

## COLD WAR 2.0: A WAR OF VALUES

How Russian President Vladimir Putin uses 'traditional values' to separate Russia from the West

Maxim Starchak

*Center for Support of International Initiatives (Poland)*  
*YGLN on Euro-Atlantic Security*



### The "Russian world"

According to Russia's political elite, Russia is not limited to the borders of the Russian Federation: Russia is only part of the Russian world, and the Russian world includes the Russian-speaking population of the former Soviet bloc, lost after 1991. That is why, according to President Vladimir Putin, the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was a geopolitical catastrophe.<sup>1</sup> The regret is not over the loss of the Soviet Union itself, but rather over the loss of so many Russians who ceased to be Russians when the USSR disintegrated. Worse, these Russians found themselves in states that were anti-Russian. To be a Russian, you have to be a patriot who loves his country and rejects the political and social values of the West; who likes order, stability and security; and who remembers his homeland's history and the brave deeds of his fathers and grandfathers during the Great Patriotic War. To be a Russian, you have to believe that only Russia is able to provide put peace and traditional conservative values. However, even if those Russians who found themselves in the newly independent states (NIS) met all of these criteria and continued to love the Russian homeland, they tended to be outvoted by non-Russian majorities. As a result, many of the newly independent states joined the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), imposed sanctions against the Russian Federation, and estranged themselves from Russia in every possible way. This, according to Putin, is the real problem: Russian-speaking people have been increasingly alienated from Russia itself.

By this logic, the Russian political elite considers what happened to Crimea in 2014 not an annexation, as it was characterized in the West, but rather the reunification of the Russian people. In speaking about Crimea, Putin recalled how Germany had been divided into the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, and suggested that Germans who remember the divided state would understand Russia's actions.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, the president forgot to mention that, in the German case, two sovereign states were reunited. He also forgot to mention that Crimea was part of another sovereign state — Ukraine — and that the government in Kiev did not approve the reunification.

But Putin's emphasis on Russian language and territory underscored the nationalism at work. And following this logic, all those territories that had been conquered by in the past by Russian imperial soldiers or Soviet soldiers and thus became a Russian-speaking territory, is today included in the goal of reuniting the Russian people. So one should not be surprised by the fears of Estonians, and one should not tell them not to worry. It is no secret that in the early 1990s there were Russian-speaking activists in the Estonian city of Narva who wanted to secede from the newly independent state of Estonia, create a breakaway Transnarovan republic that in the future could declare independence or be reunited with Russia. While they did not succeed in this project, there is a lingering concern in the Baltic countries of the Russian world that they will

become another project for reunification. While Putin says that Russia has no plans to attack NATO countries, and the Baltic states in particular,<sup>3</sup> this does not guarantee security. There were no plans to conquer the Crimea either. On the contrary: this case showed that sometimes the Russian rulers will, by force of circumstances, forget all agreements, ignore previous promises, and abandon assumptions of decent international behaviour. It is not surprising that the Baltic states are asking for American military bases and weapons to be deployed on their territory. A positive answer will protect them from the surprises of hybrid war.

For the political elite, Crimea has become de facto Russian now that the threat of the formation of an anti-Russian Crimea has ended. Anti-Russian does not mean struggling with Russia; it means that it makes choices not in favour of Russia, its policy, or its cultural and historical values. The protection of Russians has meant a divergence from humanitarian law. Putin says that he cares about the borders in Europe far less than he cares about the Russian people.<sup>4</sup> In fact, this unique horror can be seen in the Russian declaration of the right of occupation and annexation of Crimea under the pretext of protecting the Russian population. In fact, protecting the Russian understanding of security and its values has been set as a key governmental priority.

The way Russian political leaders relayed the message that Russians should remain Russian, if not within one state, but intrinsically, is as follows: the state can be different, but the Russian turf and Russian people should remain Russian (speak Russian, share the cultural and historical values of Russia, and be loyal to the Russian homeland). Russia defined itself as a community of Russians who share common historical memory, cultural and social values, speak Russian and support current policy. Importantly, this definition of the state does not assume a territorial boundary.

