstrates that Putin's behavior on a variety of issues altogether apart from the beginning of the SMO have moved closer to the line held by more militant, 'nationalistic' voices once relegated to a purely oppositionist position.

The existence and magnitude of these broader shifts in strategy and approach are corroborated by an examination of the political figures who have been newly added to Putin's party of power, United Russia. Created in December 2001, United Russia has served as the regime's pro-presidential dominant party, recruiting important voices, creating strongholds in regional political circuits, and structuring relations with the country's elite (Reuter 2019, 42–43). But in addition to serving as a mechanism to interact with and co-opt elite figures, dominant parties can also serve as a powerful avenue for symbolic representation. The personnel lists of parties like United Russia include figures who represent some aspect or strand of political life, creating an institutional linkage between said factions and the dominant issue positions they further and the incumbent leader or regime. Inclusion within the party is an exercise in communication – both to the general public and to narrower elite circles. These additions are more complex, subtle forms of communication and symbolism than high-profile and public PR moves, like Putin's decision to issue his New Year's Address in a military base surrounded by uniformed soldiers (The Moscow Times 2022). Just as shifts in diction and stagecraft indicate

changes in image and strategy, so can a shift in party membership. Thus, changes in party cadres accomplishes a dual function – both 'co-opting' elites by giving them a share in the status quo and communicating the party's approach and overall strategy to various populations.

An examination of changes to the United Russia's party lists can thus elucidate developments in Putin's coalition and grand strategy, while offering an insight into the issue positions and symbols most relevant to the Kremlin's perpetual power politics. The bicameral legislative branch of the Russian Federation is made up of the State Duma and the Federation Council. The Federation Council is composed of senators selected by high-ranking regional officials. The State Duma, on the other hand, consists of deputies elected to five year terms chosen in a parallel voting election system (Noble 2019, 56–57). The last two election cycles prior to the commencement of Russia's invasion of Ukraine occurred in 2016 and 2021. The interim five-year period is critical in analyzing the changes to the status-quo as they also encompass the 2020 constitutional amendments referendum, which resulted in significant changes to Russia's constitution, enshrining a conservative, traditionalist worldview (Blitt 2021). In comparing the United Russia party lists from 2016 to 2021, there are several notable additions indicative of the regime's transition to a more militant brand of politics. These additions are notable in that they center voices from groups previously marginalized from Kremlin politics and relegated to opposition parties or in some cases even armed struggle in Ukraine.

The most striking addition to the United Russia roster between the 2016 and 2021 elections is the infamous Alexander Borodai. Borodai has been a mainstay in renegade radical politics, previously serving as the Prime Minister of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (*BBC News* 2014). For many radical conservative, traditionalist, and neo-imperialist groups and figures like Prokhanov's Izborsky Club and the ubiquitous Dugin, Borodai served as the vital on

the ground contact which enabled them to directly involve themselves in the situation in Eastern Ukraine, in some cases actively recruiting fighters (Laruelle 2018, 197–98). Borodai's political resume has a much longer tail beyond the eruption of the 2014 civil war in Ukraine. He has been open about his role as a street fighter during the 1993 Constitutional Crisis, in which radical politicians of all stripes congregated in the besieged White House in armed resistance against then-President Yeltsin (de Waal 2014). It would not be an overstatement to say that Borodai has been one of the most pivotal individuals belonging to the vanguard of Russian fighters and politicians directly advocating for and fighting in the most aggressive and consequential Russian military campaigns. His long record of militancy also includes stints fighting alongside pro-Russian separatists in the Moldavan breakaway region of Transnistria, actively participating in the annexation of Crimea, and of course his claim to fame spearheading the chaos in the Donbas (Roth 2015). After years of advocating from the fringes of militant, radical politics for a change in the philosophy and policy line of the incumbent regime, Borodai found himself in the belly of the beast, included within the regime as a symbolic piece of the aggressive chimera it had become. In a final symbolic flourish, Borodai was appointed the Deputy Chairman of the State Duma Committee on the Commonwealth of Independent States, Eurasian Integration, and Relations with Compatriots, placing the Donbas warlord in a prime position to influence policy on 'relations with compatriots' and the bustling Kremlin movement to construct a broader Eurasian political entity ("Бородай Александр Юрьевич" 2021).

Borodai was joined by other new additions who were defined by their intimate links to the separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine. One of these figures, high-ranking military official Andrey Kartapolov, was essential in the Russian Federation's disinformation campaign surrounding the contested downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17, which crashed in Eastern

Ukraine in the summer of 2014. In response to allegations of Russian and/or separatist involvement in the shootdown of the commercial airliner, Kartapolov accused Ukraine of downing the aircraft. In a high-profile, televised press conference held by the Russian Ministry of Defense, Kartapolov presented apparently objective data showing a nearby presence of Ukrainian surface-to-air missile systems and a fighter jet which was alleged to be flying near the commercial airliner (Toal and O'Loughlin 2018). Kartapolov's claims and the data that was presented to substantiate them were found to be altogether fraudulent. A Dutch-led international investigation into the causes of the disaster, which led to the deaths of 298 civilians, conclusively found that separatists in Eastern Ukraine were responsible for the airliner's downing, which was struck by an antiaircraft missile system provided by the Russian military (Méheut 2022). Beyond his involvement in the MH17 incident, Kartapolov had also played a crucial role in the regime's rehabilitation of Joseph Stalin and the continued loosening of the separation of Church and state. In 2020, as Deputy Minister of Defense, Kartapolov publicly praised a controversial plan to include a mosaic which bore the face of Stalin in the new temple of the Armed Forces, itself a lavish monument to the increasingly close relationship between the Russian government and the Orthodox Church. ("Russian Deputy Defence Minister: 'Why Should We Be Ashamed of Stalin?'" 2020). While the plan was subsequently dropped alongside a similar proposed mosaic which would have depicted Putin and Defense Minister Shoigu, Kartapolov contributed to public outcry with his statements praising the Soviet dictator for having "restored religion in Russia" (Rozanskij 2020).

Kartapolov was just one of the several military officials added to United Russia who were publicly connected to the unfolding civil war in Ukraine. Another critical new addition was former military commander Andrey Gurulyov. Gurulyov sparked media attention for his

blustering statement in January 2023 calling for a nuclear strike on the United States. In September of 2022, he made a similar comment, threatening that Russia could deploy its nuclear arsenal and turn the United Kingdom into a "Martian desert" (Jackson 2023). As the deputy commander of the Southern Military District, Gurulyov oversaw military detachments which were alleged in 2018 by the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense to also include the militias of the Lugansk and Donetsk Peoples' Republics (Krechko and Golovin 2018). The Ukrainian MoD continues to allege that Gurulyov was one of the key Russian military officials directly involved in the fighting in the Donbas ("War Criminal, Lieutenant-General of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation Huruliov Andriy Viktorovych" 2017). While the full details and circumstances surrounding the involvement of the Russian military in Ukraine prior to the full-scale invasion in 2022 are still shrouded in mystery, the consistent and targeted allegations of the Ukrainian MoD, along with independent investigative inquiries suggest that Gurulyov was a key figure in organizing the Russian overseeing of the events in Ukraine (Komakhidze 2017).

Rounding out the list of new regime voices which were linked to the events in Eastern Ukraine are Rizvan Kurbanov and Nikolai Doluda. Kurbanov is not a first-time State Duma deputy, previously serving as one of the representatives of Crimea for the Communist Party of Russia ("Курбанов, Ризван Даниялович" 2019). As a Communist Deputy, Kurbanov was well-documented in his authorship and introduction of several pieces of legislation which abridged the rights and freedoms of citizens, including broad and nebulous laws restricting the behavior of 'foreign agents', cracking down on educational policy, and loosening the regulations surrounding politically motivated persecutions ("Kurbanov Rizvan" 2019). Kurbanov's previous affiliation with the Communist Party and Crimea, as well as his legislative record of authoritarian policies made him an attractive candidate for induction into the new United Russia.

