Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization 23 (4) Fall 2015: 401-426.

Ideological Change under Vladimir Putin in the Perspective of Social Identity Theory

Alfred Evans
Fresno State University

Abstract: This article places Russia's recent ideological developments in a perspective that is drawn from social identity theory (SIT). The analysis presents examples of all three of the identity management strategies that SIT describes – social mobility, social competition, and social creativity – in the words and actions of Soviet and Russian leaders from the Brezhnev period to the present time. During 2012 and 2013 the Putin regime adopted a new strategy of identity management, for the first time in the post-Soviet years placing primary emphasis on social creativity. That change in approach has involved the open endorsement of an ideology that Russia's political leadership calls "conservatism." In the ideology of the Putin regime, hostility toward the West has assumed an increasingly prominent position, as Putin charges that the West is generating the most basic threats to Russia's identity, its security, and its domestic stability. Putin's increasingly anti-Western outlook has been reflected in his denunciation of the alleged disintegration of traditional moral standards in Western countries. This article also notes that Putin's emphasis on the importance of a unity of moral values for members of the Russian national community calls into question his previous pledge that the state will not interfere in the personal life of each citizen.

Has Vladimir Putin become the author of a new political ideology? That question may be raised in the light of some statements about the president of Russia that have appeared in print. According to Owen Matthews, "Putin was basically pragmatic" in earlier years, but after Russia's annexation of Crimea, "Putin has become a different kind of

Alfred Evans is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Fresno State University. E-mail: evansalca@comcast.net.

المنارة للاستشارات

leader, motivated by ideology, regardless of the cost to Russia's economic well-being."[1] In March 2014 Masha Gessen went so far as to say that "a new ideology has taken shape in the Kremlin," and "it has taken hold as Russia's national idea."[2] A number of observers would agree with Fedor Lukianov's assessment that before his third term as president, which began in 2012, Putin was "non-ideological" and a pragmatist, but after his return to the presidency "he promoted an ideology of conservatism."[3]

Interest in the possibility that Putin had made a commitment to a conservative ideology was stimulated particularly by his address to Russia's Federal Assembly in December 2013.[4] Certainly the situation has changed in some way. During an interview in September 2013, when a journalist asked whether he was a conservative, Marxist, liberal, or pragmatist, Putin replied that he was "a pragmatist with a conservative inclination."[5] But a few months later, in March 2014, during a lecture on conservatism for officers of the ruling United Russia Party, when the speaker, Ol'ga Vasil'eva, who is a history professor and the deputy head of the Administration for Social Projects of the presidential administration, was asked, "Is Vladimir Putin a conservative?" she answered directly, "Classical."[6] So we might ask whether Putin has really moved away from pragmatism and adopted an ideology with a conservative content.

This article will address that question, and will place recent developments in ideology in Russia in a perspective that is drawn from social identity theory (SIT). Social identity theory offers the capacity for insights that help us to assess the significance of the change in the ideational framework of the Putin leadership described by the commentators cited above. There is not likely to be much dispute about the statement that in recent decades, "the attention given to the concept of *identity*—both in the social sciences and in the world at large—has continued to rise."[7] In the constructivist approach to the study of international politics, the central concept is identity,[8] but in that approach identity is not assumed to have an unchanging nature, but is viewed as variable and changing, and as

[1] Owen Matthews, "Putin to Russia: We Will Bury You," *Newsweek.com*, June 12, 2014.

[2] Masha Gessen, "Russia Is Remaking Itself as the New Leader of the Anti-Western World," *Washington Post*, March 31, 2014.

[3] Fedor Lukianov, "Putin Has Stumbled in Ukraine," *Moscow Times*, August 11, 2014.

[4] Oksana Skripnikova, "'Vezhlivyi konservatizm' vnedriaet progressivnymi metodami," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, May 19, 2014.

[5] Vladimir Putin, "Interviu Pervomu Kanalu i Agenstvu Assoshieted Press," Web Site of President of Russia, September 4, 2013.

[6] Irina Nagornykh, "'Edinaia Rossia' osvezhila ideologiiu," *Kommersant*, March 31, 2014.

[7] Rawi Abdelal, Yoshiko M. Herrera, Alastair Iain Johnston, and Rose McDermott, "Identity as a Variable," *Perspectives on Politics*, 4, no. 4 (December 2006): 695-711.

[8] Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*, Third Edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), 15.

المنارة للاستشارات

the product of interaction among states and among forces inside national political systems.[9] Social identity theory in international relations reflects a particular school of thought within constructivism that developed out of social identity theory in social psychology, which originally was applied to individuals and groups. That theory posits that each person desires a positive self-image, which can be gained by identification with a group, and by favorable comparison of that in-group in relation to certain out-groups.[10] Thus people want the group to which they belong to have a positive identity.[11] On the level of international relations, national political leaders can be expected to seek to establish a positive identity for their country.

SIT delineates a variety of *identity management strategies* in reaction to a negative or unfavorable identity for a social group,[12] and similarly, national political leaders may employ identity management strategies to "enhance national self-esteem."[13] The three types of strategies that social identity theory has distinguished are social mobility, social competition, and social creativity. For a nation that sees itself in a category with lower status, the strategy of *social mobility* entails acceptance of the norms of nations with higher status, with the aspiration of joining that group of nations.[14] In other words, that strategy seeks assimilation to the more highly regarded category, which requires emulation of the values and institutions of nations with higher prestige.[15]

A second strategy is that of *social competition*, which accepts the criteria for the assessment of status among nations, but attempts to change the negative ranking of one's lower-status nation.[16] If the status of nations is based on their economic development, military strength, and spheres of influence, a country that currently has a lower ranking can strive to accumulate more of those assets, to equal or surpass the countries that are

---

[9] Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Contested Identity and Foreign Policy: Interpreting Russia's International Choices," *International Studies Perspectives* 15, no. 1 (February 2014): 22; Anne B. Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia's Resurgence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009): 25, 28.

[10] Jonathan Mercer, "Anarchy and Identity," *International Organization*, 49, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 241.