## History

The first attempts to articulate what “Russian values” are and how they are different from those in the West appeared in the mid-2000s. History has become one of these values. In general, the appeal to history is a feature of Russia. Topics such as the thousand-year history of the Russian state, the youth of Russian democracy (as an

excuse for its authoritarianism), the contribution of Russia to the fight against fascism, the role of Russia in German reunification, and the peaceful transformation of the Soviet regime are always brought up. The political elite used history to prove the difference between Russia and the West. And this had to be declared. In 2007, Putin bruted the idea that the teaching of history should be controlled in 2007, and the first single textbook of modern history was created after he had met with history teachers.<sup>5</sup> It is clear that for the president, history was proof of Russia’s power and strength, as well as its peaceful path to development, democracy, and security for its neighbours. That is why, for Russia, it became so important to fight against rewriting history. The struggle for a unified interpretation in of history in textbooks was important in order to consolidate the power of Russia — a country that made the main contribution to the victory over fascism, joined the UN Security Council, created an atomic bomb and the strongest army in Europe, and supported the peoples of Asia and Africa. At the same time, history should remind everyone that not everything was bad in the USSR, and that the years under communism were not spent in vain: during this era advances had been made in space research, and in the development of industry, agriculture, energy, and railways. Soviet citizens enjoyed free housing, medicine, and education, not to mention the top level of ballet, theatre and sport. In order to preserve and promote knowledge about the fundamental historical role of Russia, the Historical Society and Military-Historical Society were created in 2012.

One striking attempt to establish historical “truthfulness” occurred in 2007, in response to a decision by the Estonian government to move a Soviet-era war memorial from the centre of the capital, Tallinn, to a military cemetery. The reaction in Russia was furious. Russian youth organizations, as well as federal and regional politicians of various parties, all criticized Estonia, calling for a boycott of Estonian products and the severance of diplomatic relations.<sup>6</sup> As violence erupted in Tallinn, the Estonian embassy in Moscow was attacked, and the ambassador was harassed by protestors. Likewise, the Russian community was highly indignant when Ukraine decided to change the date of its celebration of the end of the war against the Nazis in 1945. Traditionally, Ukraine had celebrated the end of the war on the same date that

Russians celebrate the end of the Great Patriotic War — 9 May. This was the date in Soviet time zones when the Nazi surrender was received, and thus Victory Day in Russia is a day later than the date that other European countries use to mark Victory in Europe (VE) Day, 8 May, which was the date in Berlin when the surrender was issued. In 2015, however, Ukraine decided to abandon Victory Day celebrations and instead add a celebration on 8 May.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, the movement of the monument to the Soviet military in China in 1999, and the dismantling of a monument in Uzbekistan in 2013, did not cause a comparable reaction. This is the essence of the European orientation of Russian foreign policy. That is, in this context, if you do not share Russia's history, do not project the history of the USSR on the history of modern Russia, do not give the country credit, if you do not love Russia unconditionally, then you are against Russia. This means that you are not Russian, you are a stranger.

### “Family values”

Putin considers the West as an unprincipled, immoral society where homosexuals arrange parades, marry, and openly say that homosexuality is normal. The West is where people can permanently live in civil marriages and refuse to have children.<sup>8</sup> The West, for Russia's political elite, is also a place where a spouse can forfeit the right to see his or her child, a place where the child can be deprived of both parents due to inappropriate methods of upbringing, a place where adopted children from Russia were beaten, killed, or sent back to Russia, and Russian representatives were not even allowed to attend court during the investigation of such crimes.

The formation of traditional family relations as a value began with the justification of the need to form large families. For the first time, Putin addressed the issue of demography in 2006.<sup>9</sup> A program aimed at increasing the birth rate was included in the Address to the Federal Assembly for the first time, and on 1 January 2007 a maternity fund program came into effect. This program sought to increase the population by rewarding families for having two or more children. And it is not surprising that efforts to stage a gay pride parade in Moscow were thwarted by the government, which banned the parade in 2006 and for the seven years thereafter. When the gay community in Russia began to actively push back and

report cases of discrimination, violation of rights, and anti-gay violence, regional parliaments started enacting laws to fight against what they characterized as gay propaganda. In 2013, a federal law tellingly entitled "for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values" was enacted. The fact that Putin stressed that these laws were not aimed at homosexuals, but were an effort to encourage large families, is illustrative. Same-sex marriages will not deliver babies to the country.<sup>10</sup> In a similar way, Russia put forward several resolutions to the UN Human Rights Council which were aimed at promoting “traditional values,” and in 2012 cemented its image as a moral crusader by adopting a law in which one of its articles prohibited the adoption of Russian orphans by US citizens. In this way Russia has shielded itself from what it considers to be an unprincipled and immoral legal policy regarding adopted children by the United States.