Nikolai Doluda is also a posterchild for the Kremlin's program of integrating Crimea and bolstering military-political support among key interest groups. Doluda has been the ataman[6] of the Kuban Cossack Army since 2007. In 2019, President Putin appointed him as the ataman of the All-Russian Cossack Army, further empowering him as a significant military and community leader ("Кто такой Николай Долуда? Жизнь и мнения атамана Всероссийского казачьего войска" 2019). Cossack groups are notable for having directly participated in a variety of Russian conflicts since the Soviet collapse. They have emerged as significant paramilitary organizations, fighting in the Transnistrian war and being a powerful force in the separatist Georgian region of Abkhazia (Skinner 1994, 1018–19). Doluda had a critical role in addressing the mistakes of the Transnistrian and Abkhazian operations and assuring that Cossack forces acted as a unified front in the Crimean annexation. Under the command of Doluda, Cossack paramilitary detachments crossed into Ukrainian territory in February 2014 and continued to operate alongside Russian forces, defending seized government buildings and military checkpoints ("Как казаки в Крыму воевали: воспоминания участников операции" 2015). Leading into full-scale war in 2022, Cossacks were heavily involved in the fighting in Ukraine, with analysts particularly noting that the promotion of Doluda had played a significant role in bolstering Cossack recruitment drives for the Kremlin's war (Arnold 2022). Thus, the inclusion of Doluda within United Russia served as a symbol of the regime's new militancy while aiding in the tangible preparations for the coming war.

Also newly inducted into the brutalist halls of the State Duma was notorious political commentator Oleg Matveychev. Matveychev made Western news headlines for his March 2022 comments demanding "reparations" from the United States for damage done to Russia during the

[6] Ataman is a traditional title referring to Cossack leaders.

course of the Ukrainian war in the form of the return of Alaska and California's Fort Ross, along with a recognition of Russian control over the Antarctic (J. Davis 2022). While this may be perceived as frenzied wartime rhetoric meant to whip up chauvinism among the Russian public, Matveychev has long been a fringe commentator engaging in the most provocative and radical demonstrations and statements. In the 2000s, he was one of the administrators of a website called 'Mediaactivist', created to serve as a springboard for political dissent. Matveychev shared a series of provocative reports and polemics against leading liberal figures within and outside Russia, with a particularly hostile diatribe leveled against Anatoly Chubais, labeling him a traitor akin to Judas and calling on him to "choke [him]self". He concluded the tirade by calling on readers to decorate trees in Moscow with nooses as a grim, macabre act of protest (Vasilyeva 2005). Matveychev's violent pronunciations have been a continuous theme throughout his entire tenure as a public official. He again made Russian media headlines in 2020 when he erupted in an online rant, calling for violent reprisals against liberals, including by sentencing them to forced labor in "uranium mines". He even went so far as to declare that Russia needs "the 37th year", referring to a redux of the Stalinist Great Purge, which had begun throughout the Soviet Union in 1937 (Kozhedubov 2020). Matveychev's flagrant comments were unpalatable even for notorious provocateur Vladimir Zhirinovsky, who publicly called for his dismissal from his university position ("Жириновский призвал уволить профессора ВШЭ за пост 'Нужен 37-й год'" 2020). Matveychev's addition to United Russia is but one episode speaking to the dramatic revision of the Overton window of acceptable Russian discourse. A radical, violent figure like him has been made a legitimate, powerful voice within the annals of power.

While the Ukrainian War represents the most significant political move of the Kremlin in recent years, evidence has consistently pointed to an overall hardening in regime tolerance of

authoritarian measures surrounding issues which would ostensibly seem far detached from the war effort. While Putin's increasingly ideological and conservative rhetoric and policies upon his return to the presidency in 2012 have been covered extensively within the literature, Putin's politics from 2020-2022 have represented a rapid and significant acceleration of the earlier trend (Kaylan 2014, 11). Russia's notorious foreign agent law, first passed in May 2012 - just two months after Putin's return to the presidency - has seen several amendments which have greatly expanded its repressive potential. By 2017, the law was expanded to include media companies, by 2019 – individuals, and by 2021 – outlets that did so much as republish information said to be created by foreign agents (itself a nebulously defined term) (Salaru 2022). Following the start of the war in 2022, the foreign agent law was again amended to allow the targeting of individuals and collectives claimed to be under "foreign influence". The law also further limited the rights of apparent 'foreign agents', banning them from participation in official forums, civil service, electoral campaigns, and other vital fields of civic and public life ("Russia: New Restrictions for 'Foreign Agents'" 2022). With the consistent expansion and broadening of restrictive, anti-democratic legislation like the foreign agents law, the Kremlin has repeatedly emphasized and constructed an image of a fortress state, protected against all foreign influence and concerned solely with nativist interests.

Other hallmarks of the Putin regime's more conservative, traditionalist brand of politics have also steadily accelerated. The oft-discussed law on "nontraditional sexual relationships" was first adopted in 2013, again in the early years of Putin's conservative foray. After its passage, public discussions about homosexuality in places and media accessible to children were banned. The law was accompanied by a blasphemy law which criminalized the insulting of religion (Kramer 2013). The package amounted to a serious step towards a highly conservative

approach to public politics, subordinating individual rights and liberties to a religiously oriented conception of social order and shared morality. In 2022, the ban on 'propagandizing' nontraditional relationships to minors was expanded to encompass all public displays and discussions of 'nontraditional' relationships (Bubola 2022). The law was thus broadened to include adults as well as children, casting LGBTQ+ individuals entirely out of the public eye. The laws on foreign agents and LGBTQ+ expression are key components of a larger shift in the Kremlin's self-definition of Russia, which is distancing itself from any modicum of liberal and Western European aspirations.

Fighting Words: An Examination of the Putin Regime's Discursive Evolution

Alongside the tangible and material changes to both Putin's regime makeup and policy courses, influential individuals associated with the regime have also dramatically altered the discourse used to describe Russia and relations with the outside world. While language cannot exactly reveal the motivations behind a particular policy or development, it can show what regime figures want to communicate about their vision for Russia.

Putin's early emphasis on stability-focus rhetoric also colored the language that he used to describe relations with the United States and other Western countries. Even in infamous addresses like his 2008 speech to the Munich Conference on Security Policy, frequently cited by scholars as constituting an early revisionist inclination, Putin made sure to couch critiques of his Western counterparts in a language that was supportive of the overall framework of international law and norms. In Munich, Putin decried the "greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law" on the part of Western countries (Putin 2007). Even in his apparently most alarmingly revisionist statements, Putin's primary objections lay not in the international norms and laws upheld by the existing paradigm, but instead in the conduct of Western powers who

were accused of flagrantly violating them. In discussing his decision to intervene in Syria in support of President Bashar Al-Assad's regime, Putin in 2013 again presented Russian action as being fundamentally conservative in nature and emerging out of a reaction to Western wrongdoing. He framed the intervention as defending "the norms and principles of international law" and the "modern world order" (Putin 2013). Thus historically, Putin's discourse even in Munich was used as a signal identifying him as a conservative, status-quo world power.