[11] Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy," *International Security*. 34, no. 4 (Spring 2010): 68.

[12] Ibid. 66.

[13] Clunan, *The Social Construction*, 34; Anne B. Clunan, "Constructivism's Micro-Foundations: Aspirations, Social Identity Theory, and Russia's National Interests," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, New Orleans, August 30-September 2, 2012, 6.

[14] Larson and Shevchenko, "Status Seekers,"67: Clunan, "Constructivism's Micro-Foundations," 10.

[15] Larson and Shevchenko, "Status Seekers," 72.

[16] Clunan, "Constructivism's Micro-Foundations," 11.

المنارة للاستشارات

viewed as dominant.[17]

In the third strategy, *social creativity*, as described by the classic writings on social identity theory, the members of a group with a lower level of esteem "may seek positive distinctiveness for the in-group by redefining or altering the elements of the comparative situation."[18] On the national level, that may be accomplished when the leaders of a country revise their interpretation of the dimension on which nations are ranked, so that a characteristic that was seen as negative is now presented as positive.[19] Another form of social creativity is to shift to a different dimension as the basis of the rankings of nations, making it possible to claim that one's nation is superior in relation to that dimension. A third type of social creativity strategy changes the focus of comparison, so that one's nation is compared with a group of countries of lower status, rather than being compared with the group of countries with the highest ranking.

This article will conclude that the Putin regime has adopted a strategy of identity management that is consistent with the second type of social creativity, shifting the basis of the rankings, with the result that Putin now presents Russia as superior to Western nations on a new dimension of comparison, which claims to be oriented toward traditional ethical norms as the criteria for assessment in the international arena. The strategy that Putin has chosen signifies a decisive rejection of the assumption that Western societies should be viewed as the source of moral and political standards for Russia.

Ideological Change in the Soviet Union and Russia in the Perspective of Social Identity Theory

We can recognize examples of all three of the identity management strategies – social mobility, social competition, and social creativity – in the changing words and actions of Soviet and Russian leaders from the Brezhnev period to the present time. As a background to such examples, we should be aware that all those leaders have seen Russia as a great power, and that all the different ideological positions in Russia with contrasting ideas about that country's identity agree "that Russia belongs to the group of great powers, and believe that it is distinctive in its centuries-old unbroken great power status."[20] Also, there is a consensus among scholars that for most of Russia's intellectuals and political elite, the West is the most

[17] Larson and Shevchenko, "Status Seekers," 72.

[18] Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," in *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, Second Edition, ed. Stephen Worchel and William G. Austin (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986), 19.

[19] Larson and Shevchenko, "Status Seekers," 67.

[20] Clunan, "Constructivism's Micro-Foundations," 7.

المنارة للاستشارات

significant other,[21] serving as the main reference point (whether positive or negative) for Russia's definition of its identity, which has been true for centuries. It is evident, however, that the strategies adopted by Soviet and Russian leaders in response to the challenges posed by the West have varied greatly during the last fifty years. And it is also true that each group of leaders has usually employed a mixture of the different strategies that social identity theory has delineated.

From the mid-1960s to the early 1980s, the Brezhnev leadership placed primary emphasis on a strategy of social competition, emphasizing that the Soviet Union had a massive industrial economy, expanding the country's strategic arsenal while preserving a large advantage in conventional forces in Europe, and seeking growth in the number of Soviet clients in less developed regions of the world, supposedly indicating a shifting "correlation of forces (*sootnoshenie sil*)" in favor of the USSR.[22] During the period of détente in the 1970s, that emphasis on competition did not preclude closer cooperation with the leaders of the United States, which was seen by Soviet leaders as a tacit acceptance of the status of their country as one of only two superpowers in the world. Also, in their depiction of developments within their own society, by 1976 Soviet leaders muted the optimism about economic attainments that had been embodied in the concept of "developed socialism" in the early 1970s, and engaged in social creativity by proclaiming the superiority of the "socialist way of life (*sotsialisticheskii obraz zhizni*)" in the Soviet Union.[23] According to that conception, even though the material standard of living in the USSR still was not equal to that in the West, the moral standards of Soviet society, shaped by the collectivistic ethos of socialism, were superior to the amoral individualism and materialism of capitalist societies. Although such an argument contained elements of rhetoric that were traditional for the Soviet regime, when the Brezhnev leadership featured the concept of the socialist way of life it was trying to cope with a factor that was new in the history of the Soviet Union: the tacit realization by that state's leaders that their country was not catching up with the West in its level of economic development. If those leaders could no longer credibly claim that the Soviet economic growth model was superior, they needed to shift their emphasis to new criteria for comparison.

Soon after Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the middle of the

---

[21] Vera Tolz, "Forging the Nation: National Identity and Nation Building in Post-Communist Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 50, no. 6 (September 1998): 995; Clunan, "Constructivism's Micro-Foundations," 7.

[22] R. Craig Nation, *Black Earth, Red Star: A History of Soviet Security Policy, 1917-1991* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 255-256.

[23] Alfred B. Evans, Jr., *Soviet Marxism-Leninism: The Decline of an Ideology* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993), 141-145.

المنارة للاستشارات

1980s, he adopted an identity management strategy that placed its main emphasis on social creativity. As Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko have pointed out, Gorbachev's "new thinking" aimed at attaining a high status for the Soviet Union as the main advocate for ideas that would introduce innovative solutions to global problems.[24] The dimension that implicitly should determine the allocation of prestige, and on which the Soviet Union could achieve the highest ranking, was not military strength but "moral visionary leadership."[25] But again, that choice by Gorbachev did not rule out the use of elements from another identity management strategy. As he redefined the meaning of the "common European home" to include North America, Europe, and all the territory of the Soviet Union, and as he accepted the standards of democracy as obligatory for inclusion in that European home, he engaged in a strategy of social mobility, since he sought the assimilation of the Soviet Union into the community of states that were committed to the values of Western democracy. He had every reason to expect that his new thinking would both enhance the status of the Soviet Union and also make it a more attractive partner for Western states. On the other hand, Gorbachev abandoned the strategy of social competition, since he renounced efforts to compete with the United States in amassing large military forces.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin placed primary emphasis on a strategy of social mobility, since he explicitly stated a commitment to adopting democracy and a market economy in Russia, and he enthusiastically sought acceptance of Russia by Western democratic nations as a country that supposedly had the same ideals that they valued.[26] Yet even though he placed the first priority on his government's relationship with the leaders of the United States, leading some Russians to charge that their country had accepted a subordinate status, at times Yeltsin did complain bitterly about actions by the United States government, showing that he still expected Russia to be regarded as a great power. When Vladimir Putin rose to the position of top leader in Russia in 2000, he took pains to stress that great power status was essential for Russia, and was necessary for it to survive. In fact, the restoration of Russia's status as a great power seemed to be his central goal for foreign policy from the time he became president.[27]