### Spirituality

These differences revealed themselves after the arrest and trial of the punk group Pussy Riot following its scandalous act in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in February 2012. In 2013, a law on the protection of believers' sentiments was adopted. Pussy Riot's action was perceived as hooliganism based on religious hatred by one side, and as political performance by the other. For some, Pussy Riot were fools; for others, they were prisoners of conscience. Many in the West also criticized the disproportionate punishment imposed for the cathedral performance, and there were actions in support of Pussy Riot in many Western countries. Putin always had to hear criticism towards the sentence for the group members at meetings with the leaders of the West. Actions perceived as freedom of speech in the West were considered a mockery of Orthodox believers' sentiments in Russia. The believers' sentiments have become an integral part of modern Russian political discourse. In this situation, Putin also deemed the aggregate West as an opponent that was fostering soullessness.

### “Morality of politics”

President Putin routinely argues that Russia does not encroach on anybody's interests; it does not impose its patronage on anybody; it does not try to tell anyone what to do. Rather, Putin claims, Russia speaks about the protection of international law, about respect for national

sovereignty, and about autonomy and the identity of peoples.<sup>11</sup> According to Putin, Russian political culture is substantially different than the West, which imposes its patronage on others, deploys US military bases around the world, and expands NATO. The West preaches democracy, but criticizes democracy in Russia. Statements by Western officials concerned about the rights of certain groups in non-Western states are prominent. Russian politicians tended to speak confidently about Russia's adherence to international law and Moscow's respect for national sovereignty until 2014; after Crimea, there were fewer such speeches.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Putin keeps claiming that the UN is the main universal institution, the decisions of which are binding on all members, and Russia itself has always followed the resolutions of the UN Security Council.<sup>13</sup> In doing so, Russia stresses that it has not violated international laws, while the US has a discrediting experience of bombing Yugoslavia and invading Iraq without a UN Security Council resolution.

As for the independence and identity of peoples, Putin argues that the West is trying to spread democracy where it cannot be spread in the Western form, and is not taking into account cultural and historical issues.<sup>14</sup> Russia does

not consider the so-called Western model of democracy to have universal value. On this issue, Russia, although it does not directly oppose democracy, points out that there are limits and restrictions for such policies, emphasizing that, unlike the West, Russia has always respected cultural, historical, and religious features of countries. In his speeches, Putin complained that moral norms are being revised in other countries, and national traditions and differences between nations and cultures are being erased.<sup>15</sup> According to Putin, Russia is a country of morality and justice, unlike the West.

### Conclusion

In short, these are the building blocks of President Vladimir Putin's concept of "traditional values," the values of Russian men and Russian patriots and Orthodox faithful. These are values that, Putin argues, are not only substantially different from those of the West, but are also the values that are important counterweights to Western values. These Western values of freedom, democracy, and human rights now divide Russia and the West, and the differences have become a solid foundation for the internal justification of confrontation with the West.

### Endnotes

1. Vladimir Putin, "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation," Kremlin.ru, April 25, 2005. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>
2. Vladimir Putin, "Address by President of the Russian Federation," Kremlin.ru, March 18, 2014. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>
3. "Meeting of the Valdai international discussion club," Kremlin.ru, October 27, 2016. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53151>
4. "Interview to German newspaper Bild. Part 1," Kremlin.ru, January 11, 2016. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51154>.
5. E. Vyazemsky, "A unified history textbook: pedagogical aspects of the problem," *Problems of Modern Education* 6 (2013), 14.
6. Regions.ru, April 28, 2007.
7. Lenta.ru, May 9, 2017.
8. "Meeting of the Valdai international discussion club," Kremlin.ru, September 19, 2013. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>.

9. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, May 11, 2006.
10. "No harassment of gays in Russia, Putin says in interview with Oliver Stone," TASS, June 14, 2017. <http://tass.com/politics/951188>.
11. "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," Kremlin.ru, December 12, 2013. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825>.
12. "Russia stands for the supremacy of international law and respect for territorial integrity, sovereignty, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states," Kremlin.ru, December 22, 2004. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/32442>.
13. "Transcript of Vladimir Putin's speech at the UN General Assembly," Rg.ru September 28, 2015. <https://rg.ru/2015/09/28/stenogramma.html>.
14. RIA Novosti, December 20, 2015.
15. "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," Kremlin.ru, December 12, 2013. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825>.