This association with conservatism and legalism can be seen as a natural outgrowth of Putin's posturing with regard to domestic political issues, where he again was best described as a "liberal conservative" seeking to uphold key principles while also fitting into the overall liberal spirit of the times (Drozdova and Robinson 2019, 808–18). Even in 2014, following the annexation of Crimea, Putin stuck to a similar playbook. While obviously frustrated with Western misdeeds and intransigence, Putin entirely denied that the Crimean annexation was a violation of international norms and made what amounts to a legal argument citing the "Kosovo precedent" and sections from the United Nations Charter to justify the act (Putin 2014a). This was a clear element of consistency stretching back to 2008 in which Putin sought to paint himself and Russia as true defenders of the contemporary world order while sharply criticizing Western actions which were seen to have openly violated the very norms that they sought to uphold.

However, in recent addresses, particularly following the 2022 decision to invade Ukraine, Putin has been open and transparent about his convictions that the fixtures of the rules-based international order themselves are wrong and ill-equipped to serve as the backbone of interstate relations. In landmark addresses, such as his September 2022 speech following the annexation of the Donetsk, Lugansk, Kherson, and Zaporozhzhia regions, Putin has loudly and aggressively attacked the entire concept of the rules-based world order. The language used in the speech is

striking in comparison to Putin's address following the annexation of Crimea in 2014. In the fiery speech, Putin admonishes the rules-based order, raving "Where did that come from anyway? Who has ever seen these rules? Who agreed or approved them? Listen, this is just a lot of nonsense, utter deceit, double standards, or even triple standards! They must think we're stupid. Russia is a great thousand-year-old power, a whole civilization, and it is not going to live by such makeshift, false rules" (Putin 2022d). This recent language is further evidence of a dramatic change in the modus operandi of Putin. While he consistently used to rely on emphasizing the notion of Russia and his regime serving as an important conservative force reacting to Western violations of international norms, Putin's discourse has shifted to justifying outright revisionism and questioning the entire present world order as such.

These momentous discursive evolutions since 2014 can also be evidenced in the way that Putin describes Russia's relationship with the West. Since the inception of the Russian Federation, Russian officials and ideologues have consistently grappled with the country's place and role in world affairs, particularly in relation to the Western powers. The topic of the civilizational West and Russia's complicated dynamic with the countries and societies that encompass it has been a constant source of fierce debate and upheaval for essentially the entirety of Russian history going far beyond the post-Soviet era. Immediately following the collapse of the USSR, these complex questions and each figures' prescriptive responses became key elements of the budding state's political discourse. Much of Russian political society had an expectation that following the Soviet collapse, the West would be transformed into a pluralistic new "greater West" upon the inevitable inclusion of Russia within its ranks. Despite early flirtations with the concept of a Eurasian pivot, discussing the terms of Russia's integration within the Western ideological and ideational framework remained the ultimate goal. While

historical developments like NATO's bombing of Serbia added to Russians' growing frustration, the concept of Russia being a power foreign to the West was a marginal one within the policy debates of the new era (Sakwa 2020, 146–50).

As relations with European countries and the United States continued to deteriorate, the Putin era saw widespread mainstream reference to the geopolitical conception of Eurasia gain steam. The idea of Russian civilizational distinctness and its Eurasian nature and destiny have been the ideological pillars of a series of policies undertaken by the Putin regime to better integrate key countries into Moscow's sphere of influence (Adamsky 2019, 177). These projects included economic and military platforms for cooperation and consolidation, like the faltering Eurasian Economic Union and continued investment and commitment to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (Frear and Mazepus 2021, 1217). Yet even amidst Putin's developing relationships with Asian countries and regime officials' discursive nods to Russia's 'Eurasian-ness', Putin continued to regard Russia as a fundamentally European country. As relations with the West approached a breaking point during the 2014 Crimea Crisis, Putin made sure to note to observers that conjecture about Russia "supposedly turning its back on Europe" had no basis in reality and was "absolutely not the case" (Putin 2014b).

For despite how strained the relationship with Western leaders became, Putin, much of the Russian elite, and Russian civil society continued to have a substantial stated reverence for the West, at the very least as a civilization. Examinations of Kremlin-approved educational textbooks reveal a strong emphasis on modernization theory and a view of liberal democracy as the political system accompanying the "latest stage of human development". Lessons regarding the West took on an overtly positive tone, becoming "ideal models", even at the cost of justifying

colonialism. Though the schoolbooks made sure to denounce recent Western and US-led foreign policy machinations, they still presented the West as representing the apex of human sociopolitical development (Pan 2021, 8–9). While the views expressed in textbooks can certainly not be considered representative of Putin's or his coalition's, they offer a key insight into the beliefs and biases animating the words and actions of the Russian political and intellectual elite.

In contrast, Putin's recent public statements and addresses have seen the President hurl scornful invective against the West, even at the civilizational level. Whereas the political acts of European countries were historically held as being separate from their civilizational character within Russian political discourse, Putin's rhetoric has taken on an abrasive and inflammatory tone that conflates the two and sharply rebukes the West as such. In the Donetsk, Lugansk, Kherson, and Zaporozhzhia annexation speech, Putin opened fire at the Western historical track record, recounting the long European history of colonialism. After outlining the Western crimes of colonialism, genocide, and the slave trade, Putin portrays Russia as the leader of the "anti-colonial movement, which opened up opportunities for many peoples around the world to make progress". Putin thus draws a historical throughline from the colonial policies of yore and Western actions today, while drawing a similar line from Russian anti-colonialism to the present. He makes this historical connection overt, stating that "deep down, the Western elites have remained the same colonizers" (Putin 2022d). The previous discursive flourish of critiquing American foreign policy while expressing admiration and connection to the Western world has collapsed into an overt, hostile censure of the West and all it purports to stand for. The Western hypocrisy Putin has long criticized has morphed from momentary misdeeds into a fundamental feature of modern European history, which Russia is approaching from the exterior.

These harsh words can be thought of as signals to listeners and notably to states in the Global South, which is increasingly becoming a targeted fortress for Putin's Russia. As Putin highlights the colonial past and present of the West, regime officials make significant investments into improving relations with African states, seeking to strengthen their foothold in the continent (Bariyo, Steinhauser, and Faucon 2022). These maneuvers into Africa and the recent announcement of a "no limits" partnership with China are real policy evolutions which are the tangible components of the broader discursive and ideational shift recently forwarded by the Putin regime (Faulconbridge 2022a). While the early indications of a shift in this direction have been present in Putin's earlier rhetoric and decision-making, the full-scale divorce from the West and the committed insertion of the Russian Federation into the Global South is a new and remarkable development which has set Russia on a fundamentally different geopolitical route.

While to this point, I have mostly referenced the words of Vladimir Putin in discussing various discursive shifts, this phenomenon extends far beyond the President and encompasses a wide range of notable Russian figures. The language utilized by mainstream politicians has taken on a sharper, more militant, and anti-Western tone, in many cases eschewing any semblance of professionalism or standards of conduct. This change can be evidenced in not just those politicians who historically identified as members of the nationalist wings of the Russian political scene, but even by those who were generally regarded as moderates or in some cases as pro-Western democrats. The most striking example of this phenomenon is the case of former president Dmitry Medvedev. Throughout his tenure, Medvedev forwarded policies and espoused rhetoric which earnestly supported a conciliatory relationship with the West, speaking of a "common European home" and identifying largely with the pro-Western, moderately liberal strand of the political scene (Tsygankov 2014, 28–30). Medvedev's relative liberalism was

anathema to the influential security forces and other more conservative factions, who many suspect pressured Putin to sideline Medvedev and return to the presidency in 2012 (Sakwa 2020, 85–86). Critical in Putin's decision to reassume the presidency was also his severe and quite public disagreement with Medvedev's handling of the 2011 Western intervention into Libya. Medvedev had refused to condemn the West's use of force and emphasized his belief that the intervention was the "result of the Libyan leadership's absolutely intolerable behavior and the crimes that they have committed against their own people" (Myers 2015). Medvedev was thus willing to tolerate and even justify Western military activity which many in Russia saw as unacceptable and contrary to their expectations of the post-Cold War security order.