The strategies that he has pursued to serve that end have varied, however, reflecting different choices by Putin at different times. During

---

[24] Larson and Shevchenko, "Shortcut to Greatness," 78.

[25] Ibid. 97.

[26] Robert H. Donaldson and Joseph Nogee, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*, Third Edition (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2005), 230; Clunan, "The Social Construction," 87-88.

[27] Larson and Shevchenko, "Status Seekers," 88.

المنارة للاستشارات

his first few years in power, Putin saw the revival and growth of his country's economic strength as of primary importance, implicitly indicating a strategy of social competition, since he regarded a strong economic base as the most essential prerequisite for a positive national status. During those years he did not claim that he was expanding Russia's military forces, which in any case would have been impossible at that time in view of the condition of the country's economy. He followed Yeltsin's social mobility strategy, though in a much more guarded fashion; while he continued to assert that Russia had entered the ranks of democratic nations, he insisted that his country would build democracy in its own way, and that efforts by other nations to tutor Russia would be unnecessary and unwelcome. Now it is clear that his references to the importance of long historical experience for contemporary Russia would help to lay the basis for a later strategy of social creativity, though the potential for the significance of such statements was not fully realized at the time.

As Russia's economy began to revive after 1998 and continued to grow for several years after Putin took power, the confidence of Russia's political leaders increased. By 2006, some people within the country's political leadership, most visibly Vladislav Surkov, advanced sovereign democracy (*suverennaia demokratiia*) as the central concept in the ideology of the regime that had taken shape under Putin.[28] However, that concept added little to Putin's earlier insistence that Russia would follow its own path. In other words, "sovereign democracy" signaled that Russia's leadership would still employ a strategy of social mobility, but with distinct reservations. We should note that Putin himself voiced relative indifference to that concept, and Dmitrii Medvedev, who would later become president, openly expressed skepticism toward it.[29] During the time of Medvedev's presidency, from 2008 to 2012, although it was generally assumed that Putin was still the most powerful leader in Russia, there was greater emphasis on the strategy of social mobility, with the goal of assimilating Russia into the community of democracies, and with hope for closer cooperation between Russia and the United States.

A National Ideology of Conservatism

The months leading up to Putin's return to the presidency in the spring of 2012 saw a shift away from that emphasis, however, and during 2012 and 2013 the leadership embarked on a new strategy, for the first time in the post-Soviet years placing primary emphasis on social creativity. That

[28] Alfred B. Evans, Jr. "Power and Ideology: Vladimir Putin and the Russian Political System," University of Pittsburgh, the Carl Beck Papers, no. 1902, January 2008, 15.

[29] Ibid. 17.

المنارة للاستشارات

change in approach entailed a more open endorsement of an ideology than Putin had been willing to engage in earlier.

There is an abundance of evidence that Russia's regime is promoting an ideology. The fact that Putin quoted certain non-communist Russian philosophers of past periods, such as Vladimir Solov'ev, Nikolai Berdiaev, and Ivan Il'in, all of whom had, in one sense or another, a conservative orientation, implicitly encouraged Putin's subordinates to explore the ideas favored by the president.[30] That encouragement became more explicit in early 2014, when the Kremlin sent copies of books by Berdiaev, Solov'ev, and Il'in to leaders in the United Russia party as recommended readings.[31] In the months that followed, Vasil'eva spoke about conservatism and patriotism in seminars for governors, officers of the All-Russian National Front (ONF), social science instructors in institutions of higher education, and officials in the presidential administration.[32] The United Russia Party also organized a series of lectures on conservatism for deputies of the Duma and members of the party's *aktiv*, with Vasil'eva as the main speaker.[33] In addition, the Institute of Social-Economic and Political Research (ISEPI), which seems to be close to the political regime, started two web sites for the discussion of problems of conservatism.[34] Further, it was announced that prizes would be awarded to scholars doing research on conservatism, and that ISEPI would play a role in choosing the recipients of such awards. A book by Berdiaev was said to be "obligatory" reading for officials in the presidential administration,[35] and it was reported that ISEPI would establish a prize, "The Legacy of Russian Thought," in the name of Nikolai Berdiaev.[36]

Some enthusiastic supporters of the political regime soon advocated the approval of a national ideology for Russia, despite the fact that the Constitution prohibits the adoption of a state ideology. Mikhail Remizov said that Russia "has all the chances to make conservatism its national ideology,"[37] and V. I. Dobrenkov maintained that "a new national ideology

---

[30] It is not true, despite what some commentators have alleged, that all those philosophers were extreme nationalists, in the sense that they advocated a messianic role and an imperialistic foreign policy for Russia. Putin has not tried to silence the Eurasianists, who are extreme nationalists, but he has kept them at arm's length.

[31] Paul Goble, "Window on Eurasia: The Kremlin's Disturbing Reading List for Russia's Political Elite," *Johnson's Russia List*, 2014, no. 16, January 24.

[32] Irina Nagornykh and Viktor Khamraev, "'Suverennaia demokratiia' doshla do konservatizma," *Kommersant*, February 21, 2014.

[33] Nagornykh, "'Edinaia Rossia' osvezhila ideologiiu."

[34] Skripnikova, "'Vezhlivyi konservatizm.'"