This lenient and moderate Medvedev was nowhere to be found as Russian tanks rolled into Ukrainian territory in 2022. Despite retreating from the top job in 2012, Medvedev has remained influential in the government, most recently appointed as Deputy Chairman of the Security Council in 2020. On the Security Council, Medvedev was originally envisioned as a balancing influence on Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, the Council's resident hawk (Galeotti 2020). However, Medvedev has himself transformed into a hawk, appropriating the language of the most radical nationalists in and around the Kremlin. In various eyebrow-raising rants on social media platform Telegram, Medvedev has stated that NATO should "repent before humanity and be dissolved as a criminal entity", denigrated enemies as "rabid pseudo-Ukrainian lapdogs with Russian last names, choking on their own toxic blood", and called for the capture of "Russian city" Kyiv. He has also made the West a frequent target of his vociferous posts, accusing Western countries of Russophobia and a desire to dominate Russia and re-educate the country "according to the patterns of the Anglo-Saxon world" ("Dmitry Medvedev in His Own Words: From Modernizing Liberal to Hateful Hawk | Russia Matters" 2023). The former president has

also leaned into religiously charged hateful rhetoric in describing the war effort and the Western backers of Ukraine. In a particularly unhinged rant on Telegram, he described Western officials as “narrow-minded philistines from a collapsed Western empire with drool dripping down from their chins from degeneration”, while also alluding to Western adversaries as having been “raped by the masters of darkness”. He concludes the rant by proclaiming that the goal of the Ukrainian invasion is to “stop the supreme ruler of hell, whatever name he uses – Satan, Lucifer, or Iblis” (Kostiushenko 2022). These verbal assaults are a far cry from the typical rhetoric employed by Medvedev. He, like Putin and the regime itself, has transformed into a virulently anti-West pugilist unburdened by the norms of diplomatic and international conduct.

Other regime officials have also undergone similar transformations, fundamentally altering their political image and their language. Another key hardliner chameleon has been Sergei Kiriyenko, a highly influential aide to President Putin. A former liberal serving in the Yeltsin regime, Kiriyenko has now become one of the war’s biggest cheerleaders, spearheading the propaganda efforts undertaken by the Kremlin. He has been critical in the state’s campaign of steadily wiping out the previously liberal, pro-Western educational curriculum, telling schoolteachers that they are “waging a ‘people’s war’ against the West by educating the youth in a patriotic way” (Faucon 2022).

This is all to say that Putin’s discursive evolution is far from an individual phenomenon. Rather, it is indicative of a larger shift in the political mainstream of Russia. With even the old reliable liberals casting off their modernizing, pro-Western skins and embracing a ‘patriotic’ and militant shell, the regime has morphed into a powerful ally of those voices who were advocating for Russia to take on a more assertive and violent approach to foreign and domestic policy. This can also be seen in the wide range of curious discursive and policy similarities between

incumbent officials and previous speeches of notable opposition candidates. These common themes can be interpreted as the regime following the course advocated by the more hardline, militant factions in the policy circuit. This is most clearly evidenced in Putin's end of February addresses laying the groundwork for and then announcing the 'Special Military Operation'. Despite Putin's litany of disagreements with oppositionists like Zyuganov vis-à-vis the historical legacy of the Soviet Union and the evaluations of its authorities' role in manifesting the conditions which have led to the current Ukrainian crisis, his framing of the events tracks closely with Zyuganov's analysis publicized years ahead of time. In the chilling watershed speech of February 24th, 2022, announcing the official launch of the invasion into Ukraine, Putin justifies the war in part by claiming that "leading NATO countries are supporting the far-right nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine" who are a historical continuation of "Hitler's accomplices" (Putin 2022b). This verbiage tracks closely with Zyuganov's consistent harangues in 2014 and 2015, which created a throughline between the Second World War and the actions of Ukrainian authorities after the 2014 Maidan revolution. On numerous occasions, Zyuganov has emphasized the direct relationship between "Banderists" and their "patrons in the West" , while comparing the alliance between them as being analogous to the "strategic coalition" between Bandera and his followers with Nazi forces during WW2 (Zyuganov 2014).

Beyond the similar historical analogies drawn by Putin and Zyuganov, Putin's increasingly widespread usage of the term 'Novorossiya' in describing the Southern and Eastern territories of Ukraine is also evidence of Putin's appropriation of the very words of the oppositionists. With roots in the eighteenth century, the term Novorossiya was historically used in reference to the territories that Catherine the Great seized from the Ottoman Empire. Since then, the term faded into obscurity before forcefully reemerging within the context of the

Russian intervention in Ukraine. Putin earlier used the term in a 2014 speech discussing the Russian-speaking population of Southern and Eastern Ukraine, but shied away from using the designation for several years. The militants of the Lugansk and Donetsk People's Republics appropriated the term, announcing their unification as the "Union of Novorossiya". Putin, even in statements addressed to the LPR and DPR, deliberately excluded the term. Marginalized from the Kremlin's rhetoric, Novorossiya became a mainstay in the lexicon of nationalists and imperial fetishists who continued to use the term in their addresses advocating for a more aggressive approach from the Kremlin. The concept effectively became a rallying cry to upend the status quo, bolster Russia's resolve to restore its great power status, and overthrow the liberal orthodoxy which was maligned as having held back the realization of Russia's true mission (Laruelle 2018, 196–97). Zyuganov has been one of the mainstream figures within the ranks of these forces consistently using the term. Since the early days of the Ukrainian crisis, Zyuganov has consistently referred to much of Ukraine as Novorossiya. In open letters and addresses, Zyuganov and other officials of the Communist Party consistently referred to Novorossiya in urging Putin to recognize the independence of the DPR and LPR (Zyuganov 2015).

In the lead-up to the Ukrainian War, Putin began gradually incorporating Novorossiya into the official vocabulary of the ruling elite. In his July 2021 article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", Putin referenced the term for the first time since 2014 as he outlined the Russian-ness of Crimea and the lands cradling the Black Sea (Putin 2021). **In the years between 2014 and 2021, 'Novorossiya' was entirely absent from presidential addresses, meeting transcripts, and phone calls.** This dramatic reemergence of the long-neglected term was merely a harbinger of its full-scale incorporation into the Kremlin lexicon. In the infamous February 21st, 2022 address announcing the official recognition of the Donetsk and Lugansk

People's Republics, Putin made a similar historical reference using the term. Putin then proceeded to denounce the attempts to "condemn these landmarks of history to oblivion" (Putin 2022a). His usage of Novorossiya only accelerated from there, evolving in usage from a purely historical reference into a term describing present realities. In September of 2022, for instance, Putin referenced the idea that the majority of the inhabitants of the "historical lands of Novorossiya do not want to live under the yoke of the neo-Nazi regime" (Putin 2022c). The nationalist mythmaking around Novorossiya thus evolved from an outsider pitch for a dramatic restructuring of the status quo into a vital element of the discourse used to justify and explain the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Despite a shrinkage of the distance between the 'great power chauvinists'' line and the Kremlin's line, the game of catch between the Kremlin and opposition figures is far from over. While the decision to invade Ukraine was lauded by much of the political scene, the Kremlin's war effort has become the subject of severe criticism, again exposing the realities and importance of competition in Russian politics. As the Russian war machine lumbered on, exasperated at the unexpected breadth of the Ukrainian resistance, Putin and leading military officials seemed content to maintain the status quo despite high-profile and humiliating routs on the battlefield. In early September of 2022, Zyuganov released a statement calling for a "maximum mobilization" of strength and resources (Reuters 2022a). While Kremlin officials initially maintained that mobilization was not on the docket, a partial military mobilization was announced just over a week after Zyuganov's statements. While the mobilization order was not necessarily a direct response to Zyuganov's critiques alone, the episode is indicative of the continuation of the same dynamics as evidenced before the war. The Kremlin has continued to balance factions even after

significant incorporation of the policies and language of leading conservative/nationalist forces in a bid to ensure that the imperialist brand of politics does not become fully hegemonic.

In fact, the Kremlin's conduct of the war itself serves as a microcosm of its approach to domestic politics. What initially began as a chaotic and disorganized effort eventually coagulated into a brutal, artillery-heavy attack led by the "butcher of Syria" General Sergey Surovikin. Surovikin's appointment came after a series of battlefield losses which led to heavy criticism from the great power front, especially from Wagner Group leader and rising power broker Yevgeny Prigozhin. Prigozhin, Chechnyan leader Ramzan Kadyrov, and other hardliners had severely critiqued the war effort up to that point. Upon the elevation of Surovikin to the top post, Prigozhin heaped flowery praise, calling him a "legendary figure" (Kasapoglu and Rough 2022). The war effort seemed to stabilize under Surovikin, who led a successful and orderly retreat from the city of Kherson while prudently focusing on bolstering defensive lines to prevent further Ukrainian gains.

Despite his popularity among war correspondents and militant politicians, as well as his seeming competence, Surovikin was unceremoniously demoted in early 2023. In his place came General Valery Gerasimov, Kremlin ally and the man in charge of the abortive initial invasion plan to seize Kyiv. Gerasimov himself had been a consistent target of intense criticism and ridicule by hawkish figures like Prizozhin and his ilk (Kurmanaev 2023a). Alongside Gerasimov's elevation came the promotion of Colonel-General Alexander Lapin to the position of Chief of Staff of the Russian ground forces. Prigozhin, Kadyrov, and countless other hawks had been very open in their extreme disapproval of Lapin and his performance during the war. Lapin was vociferously criticized for a multitude of defeats that the Russian forces had incurred

during his tenure. Kadyrov went so far as to call for Lapin to be stripped of his designations and sent to the front as a common soldier to atone for his misdeeds (Reuters 2023).

Prigozhin and co had gradually been ascending the ranks in terms of influence and status, both among the public and the elite, creating a potential threat to the regime's hold on power. Prigozhin's Wagner Group had been credited with numerous battlefield victories, coinciding with a violent public relations push publicizing videos of the execution of deserters. This rise in influence eventually led to a counterattack from the establishment figures of the Russian military, who attempted to wrest credit from the Wagner Group over a relatively minor military victory (Zygar 2023). A short time later, Prigozhin directly and openly challenged the establishment, issuing vitriolic tirades accusing the military leadership of depriving his Wagner forces of necessary ammunition. The squabble seemed to subside following a statement by the Defense Ministry denying the claims and indirectly suggesting that Prigozhin was compromising the unity of the war effort (Kurmanaev 2023b).

These petty spats of infighting are ultimately reflected in the Kremlin's bureaucratic shuffling. As a particular group grows in influence and popularity, the incumbent officials are careful and sure to stunt their growth, while selectively incorporating elements of their broader vision into the incumbent grand strategy. Thus, in peace and in war, the Kremlin continues the same practice of reacting to these waxes and wanes in influence. Like a skilled surfer, Putin manages the crests and troughs of the waves of public and elite opinion, sending the proper signals when necessary. This war is notable in so far as it represents the most significant policy

change[7] of Putin's new turn, and in the way it exposes the previously latent dynamics governing the court of the Red Square.

A Certain Idea of Russia[8]

All of the various elite groupings, individuals, and quasi-factions vying for power and influence within and outside the halls of the Kremlin are each involved in their own mythmaking projects, projecting some narrative explaining Russia and deriving a set of policy courses from that individual abstraction. These narratives are ever-changing and dynamic, constantly tuned and refined by their authors to fit the current socioeconomic and political currents. Putin incorporating elements of the narratives and strategies forwarded by those who for years found themselves outside the ruling coalition represents a significant shift in the political foundation of Putin's rule. The question of why political actors like Putin or Medvedev change course and rewrite their stable narrative is a critical one which can be afforded only a general answer.

A series of internal and external factors likely influenced the ruling elites' transformation and incorporation of chauvinistic figures and the lexicon they employed. All of them ultimately come down to the shortcomings of the existing forwarded narrative in changing times. The years since 2014 have been turbulent and uncertain for Russia. Despite an enormous swell in public support following the annexation of Crimea, 2014 and 2015 saw a Russian macroeconomic crisis which dampened the public mood (Viktorov and Abramov 2020, 488). This general pattern of economic stagnation, accompanied by the authorities' refusal to grant meaningful liberal and democratic concessions to the middle class had long been a recipe for instability, as most clearly

[7] While war is often analyzed as a separate arena, it still represents a public policy decision – with all the risks, opportunities, and calculations that adopting some policy entails. As such, the decision to go to war is fundamentally tied to ensuring and strengthening the ruling coalition's grip on power.
[8] Adapted from French statesman Charles de Gaulle's famous quote "All my life I have had a certain idea of France".

seen in the sudden explosion of enormous anti-Putin protest movements in 2011-2013, which had frightened the authorities to a significant degree (Kramer and Herszenhorn 2011).

While 2012 saw the oft-discussed 'conservative turn' in Putin's politics which was intended to solve this predicament, the years immediately leading up to 2022 featured similar strains. The economic crash of 2020 and the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, which hit Russia particularly hard[9], all contributed to a sense of malaise among the Russian public and elite, despite Putin's attempts at cautiously continuing his recent conservative foray (Stronski 2021). Putin's poll numbers steadily declined since 2019, and towards the end of 2021, 42% of respondents expressed that they would not wish to see Putin continue as President following the end of his current term, the highest mark recorded since the eve of the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Levada Center 2021). The 2021 election season also saw Zyuganov's Communist Party mount an impressive resurgence following their post-Crimea decline, gaining seats at the expense of United Russia (Coalson 2021). Thus, despite the regime's grip on power not necessarily being under imminent threat, the ruling elite were facing a downward trajectory and an economic and social malaise among the public and elite that was proving increasingly hard to overcome with the existing playbook. The Putin regime's earlier conservative overtures and the gradual escalation of his paternalistic politics also contributed to a situation in which his potential range of actions were already limited by the people closely allied to Putin whom he relied on to preserve political stability. Figures who previously fell far outside the Overton window were now more able to express their thoughts as Putin gradually and then suddenly shifted away from the 'liberal' orthodoxy.

[9] Russia at one point had the highest mortality rate in all of Europe and the second highest in Asia, after India.

All this is to say that Putin's 'certain idea' of Russia was growing increasingly unpopular throughout Russian society. While the 2012 conservative turn and the subsequent Crimean annexation temporarily ameliorated the issues faced by the governing faction, the cracks were beginning to show and those who Putin directly empowered through his uncorking of the conservative and imperialist vectors which were previously outside the mainstream were gaining ground in a time of unprecedented vulnerability. This precarious domestic political situation led Putin to dramatically reshape his image in and around 2021 by recruiting and co-opting those like Borodai who most represented the brand of politics which was growing in influence.

However, changing one's domestic political strategy does not come without its costs. First and foremost, a strategic change of this magnitude is necessarily an exercise in creative destruction. The elaboration of a new identity and political vision came at the expense of the wholescale uprooting of much of the moderately liberal previous approach which had continued to cling on, wounds and all. The previously dependable individuals in the liberal, moderate factions became sidelined, leaving the new factional players as the ones in prime position to influence policy decisions and critically, to **expect** policy change. While Putin can string together combative words denigrating the West, his policy must follow suit, otherwise the very individuals he has recruited will become disillusioned and join the exiled liberals in forcing a reorientation in the Kremlin or even a full regime change.