[35] Alena Sivkova, "Chinovnikov obiazali izuchat' Nikolaia Berdiaeva," *Izvestiia*, February 19, 2014.

[36] Natal'ia Galimova, "Berdiaev po-putinski," *Gazeta.ru*, May 16, 2014.

[37] Quoted in Vitalii Petrov, "Lichnyi brend," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, May 19, 2014.

المنارة للاستشارات

of Russia can be formed only on the basis of conservatism."[38] From 1999 to the present, Putin persistently has emphasized that Russia must follow its own distinctive path instead of imitating models of development drawn from Western counties.[39] With equal consistency he also has stressed that attempts by other countries to interfere in Russia's internal affairs are unacceptable.[40] It is apparent that the version of conservatism that the Russian state is promoting is intended to provide ideological support for the current political regime in order to preserve the model of governance that Putin

has created.[41] Another goal of the regime is to unite Russian society behind a single "national idea" whose content will be defined by a set of conservative ideas.[42]

One of Putin's central themes, which he emphasized before he first became president of Russia and has continued to repeat to the present time, is the crucial need for consensus in Russian society. As Elena Chebankova notes, Putin "insists that Russia needs to recreate its original *cultural code* as the basis for a societal consensus."[43] When he was being interviewed for his biography in early 2000, and one of the interviewers asked him, "What, in your opinion, does the country need in the first place? The main thing?" Putin replied, "To precisely and clearly determine goals. And not just to talk of that in passing. Those goals should become understandable and accessible to everyone. Like the Code of the Builder of Communism." Then the journalist asked, "And what will you write in the first line of that code?" And Putin answered, "Moral values."[44] Putin's major programmatic statement of December 1999, which was published just before he became the acting president of Russia, revealed his preoccupation with the need for *soglasie* (accord, concord, agreement, or harmony) in Russian society, as he stressed the importance of accord "on such fundamental questions as goals, values, and the boundaries of development, which are attractive for the overwhelming majority of Russians."[45] In his presidential address

---

[38] V. I. Dobrenkov, V. I., "Konservatizm—Natsional'naia ideologiia Rossii," *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta, Seriia 18, Sotsiologiia i politologiia*, 2011, no. 2, 15.

[39] Walter Laqueur, "After the Fall: Russia in Search of a New Ideology," *World Affairs* 176, no. 6 (March/April 2014): 73.

[40] Alfred B. Evans, Jr., "Putin's Legacy and Russia's Identity," *Europe-Asia Studies* 50, no. 6 (August 2008): 903.

[41] Jadwiga Rogoza, "Conservative Counterrevolution: Evidence of Russia's Strength or Weakness?," *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 154 (July 28, 2014): 3.

[42] Dmitrii Runkevich and Anastasia Kashevarova, "Kreml' otkazalsia ot ideologii v pol'zu natsional'noi idei," *Izvestiia*, December 6, 2013.

[43] Elena Chebankova, "Contemporary Russian Multiculturalism," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 28, no. 3 (July/September 2012): 328.

[44] N. Gevorkian, A. Kolesnikov, and N. Timakova, *Ot pervogo litsa: razgovory s Vladimirom Putinym* (Moscow: Vagrus, 2000), 155.

[45] Vladimir Putin, "Rossiia na rubezhe tysiacheletiia," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, December 31, 1999.

المنارة للاستشارات

in 2000, Putin again emphasized, "I am convinced that the development of society is impossible without agreement (*soglasie*) on common goals."[46] He has returned to that subject repeatedly, as in September 2015, when he continued to warn against the danger posed by internal divisions and to stress the crucial importance of unity and consensus.[47]

We will better understand why consensus in Russian society is extremely important for Putin if we notice that his pronouncements reveal a profound horror of division in Russian society. In his programmatic statement in December 1999, Putin argued that "fruitful, creative work" for the benefit of the fatherland "is impossible in a society that finds itself in a condition of division, internally separated, a society in which the basic social forces adhere to different basic values and fundamental ideological orientations."[48] He contends that a society that is fragmented will be unable to survive in the face of major threats from outside. In his address to the Federal Assembly in 2003 he asked the rhetorical question, "Can Russia seriously resist such threats if our society is divided into small groups, if we live only with our group interests?" His answer to that question was, "I am convinced that without consolidation, if only around basic all-national values and tasks, it will be impossible to resist those threats."[49] His address to the legislature in 2007 placed particular emphasis on the importance of "the spiritual unity of the people and the moral values uniting us," and "a common system of moral orientations."[50]

Putin sees the unity of the nation as necessarily derived from a consensus on moral principles, which is consistent with his nostalgia for the Moral Code of the Builder of Communism of the early 1960s. By 2012 he began to speak frequently of the need for *skrepy* (braces or clamps) to ensure the unity of Russian society. In January 2012 he wrote, "Trust between people is formed only when society is clamped together by common values,"[51] and in his address in December 2012 he complained, "today Russian society is experiencing an obvious deficit of spiritual clamps."[52] He assigned the political authorities an important role in

[46] Vladimir Putin, "Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniiu Rossiiskoi Federatsii," Web Site of President of Russia, July 8, 2000.

[47] Putin, "Vystuplenie na prazdnovanii Dnia znanii s vospitannikami i pedagogami obrazovatel'nogo tsentra dlia odarennykh detei 'Sirius," September 1, 2015, Web Site of President of Russia.

[48] Putin, "Rossiia na rubezhe tysiacheletiia."

[49] Vladimir Putin, "Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniiu Rossiiskoi Federatsii," Web Site of President of Russia, May 16, 2003.

[50] Vladimir Putin, "Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniiu Rossiiskoi Federatsii," Web Site of President of Russia, April 26, 2007.

[51] Vladimir Putin, "Rossiia sosredotochivaetsia—vyzovy na kotorye my dolzhny otvetit'," *Izvestiia*, January 17, 2012.

[52] Vladimir Putin, "Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniiu Rossiiskoi Federatsii," Web Site of President of Russia, December 12, 2012.

المنارة للاستشارات

achieving greater unity, as he saw one of the tasks of the state as "forming a world-view clamping the nation,"[53] involving a cultural policy which will instill a common understanding of the history of Russia. Putin believes that the values that all Russians should share are those that have been developed by the people of their country in its "thousand-year history."[54] Putin looks to history as the source of his country's national identity, and wants teaching about the history of Russia to give greater attention to positive achievements.[55] Since 2012, he has placed more explicit emphasis on the theme of continuity in the whole sweep of Russian history, in connection with the heightened emphasis on the need for national unity.[56] He sees the Russian Orthodox Church as one of the main carriers of traditional values in Russia, and the regime has developed closer ties with the church in recent years.[57]

The current political leadership of Russia shows that it expects its brand of conservative nationalism to find widespread popular support.[58] Jadwiga Rogoza observes that Putin symbolically has separated what he considers to be the "healthy and conservative" majority in Russian society from the alienated and "cosmopolitan" minority, which he accuses of acting in the interests of the West.[59] The strategy of the political regime is to rely on support from the "passive majority" of society,[60] or, as another source has called it, the "paternalistic majority" of citizens, who depend on benefits that the state provides.[61] Putin seems to have given up on the possibility of gaining support from the minority who are the more independent-minded members of the middle class,[62] as he concentrates on appealing to Russia's blue-collar majority.[63] In the words of *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, "Putin is not interested in the carriers of liberal values and the creative class as a whole ... the creative class, in the discourse of the authorities, is becoming one of

---

[53] Putin, "Rossiia: natsional'nyi vopros."

[54] Putin, "Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniiu," 2007.

[55] Vladimir Putin, "Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba 'Valdai,'" Web Site of President of Russia, September 19, 2013.

[56] Putin, "Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniiu," 2012.

[57] Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Breakout from the Post-Cold War System: The Drivers of Putin's Course," Paper of the Moscow Carnegie Center, December 22, 2014, 7.

[58] Paul Goble. "Window on Eurasia: Putin's New National Conservatism Resonates in Russian Regions," in *Johnson's Russia List*, 2014, no. 7, January 9.

[59] Jadwiga Rogoza, "Conservative Counterrevolution: Evidence of Russia's Strength or Weakness?," *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 154 (July 28, 2014): 3.

[60] *Vedomosti*, "Verkhovnye conservatory v antikonservativnom obshchestve," January 21, 2014.

[61] *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, "Putin opredelilsia s politicheskimie prioritetami," December 27, 2013.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Matthews, "Putin to Russia."

المنارة للاستشارات

two sides in the main political confrontation with the 'simple people.'"[64] In 2013 Putin, in some remarks about the history of Russia, cast suspicion on the intelligentsia as a whole by asserting that some of its members not only had opposed the government in power but also had been disloyal to the Russian nation, and he suggested that their attitude was the source of the instability that built up during the last years of Tsarist Russia and the last years of the Soviet Union, with "ruinous and destructive" consequences for the Russian people in each case.[65] On a similar note, he said, "Too often in our national history, instead of opposition to the government we have come into conflict with opposition to Russia itself," and he added, "and we know how that ended – with the destruction of the state itself."[66] Obviously Putin seeks to discredit those who are the base of support for the critical opposition to his regime.

It is not surprising that the perspective of the regime has fostered intolerance toward those who have a different point of view. The regime regards its opponents as dissidents, and stigmatizes them as much as possible,[67] in order to isolate them from the majority. After Russia's annexation of Crimea, the leadership and the mass media became even more eager to portray citizens who disagreed with the state's actions as disloyal to Russia.[68] Films on Russian television stations allege that dissidents in Russia have always taken money from Americans and that today's dissenters are akin to those who collaborated with the Nazis during the Second World War.[69] Those who oppose the line of the political leadership are accused of being unpatriotic and are suspected of belonging to a "fifth column" that does the bidding of foreign masters.[70] Thus those who are seen as internal enemies are linked with the external enemies of Russia, which justifies the steady tightening of restrictions on the domestic critics of the regime.[71]

In the ideas promoted by the Putin leadership, hostility toward the West has assumed an increasingly prominent position,[72] to the degree that

---

[64] *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, "Putin opredelilsia."

[65] Putin, "Interviu Pervomu Kanalu."

[66] Putin, "Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba 'Valdai,'" 2013.

[67] Mark Galeotti and Andrew Bowen, "Putin's Empire of the Mind," www.foreignpolicy.com, April 21, 2014; Rogoza, "Conservative Counterrevolution," 3.

[68] Aleksandra Samarina, "Kholodnaia voina. No v Rossii," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, March 18, 2014.

[69] *Vedomosti*, "Zachem gosudarstvo seet nenavist'," February 19, 2014.

[70] Konstantin Remchukov, "Liniia Putina na sokrashchenie kontaktov s Zapadom iavliaetsia osnovnym trendom poslednego vremeni," interviewed by Tat'iana Fengel'gauer. *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, July 14, 2014.

[71] Denis Volkov, "Logika reaktsii, "*Nezavisimaia gazeta*, April 7, 2014.

[72] Vladimir M. Gurvich, "Bezvremen'e kak rezul'tat stabilizatsii," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, March 8, 2014.

المنارة للاستشارات

Putin sees the West as generating the most basic threats to Russia's identity[73], its security, and its domestic stability.[74] In the perception of one supporter of Putin's political regime, a confrontation between the West and Russia has been in existence throughout the history of Russia, and will persist in the future.[75] Chebankova points out that over time there has been a shift in Putin's attitude toward Europe.[76] For years, he emphasized that Russia was a European country. In an interview for his biography, which was published in 2000, he said, "We are a part of Western European culture," and "wherever our people may live—in the Far East or in the South—we are Europeans."[77] In his presidential address in 2005 he affirmed, "Above all, Russia was, is, and of course will be a very mighty European nation."[78] As recently as February 2012 he reinforced that point by saying, "Russia is an inalienable part of Great Europe, the broad European civilization. Our citizens feel themselves to be Europeans."[79] There may already have been some within the regime who favored a change in thinking on that point, however, as implied in an article by an author who had tried to interpret the meaning of conservatism in Russia, who had maintained in 2011 that "Russia always was different from the West," since it is a Eurasian civilization, and "therefore cannot integrate into Western civilization."[80] By 2014 a distinct change in thinking in the leadership was evidenced when Russia's Minister of Culture flatly declared, "Russia is not Europe."[81]

We should note, however, that the principal focus of the Putin regime's suspicion and hostility is not Europe, but the United States. For several years, Putin has complained about actions by the US government that he has depicted as showing that American policy-makers assume a unipolar world and intend to reinforce American hegemony, without regard to the interests of other nations. But during the last few years, he has gone farther in his statements, as he has identified the United States as the main force behind the growth of instability in the world.[82] We should recall that Putin greatly values stability, and that he abhors instability. He described the condition of the international system in alarming terms in January 2012 when he spoke about a "serious systemic crisis" confronting the world,

---

[73] Galeotti and Bowen, "Putin's Empire of the Mind."