All roads led to Ukraine, which had defined Russia's foreign policy and identity for years. The 'little Russians' and their forced integration within Russia, or at the very least their 'demilitarization' and vicious battering into submission served as the prime method for delivering a massive victory and solidifying Putin's reign. Saddled with his new friends Borodai, Matveychev, and others, Putin was expected to fulfill their desires and live up to his projected

policies. With tank columns lining up outside Kyiv and Russian artillery hammering military and civilian installations alike, the transformation had been complete, although Putin had knowingly invited the chauvinist jackals into the Kremlin and tied his fate to them and the Ukrainian front.

While this dramatic new vision of a virulently anti-Western, anti-liberal, and combative Russia, along with the violent policy proposals which necessitate its preservation may have won Putin an opportunity to perpetuate his rule, the sum total of the strategy is not necessarily inherently popular with the Russian public. For a society long educated to believe that the liberal West represents the apogee of human development, and that Russians and Ukrainians are fraternal (albeit unequal) brothers, an aggressive war aimed at their inspirers and brothers understandably creates discord. Herein lies the key wartime paradox that endangers the coalition: the inevitable consequences of the aggressive and conservative cloak that the Putin regime donned to garner political support are potentially catastrophic to the Russian society that the new approach is meant to consolidate. While segments of the Russian public and elite may have appreciated the imperialist rhetoric, ultraconservative saber-rattling, and the promise of a quick victory against their junior brothers, the failure of the initial blitzkrieg made the regime susceptible to a breakdown if the increasingly brutal and grinding war provoked domestic disgust and disapproval. The public may support a calculated ‘Special Military Operation’ decapitating the neo-Nazi, Western-backed leadership which was supposedly oppressing its citizens, but the war dragging on undermines these talking points and risks pulling the public into a precarious war-weariness, especially as civilians feel the direct impacts of war on their own skin.

Even beyond the war, the regime’s certain idea of Russia requires institutions to corroborate the framing used by them to justify their rule. In the Russia of yore, tangible economic gains and regime reform were clear, identifiable markers of the incumbents’ credibility

and ability. As Putin and Medvedev promised stability and economic growth, the Russian public could clearly see the policies and effects which emanated from these promises and political identities. While conservative policies like the gay propaganda law suit a similar function, the regime ultimately needs a more credible, iconic voice to lend legitimacy and strength to its talking points, which have drifted further into the ideational, abstract, and spiritual.

The solution to this precarious wartime paradox and the broader issue of deliverables and credibility that Putin has relied on has been to bolster and lean on his relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church and its embattled Patriarch Kirill. While the great power chauvinist playbook was one which was well-known in Russia, Putin's refinement of his 'certain idea' drew on a familiar institutional source: the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). This state-Church Russian Concordat[10] has drawn significant attention, as Patriarch Kirill has made a litany of statements expressing that the war represents a "metaphysical" struggle against Western liberal values (Jenkins 2022). In the years following 2020, Putin's regime has been increasingly intertwined with the ROC, with initial disagreements giving way to borderline unqualified support from Kirill and other high-ranking clergymen. The Putin era saw a notable increase in the influence of the ROC and its proximity to Kremlin circles, with the Church gaining an institutional foothold in the decision-making processes encompassing a broad range of policy areas (Blitt 2011, 364–65). This integration only accelerated as Putin jettisoned his earlier approach for a more conservative one in 2012, laying the foundations of the paternalistic "morality politics" which would grow to dominate his myth-making and political maneuvers (Sharafutdinova 2014).

[10] Concordat refers to an 1801 agreement between Napoleon Bonaparte and the Pope, solidifying a mutually beneficial relationship between Church and state after a revolutionary period rife with anti-clerical policies.

Even still, the pro-Kremlin framing of the Ukrainian War is a far cry from the earlier positions of the ROC. Whereas the Church's relationship with the state was gradually becoming more entrenched, Kirill and other high-ranking Church officials still displayed significant resistance to the diktats of the ruling elite. As the Ukrainian crisis unfolded in 2014, Kirill resisted Putin's pressure to criticize the Ukrainian authorities and to provide ideological support for the Crimean annexation. Kirill notably did not appear at the Kremlin's ceremony celebrating the incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation, striking a generally neutral tone much to the chagrin of both the Kremlin and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Chawryło 2014). Kirill's initially noncommittal stance on Russia's actions in Ukraine created significant discord between the Church and the state, as Kirill attempted to balance his public support for the regime with its actions which were alienating his constituents and Orthodox churchgoers in Ukraine. Even as late as the end of 2017 saw Putin and Kirill giving clashing addresses each advancing different visions of how the Church should interact with the state: Putin emphasizing the Church's role in inspiring people to commit "heroic deeds for the Fatherland" and Kirill decrying the history of the Russian state in earlier eras infringing upon the Church's independence (Pertsev 2017).

However, these divisions retreated into the background beginning in 2020, with the announcement of a surprising set of constitutional amendments which legally enshrined and accelerated the incumbency's conservative turn. Among other significant provisions, the amendments included a reference to God at the request of the ROC, defined marriage as a "union of a man and a woman", forbid Russia from giving away part of its territory to a foreign power[11], and required Russia to support its compatriots abroad (Teague 2020, 306). The extension of

[11] This amendment appears clearly aimed at forever maintaining Crimea as a territory of the Russian Federation. It is also chillingly 'prescient' in retrospect, considering the Kremlin's annexation of Ukrainian regions just two years after the adoption of the reforms.

Russia's authority to include protecting and supporting Russians abroad also seems a further instrumentalization of the 'Russian World' concept, projecting power and authority far past the borders of Russian Federation. The enshrinement of traditional values in the constitution and the projection of the Russian World in Orthodox overtones thus links the ROC to the Kremlin as a key influencer involved in offering ideological cover to the regime's foreign policy machinations, especially as the Church has been granted the status of being a pivotal elaborator and "guardian of Russia's spiritual and moral identity" (Blitt 2021, 6).

The constitutional amendment affair entailed a recommitment to power projection by both the Kremlin and the ROC, following a period of mutual weakness. In 2018, the ROC broke communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate after the latter's decision to recognize the autocephaly of the Kyiv Patriarchate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, granting Ukraine a significant nation-building milestone, and further weakening the ROC's influence over Ukrainian parishes (Mankoff 2018). Thus, as the ROC lost direct mechanisms of pressure and influence over its defiant Ukrainian counterparts, the Church's leadership aligned with the Kremlin's imperative to muddy the principles of sovereignty which it claimed to uphold in favor of the elevation of Russia into an ideational conception instead of a traditional nation-state.

The signs of a fast-paced development of the Russian Concordat can also be seen in the 2021 National Security Strategy signed by President Putin. The National Security Strategy is a critical elaboration of Russia's strategic considerations which is updated every six years. The 2021 NSS contains a host of changes amounting to an approach geared for an era of intractable and irreconcilable confrontation with the West. Curiously, the strategy adopts a new priority: "the defense of traditional Russian spiritual-moral values", a framing which is accompanied by a long elaboration of what these values entail and the direct identification of the US and its allies

as being their primary threats. While language referring to “spiritual-moral values” was present in the previous 2015 NSS, the 2021 document elevates the field to a top priority of the Russian state, while also dedicating significantly more space laying out the terms in a much more strident fashion (Cooper 2021). The document in its entirety forms a quasi-manifesto meant to form the basis of the state’s actions until the new NSS in 2026. It firmly shuts the door on the liberal language inherited from the 1990s and instead emphasizes Russia’s distinct cultural and traditional background – often drawing on Orthodoxy as the basis for its uniqueness (Trenin 2021).