[74] Igor' Zevelev, "Granitsy russkogo mira," *Rossiia v global'noi politike*, 2014, no. 2, 37.

[75] Dobrenkov, "Konservatizm—Natsional'naia ideologiia," 52.

[76] Elena Chebankova, "Russian Fundamental Conservatism: In Search of Modernity," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 29, no. 4 (July/August) 2013: 304.

[77] Gevorkian, Kolesnikov, and Timakova, *Ot pervogo litsa*, 156.

[78] Vladimir Putin, "Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniiu Rossiiskoi Federatsii," Web Site of President of Russia, April 25, 2005.

[79] Vladimir Putin, "Rossiia i meniaiushchiisia mir," *Moskovskie novosti*, February 27, 2012.

[80] Dobrenkov, "Konservatizm—Natsional'naia ideologiia Rossii," *52*.

[81] Matthews, "Putin to Russia."

[82] Lukianov, "Putin Has Stumbled in Ukraine."

المنارة للاستشارات

"a tectonic process of global transformation," and added that "the world is entering a zone of turbulence," with "sharply growing instability."[83] In his view, the disappearance of the bipolar system in international relations brought an end to stability in the world,[84] implicitly because it removed the main restraints on the behavior of the United States. In his analysis, the short-sighted and futile efforts by the leaders of the US to block the transition from a unipolar world to a multipolar world constitute the fundamental factor generating instability in the international system and worsening conflicts within many nations.[85] And, in his view, American leaders are even trying to cause instability within Russia, as they seek to undermine the stability of the political regime that Putin has built.

Putin's increasingly anti-Western outlook has been reflected in a new theme in his speeches during the last few years: his denunciation of the alleged disintegration of moral standards in Western countries. In September 2013 he warned about that tendency: "We see how many Euro-Atlantic countries actually have gone on the path of rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization."[86] He returned to that theme with a tone of greater alarm in December 2013, when he charged, "Today in many countries the norms of morality and ethics are being revised, and national traditions and the differences among nations and cultures are being erased. From society now is demanded ... also the obligatory recognition of the equivalence, strange as it sounds, of good and evil, concepts that are opposite in meaning."[87] Putin has seen the growth of protection for the rights of gays and lesbians in the West, extending to the acceptance of same-sex marriage, as the prime evidence that older ethical standards are being discarded. In his perspective, the devaluation of traditional ethical principles has brought a crisis of moral values in Western countries, and the effects of that crisis have created "long-term threats to society, to Russia's security and integrity."[88] So Putin associates challenges to historically based guidelines for personal morality with the instability in international relations that he sees as the result of the challenge to multipolarity by the power that aims to enforce its global dominance.

Putin's repudiation of the alleged abandonment of traditional values

---

[83] Vladimir Putin, "Rossiia sosredotochivaetsia—vyzovy na kotorye my dolzhny otvetit'," *Izvestiia*, January 17, 2012.

[84] Vladimir Putin, "Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii," Web Site of President of Russia, March 18, 2014.

[85] Vladimir Putin, "Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba 'Valdai,'" Web Site of President of Russia, October 24, 2014.

[86] Putin, "Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba 'Valdai,'" 2013.

[87] Vladimir Putin, "Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniiu Rossiiskoi Federatsii," Web Site of President of Russia, December 12, 2013.

[88] Putin, "Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniiu," 2012.

المنارة للاستشارات

in the Western countries has made it possible for Russia's political regime to claim that his views have evoked a favorable response from many people around the world. Putin himself has said that his position "has received international recognition."[89] In December 2013, before Putin's annual address to the Federal Assembly, The Center for Strategic Communications, an institution said to be closely connected with the Kremlin, held a press conference in Moscow to announce its latest report, entitled "Putin: World Conservatism's New Leader."[90] Some Russian authors have proudly announced that even in Europe, millions of ordinary people admire Russia and its leader because they defend fundamental, traditional values.[91] When Putin plays the role of a defender of traditional values, he provides a basis for his political regime in Russia to present itself as a model for semi-authoritarian and authoritarian regimes in other countries. In July 2014, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban supported that claim when he explained that his country is striving to build a state of "illiberal democracy," in contrast with Western liberal democracy, and he acknowledged that Russia is one of the models for the system that he wants for Hungary.[92] In the summer of 2014, a speaker at the Seliger youth camp sponsored by the Kremlin told his audience that, as Russia follows its own path, despite pressure from the West, "we are not alone on that path; we can gather around us other countries and peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America."[93] Some of Putin's supporters believe that he has shaped a model and an ideology that are well positioned to exert global influence.[94] Putin believes that Russia is naturally suited to play a key role in the defense of stability in the world, in defending both traditional morality and international stability, because of its "civilizational model, great history, and cultural genome," combining the influence of European civilization and the experience of interaction with the East.[95]

---

[89] Quoted in Petr Tverdov and Aleksandra Samarina, "Vnutrennaia i vneshnaia politika konservatizma," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, December 13, 2013.

[90] Brian Whitmore, "Vladimir Ilyich Putin, Conservative Icon," *RFE/RL Report*, December 19, 2013.