The most obvious displays of the Concordat’s new breadth can be seen following the commencement of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Beyond Kirill’s framing of the war as one which has metaphysical and spiritual significance, he has fully endorsed and repeated Putin’s justifications for starting the war, whitewashing the war to the Russian public. In December of 2022, Kirill met with children from the Donbas region of Ukraine, and mentioned that “Donbas is the front line of defense of the Russian World” which itself is “everywhere where people live, brought up in the traditions of Orthodoxy and in the traditions of Russian morality” (“Святейший Патриарх Кирилл встретился с детьми Донбасса” 2022). Here Kirill doubles down on the nebulous concept of the ‘Russian World’ even in the context of the war and its linkages with the idea of expanding Russia beyond its official borders. On many occasions, Kirill has run the gamut of ideological justifications for the war, sermonizing about the apparent genocide committed by Ukrainians in the Donbas and linking gay pride parades in the Ukrainian context to Russia’s struggle against the West (Smith 2022).

While the war could have been fought without the Church’s overt consent, Kirill’s endorsement christens Putin as the protector of a holy, conservative formulation of Russia.

National security decisions are not made in a contextual vacuum. They interface with and depend on the regime officials' forwarded visions for their societies. Putin's conservative entrenchment, along with his religiously charged policies and language have all contributed to the creation of a particular image of Russia – one which is messianic, pious, deeply conservative, and fundamentally impossible to encompass within usual nation-state borders. It defies demarcation itself. As Putin has leaned into this conservative messaging and image-building to curry political support, he has also had to confront the realities of protecting this meme of Russia. The battle for power with hawks and neo-imperialist forces made the invasion of Ukraine an immense opportunity for Putin and the larger regime to coronate themselves as the firm guardians and protectors of their Russian mimesis. Putin thus utilizes the Church's support to bolster his credibility as the preeminent conservative champion of Russia while also benefiting from the ROC's repetition of regime rhetoric to influence church-going citizens and beyond to support the President's actions, despite how contrary they may ostensibly seem from Christian ethics.

This close relationship also has significant ramifications for direct, tangible wartime considerations. Wars are policy decisions which unevenly impact the population. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is no different. Investigative analyses and regional leaders have highlighted the significant toll the war effort has had on the poorer, ethnic minority regions that make up much of Russia. For Russia is not a monolith – it is a complex, diverse country of many ethnic groups distinct from the 'russkie' – the term used to describe ethnic Russians. Russkie are but one group encompassed within the broader civic term 'rossiane', used to refer to inhabitants of the country. The way in which Russia's partial military mobilization has been conducted has exposed the regime's reliance on the country's non-russkie population, who often live in impoverished and economically undeveloped republics, like the far eastern republic of Buryatia.

While official data is scant, reports have emphasized the aggressive and excessive mobilization campaign in places like Buryatia, which take place often with little regard for military history and family status (Konstantinova 2022). The disproportionate impact on poor ethnic minorities has been significant and has caused hand-wringing and criticism from leading figures in many ethnic minority republics, like Dagestan, Sakha, Chechnya, and others (Troianovski 2022b). This emphasis on ethnic minorities is also evidenced in the co-optation of key regional and ethnic leaders like Ramzan Kadyrov and the Cossack Ataman Nikolai Doluda.

Putin and co rely on ethnic minorities precisely because the war's brutishness, contrasted with the general attitudes of the russkie as primed and influenced by decades of education and media, made the russkie public more apt to oppose war. The poorer, less educated, and more vulnerable minority groups drew Putin's attention as a fighting force which the regime could rely on to fight the war which was drawing Russia into a long-term confrontation. However, even as the russkie were largely spared from the war effort, their economic and political status still made their radicalization against the war a distinct possibility which could endanger Putin's power. The framing of the war as a 'metaphysical' one, which in Medvedev's own words, is being fought to stop 'Satan', may make the Orthodox russkie population less likely to act directly to compromise the war. This is especially true as Patriarch Kirill, a critically important influencer and public figure who enjoys respect as the highest religious authority in the land, expressly greenlights the war and preaches the talking points of those who chose to maim their fraternal neighbors. To serve wartime interests, Kirill also made a controversial statement asserting that Russian soldiers who fall in the war will have all their sins "wash[ed] away", a move clearly intended to further paint the war as a righteous holy struggle and to motivate Russians to enlist (Reuters 2022b).

The exploitation of Kirill and the ROC for political gains also explains the impetus for bewildering regime maneuvers like the proposed Christmas ceasefire in early 2023. Kirill first proposed the temporary ceasefire on January 7th, which Putin then officially declared. To the surprise of few, the ceasefire entirely failed to take hold (Baunov 2023). The motivation for issuing a Christmas ceasefire was linked to the broader imperative of the Putin regime to paint themselves as the true followers of Orthodoxy, with Ukrainians representing some schismatic, even satanic group who would reject an ostensibly sincere ceasefire offer offhand even on the holy day of Christmas. Kirill's clout among the Russian Orthodox population allows him to sermonize pro-war talking points and endorse the Kremlin's manipulations as a stopgap measure to slow and diminish the scale and breadth of anti-regime sentiments and mobilization.

This cozy relationship between Church and state is far from a novelty in the broader Russian historical context. The integral nature of the ROC to the state has long roots in Russian history, far before even the oft-discussed Imperial Russian triad of Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality (Riasanovsky 2005, 130–32). The antiquated historical term 'tsar' itself has its roots in the conferring of sacral, rather than secular authority, highlighting the historic blurring of the lines between religious and state power in Russia (R. Anderson 2020, 8–9).

Even during the Soviet era, despite the suffocating repression of religious institutions, the government and the ROC had crucial episodes of deep institutional collaboration as soon as their interests converged on key matters. A particularly relevant episode of this cooperation came in the years encompassing and immediately following the Second World War. This collective Church-state action again centered around the ideational and physical battlefield erupting in Ukraine. After a period of militant atheistic discourse and vicious and all-encompassing state crackdowns on the Church, Stalin met with high-ranking Church leadership in 1943 as the war

raged on, setting the stage for an appreciably softer policy against the ROC. This surprising policy reversal was motivated by the realization that the ROC could be utilized as "an instrument of Soviet dominance" over the Ukrainian churches and sects which were agitating for religious and secular independence. Here the ROC played a critical role in denying Ukrainian independence and sovereignty by attacking the religious institutional backings of their claims (N. Davis 2003, 34). As the situation developed in Ukraine and the Soviet authorities struggled against the nationalist forces therein, the ROC began to trumpet many of the claims made by the state. The substantial Ukrainian Autocephalous Church was branded by both the Soviet state as well as the ROC as a "fascist body" (N. Davis 2003, 38). Despite some nationalist Ukrainians collaborating with Nazi forces in a bid to claim independence, the identification of the Church as well as its adherents as fascist was a politically motivated hyperbole used to denigrate and undermine the claims of the Ukrainians, while significantly discrediting them to the Soviet public, who was still reeling from the brutal and traumatic existential battle against the Nazis. Then, the ROC was an institution fully compromised by the Soviet KGB, who controlled its internal administration and utilized it as a front for intelligence-gathering and ideological manipulation. The present day is not so different from that history, as declassified sources have shown that Kirill himself was a KGB agent, even having spied for the state in clandestine operations in European countries (Kilner 2023).