[91] Savelii Vezhin, 'Tsennosti imeiut znachenie," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, February 12, 2014. Some nineteenth century Russian intellectuals believed that it should be their country's mission to achieve "the salvation of Europe's own true ideals" and "resurrect Europe's Christian tradition." Vera Tolz, "The West," in *A History of Russian Thought*, ed. William Leatherbarrow and Derek Offord (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 198, 202.

[92] Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Vladimir Putin," *Washington Post*, July 31, 2014.

[93] Igor' Gashkov, "'Seligeru' pokazali put' k Bogu," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, August 8, 2014.

[94] Gurvich, "Bezvremen'e kak rezul'tat stabilizatsii."

[95] Putin, "Rossiia sosredotochivaetsia."

المنارة للاستشارات

Explaining Putin's Choice of a Strategy of Social Creativity

How can we explain Vladimir Putin's decision to place primary emphasis on a strategy of social creativity after 2012, as signified by his embrace of a conservative ideology by 2013? In general this author accepts the assumption that, just as many factors influence the foreign policy strategy of the Russian government,[96] many factors, both internal and external, have an impact on the ideological orientation of the Putin regime. It seems likely, however, that domestic factors were of primary importance in shaping the change in course by the Kremlin that was evident by the beginning of Putin's new term as president in the spring of 2012.[97] During the time when Dmitrii Medvedev was the president of Russia, from 2008 to 2012, the tone of his statements and the character of modest reforms that he proposed raised some hope for movement toward a more liberalized, pluralistic system,[98] which was consistent with his greater stress on the strategy of social mobility, with its hope for a closer identification of Russia with the Western democracies. However, a well-informed source has reported that Putin, who still held the reins of power, had decided by the middle of 2011 "to shut down the 'liberal Westernizing project.'"[99] Some other observers also argue that a turning point in strategy for domestic politics and foreign policy came in 2011, when it was decided that Putin would return to the presidency of Russia.[100] By that time there were signs that some groups within the political leadership already were pressing for a more enthusiastic endorsement of conservative ideology.[101] Experts on the inner politics of Russia's leadership believe that there are competing factions at the highest level of the political elite, and that Putin plays the role of managing conflict among those groups.[102] It is possible that some factions in the elite feared that Medvedev's gestures in favor of reform had raised expectations for changes that could upset the balance among those groups. Richard Sakwa has said that some members of the elite saw

---

[96] Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Breakout," 2.

[97] Kathryn Stoner and Michael McFaul, "Who Lost Russia (This Time)? Vladimir Putin," *Washington Quarterly*, 38, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 169, 175.

[98] Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013), 260-261.

[99] Maria Lipman, "How Russia Has Come to Loathe the West," Commentary, European Council on Foreign Relations, March 13, 2015, 3.

[100] Rogoza, "Conservative Counterrevolution," 2; Zevelev, "Granitsy russkogo mira," 34.

[101] Two articles published in a scholarly journal in 2011 were evidence of such pressure. Dobrenkov, "Konservatizm—Natsional'nai ideologiia," 3-55; V. I. Dobrenkov, "Russkii konservatizm kak ideologiia vozrozhdeniia i razvitiia Rosii," *Vestnik Moskovskogo Universiteta*, Seriia 18, Sotsiologiia i politika, 2011, no. 1, 5-26.

[102] Richard Sakwa, *Putin Redux: Power and Contradiction in Contemporary Russia* (London: Routledge, 2014), 196, 215.

المنارة للاستشارات

Putin's return to the presidency as rectifying the threat to stability posed by the promise of moderate liberalization that Medvedev had presented.[103]

Also, as early as 2011 there were hints that problems in the functioning of the system that Putin had structured were leading to growing dissatisfaction among the public, as suggested by a decline in the approval rating for Putin from December 2010 to March 2011.[104] By 2010 Russia's economy had recovered from the global financial crisis and the recession of 2008-2009, but its rate of growth slowed down after 2011.[105] The rate of growth of household income also decreased after the recovery from the financial crisis, and by 2012 the increase of household income came to a halt.[106] Even with the price of oil relatively high, and no sanctions from Western states, Russia's economy had "started to stagnate," according to Sergei Guriev,[107] who adds that the situation in that economy had come to resemble that in the economy of the Soviet Union under Brezhnev, in a time that was later labeled the period of *zastoi*, or stagnation.[108] (We should recall that in that period Brezhnev placed primary emphasis on the concept of the "socialist way of life," indicating the choice of a strategy of social creativity.) Thus by 2011 it was apparent that it would be difficult to continue on the basis of the unwritten "social contract" of the years when a high rate of economic growth, largely due to rising energy prices, made it possible to raise the standard of living of the population.[109] Medvedev had suggested that economic reform was needed for reviving the growth rate, but that idea may have seemed threatening to those in the leadership who feared that it would undermine political stability. Sakwa argues that a "long-term erosion" of the majority backing the regime was taking place before the fall of 2011, with "signs of crumbling support" for Putin.[110]

Yet, even though Guriev contends that the stagnation in the economy created a need for the government to "come up with a new ideology,"[111] and Lev Gudkov asserts that the decline in Putin's popularity encouraged the regime to respond with "policies of social conservatism,"[112] in fact

[103] Ibid., 154.

[104] Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin, New and Expanded Edition* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 227, 230.

[105] Sergei Guriev, "Political Origins and Implications of the Economic Crisis in Russia," in *Putin's Russia: How It Rose, How It Is Maintained and How It Might End*, ed. Leon Aron (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2015), 8.

[106] Gudkov, "Resources," 58.

[107] Guriev, "Political Origins," 8.

[108] Ibid. 16.

[109] Ibid. 17.

[110] Richard Sakwa, "Politics and International Affairs in Putin's Third Term," in *Putin's Third Term: Assessments amid Crisis*, by Richard Sakwa, Mark Galeotti, and Harley Balzer (Washington, DC: Center on Global Interests, March 2015), 6.

[111] Guriev, "Political Origins," 20.

[112] Gudkov, "Resources," 70.