The historical throughlines are hard to ignore, as in the modern-day the Church has again been utilized to deny Ukrainian nationhood and fully endorse and legitimize the language used by state officials to identify large segments of the Ukrainian populace as Nazi sympathizers. In his New Year's address to commemorate the coming of 2023, Kirill described the events in Ukraine as "internecine strife", while praying that "divisions and schisms in the Orthodox

Church will cease", which he claims themselves were "a direct consequence of dangerous political actions against our Fatherland". Kirill then underscores the importance of the "reunification of our Church" since in his words "the spiritual unity of the Church is the key to the unity of… the people of all Russia" ("On New Year's Eve, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill performed a prayer singing for the new year in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior" 2022). These implicit denigrations of Ukrainian 'schismatics' and the total interlinking of religious and secular power has been a recurring theme of Kirill's. He has gone further in his statements, most notably in early 2023, where he directly linked the Soviet repressions on the ROC with the modern-day Ukrainian state's crackdowns on the Church. There, the "schismatic evil church authorities" are said by Kirill to be "fulfilling the evil devil's will", while being fully backed by state power ("Patriarchal Sermon on the 30th Week after Pentecost, Christmas Eve, after the Liturgy in the Dormition Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin" 2023).

These historical parallels drawn by Kirill also echo the general framing of the Ukrainian crisis by Vladimir Putin, particularly in Kirill's statements calling attention to how the Renovationist Church in the Soviet era was "artificially created by the godless authorities" which encroached upon the "genuine, gracious Russian Orthodox Church". Ultimately, Kirill still preaches a message of hope for Russia, sermonizing that "nowhere else in the world, not in any city, especially in any capital, are two hundred Christian churches being built today" ("Patriarchal Sermon on the 30th Week after Pentecost, Christmas Eve, after the Liturgy in the Dormition Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin" 2023). These statements amount to Kirill's creation of a religious metaphor mirroring Putin's secular one used to describe the Ukrainian crisis as one which is fundamentally a battle between the sacred, holy, legitimate Russia against an illegitimate Ukraine created by the incompetent and immoral USSR and propped up by the

satanic liberal powers of the West, interested in dividing and ultimately wrecking Russian civilization. This framing implicitly links support for Ukraine or even opposition against the war generally as being a vote for immorality and evil, despite the war being waged against a people with which Russia shares significant historical, religious, and ethnic ties.

Conclusion: Russia, its Borders, and its Future

Russia has undergone a series of profound and consequential changes, particularly in the years since 2020, culminating in the launch of a war which has proven to be the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the young 21st century. The long-term impacts of the war remain difficult to fully ascertain or predict, but Russian society has been dealt severe blows as the country faces an economic, diplomatic, and military maelstrom.

Underlying and motivating the decision-making of the incumbent regime has been the ever-present need to remain powerful and preeminent in domestic affairs. In the years leading up to the fateful February 2022 announcement of the SMO, the Putin regime had pivoted to a significantly more conservative, militant, and religious political image, backed up by groundbreaking shifts in the ruling coalition and the discourse utilized by state actors. The years since 2020 saw a severe exodus of notable liberals and moderates from the Kremlin, who were replaced by the most violent and aggressive figures inside and outside of the political mainstream. In tandem with these coalitional shifts came worrying and substantial changes in state discourse, with key officials like Putin and Medvedev notably shifting their tones to become more aggressive, overtly ideological, and virulently anti-West and anti-liberal. The caustic rants which became commonplace in elite circles grew from measured, albeit opportunistic conservatism vis-à-vis world affairs into open revisionism, as key leaders boldly questioned and undermined the building blocks of the international world order.

These evolutions were consistently and overtly supported by the Russian Orthodox Church and its leader Kirill, who gave ideological cover for the Kremlin to pursue its policy course with little regard to the Church's commitment to peace and Christian ethics. Reversing years of caution, the ROC, like the state itself, responded to momentary weakness by greenlighting and backing the Kremlin's war effort. Utilizing his platform as a key influencer, Patriarch Kirill especially became one of the top cheerleaders of Russia's new face, enthusiastically backing constitutional changes and policy proposals which blurred the lines between Church and state while joining Putin in undermining Ukrainians' claims to nationhood and sovereignty. This evolving Concordat represents a significant regression into an earlier period of Russian Church-state collusion, as even the arenas of collaboration have parallels in modern Russian history, which has a tendency of occurring the "first time as tragedy, the second as farce" (Marx 1963).

How successful this Russian turn will be in addressing the political difficulties which precipitated it remains to be seen. While major Russian cities have remained largely free from mass protests, the state's behavior, particularly its reliance on poor ethnic minorities has exposed an underlying fear and vulnerability on the part of Russian officials. Even with a powerful propaganda apparatus and the full support of institutions which remain pivotal in the daily lives of the russkie, most notably the ROC, the regime continues to fear the potential of a public souring of the mood surrounding the war. Despite at one point believing the war to be a critical means of securing his reign for the foreseeable future and appeasing the chauvinist voices newly incorporated into the ruling coalition, President Putin is in an increasingly more vulnerable position. His political fate has been tied to the developments on the long Ukrainian frontline, as he has faced unexpected challenges and the gradual antagonization of other imperialist figures

like Prigozhin, who have exploited the newly permissive intellectual and political environment to stake their political futures on an even more violent and militaristic view of Russia.

Elections and political strategies have consequences. Just as foreign policy decisions are not confined to a vacuum, neither are their effects and the overarching changes in political mythmaking. The Russian Federation's nation-building project has been a long, unstable, and immensely critical one which has significant ramifications for the world. The early hopes of a democratic Russia have long been dashed, and the expected post-Soviet Armageddon[12] of violence and revanchism which was thought to be 'averted', had only been delayed, waiting in the wings for the Russian elites' erstwhile political strategy to become untenable. The trajectory of Russia seems impossible to predict, but the impact of the regimes' new strategy hints at a dark future to come. With much of the more liberal Russian middle class, along with the comparatively moderate political voices which could help set a sensible course for Russian economic and political development fleeing to countries like Georgia, Armenia, and Dubai, a future of liberalization and peaceful interstate relations seems remote (Ebel and Ilyushina 2023).

Instead, the Russian World conception has been instrumentalized and physically realized, with Russia graduating from an ordinary state into an abstract idea. In a televised 2016 back and forth with a nine year old Russian boy, Putin pronounced that the borders of Russia "never end" (Trofimov 2022). This desire to expand Russia's reach and influence past its borders is one which has decisively been moved from the ideational into the physical world, with Russian state officials even admitting that they do not know where Russia's borders lie following the haphazard annexations occurring on its Western frontier (Brugen 2022). The ramifications of this

[12] This phraseology is borrowed from *Armageddon Averted*, the title of historian Stephen Kotkin's landmark work detailing the Soviet collapse and explaining why the disintegration of the Soviet Union did not precipitate a violent global disaster.

are difficult to overstate. A state's physical limits are critical in defining nations and creating a "political-biographical narrative" of the polity (B. Anderson 2006, 175). With the smearing of the border outward, and the lack of any cogent response to Ukraine's counteroffensives, which ostensibly crossed into Russia's sovereign territory (according to the maps and figures of Russia), the state has internalized and exported an imperial conception of world politics. Rather than accepting the terms of the present world order and remaining bounded in territorial space, Russia has instead taken tangible steps towards expansion and transformation into an amorphous pseudo-imperial body which can spill over into the space of its neighbors in wars of conquest with little regard for accepted and internationally recognized borders.

The tragedy lies in how these actions, so cynically linked to maintaining the corrupt incumbent regime, will go down in the palimpsest of Russian history, rewriting thirty years of ostensible progress and relative stasis and regressing to an atavistic imperialism which has decimated Ukraine and severely compromised the hopes of a bright Russian future.

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