المنارة للاستشارات

Putin did not explicitly endorse conservative ideology and make a clear commitment to an identity management strategy of social creativity until 2013. Though even before the fall of 2011 Putin might have decided on a policy course that would be more conservative in the sense that it would defend the political status quo, he did not allow the open promotion of a conservative ideology until after the large-scale protests of the winter of 2011-2. For years before that time, protests against violations of democratic political principles had attracted only small numbers of participants, and the regime had reacted mildly to such demonstrations, as the police arrested some of the protesters and soon let them go. Before 2011, few people showed themselves to be upset about fraud in elections, although it was common knowledge that dishonesty in casting and counting ballots was routine. Then, following the parliamentary election of early December 2011 (which showed a decrease in support for the ruling United Russia party), the crowds gathering in Moscow to protest against election fraud and to demand honest elections surprisingly swelled from thousands to tens of thousands and, by February, as many as a hundred thousand people.[113] (Demonstrations in favor of that position, with smaller numbers of participants, were held in many other Russian cities at the same time.) Most of those who took part in such protests were highly educated people and were residents of large cities in Russia. The ranks of such middle class citizens had been growing during the years of rising incomes under Putin since the beginning of the century. But now a substantial part of the middle class, consisting of those who were dubbed "the creative class" or "angry urbanites," was dissatisfied enough to voice a demand for the rights of democratic citizenship.[114] The protests, revealing an unexpected degree of discontent among that segment of the population, overturned the Putin regime's hope that the growing middle class that had enjoyed a rising standard of living would be a pillar of support for social and political stability.[115]

By 2012 the leadership had changed its strategy,[116] as it came to view its main base of support not as the urban middle class but the majority of the population, made up of Russians with lower levels of education and lower incomes, especially those in smaller cities and rural areas, most of whom are socially conservative and feel dependent on the state for security and support. Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy note that[117] in 2012 Putin "chose to build his political support in Russia's 'silent majority.'"

---

[113] Alfred B. Evans, Jr., "Civil Society and Protests in Russia," in *Systemic and Non-Systemic Opposition in the Russian Federation: Civil Society Awakens?*, ed. Cameron Ross (Burlington, VT: Ashgate), 23.

[114] Sakwa, "Politics," 7.

[115] Gudkov, "Resources," 52.

[116] Ibid.

[117] Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, 2015, 236.

المنارة للاستشارات

The version of conservative ideology that the political regime promoted with growing enthusiasm by 2013 was designed to appeal to the broad majority of Russians. It also provided a framework of interpretation that made it easier to isolate the discontented minority in Russia by depicting those who were protesting as out of step with the values of the conservative majority. That ideology also played up the threat posed by external enemies, which helped to justify economic hardships,[118] and to stigmatize opponents of the regime as serving foreign masters, and therefore betraying Russia.[119] The regime and the mass media that it controlled stepped up their anti-Western messages,[120] with particular emphasis on the evil intentions and schemes of the United States. The leadership alleged that the protesters who favored democratic reforms were actually serving the US government in its campaign to create instability and weaken Russia. So opponents of the Putin regime were characterized as disloyal to their nation and contemptuous toward the traditional Russian values of the majority of their fellow citizens.

During the period from 2011 to 2012, leading up to Putin's explicit endorsement of a conservative ideology, there were no new developments in the relationship between the United States and Russia that seemed important enough to account for the greater emphasis on conservative ideology by Russia's leadership during 2013 and 2014. Since the 1990s Russia's leaders main complaint toward the US and its allies had been against the expansion of NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) eastward, to include several states in Eastern Europe and three states from the former Soviet Union. However, Putin complained only mildly when Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania joined NATO in 2004. In 2008, the administration of President George W. Bush had advocated that Ukraine and Georgia be admitted to NATO, but other governments in the alliance had put that proposal on hold, and the Obama administration did not attempt to revive the issue. The "reset" in relations between Russia and the US had begun in 2009, surely with Putin's consent, and it had brought warming in the relations between the two states and had yielded some concrete benefits for each side.[121] It is difficult to see any of the issues in the US-Russian relationship during 2011 and 2012 as having an impact that would have caused Putin to shift to primary emphasis on an identity management strategy of social creativity.

In retrospect, it seems clear that the initiative from an actor outside of Russia that was most significant in leading to a sharp deterioration of relations between Russia and the West came not from the United States but

[118] Guriev, "Political Origins," 19.

[119] Stoner and McFaul, "Who Lost," 176.

[120] Lipman, "How Russia," 5.

[121] Stoner and McFaul, "Who Lost," 171-172.

المنارة للاستشارات

from the European Union. The EU had launched its Eastern Partnership in 20009, with the intention of building closer economic ties between the European Union and some states of the former Soviet Union.[122] Before 2012, as Carl Bildt recalls, while the EU and the Ukrainian government were engaged in negotiations on a possible Association Agreement and a trade agreement, the government of Russia seemed unconcerned, as it "raised no questions or issues related" to those agreements in its talks with the EU or with Ukraine. Bildt even says that before 2012, "the Russian attitude toward the EU was essentially quite positive."[123] The government of Russia moved Eurasian integration to the top of its foreign policy agenda with the beginning of Putin's third term as president in early 2012,[124] but initially the Eurasian Union as envisioned by Russia was "intended to serve as a complement to the European Union rather than a competitor."[125] Before long, however, Putin sharply changed his attitude toward the EU and its possible agreement with Ukraine. He came to the conclusion that the proposed agreement with the EU would keep Ukraine out of the Eurasian Union, which effectively would mean "the end of the Eurasian Union as he had conceived it."[126] During the latter part of the summer of 2013, in Bildt's words, the government of Russia "launched aggressive efforts" to prevent Ukraine, Armenia, and Georgia from signing association agreements and trade agreements with the EU.[127] Now the Russian leadership saw the EU and Russia as rivals, competing for influence in Ukraine and other states in Russia's neighborhood.[128] Russian leaders came to view the widening of the EU's sphere of economic influence as a stalking horse for the expansion of NATO.[129] According to Hill and Gaddy, by 2013, "for Putin, the EU was as much of a threat to Russia's interests and international positions as the old Cold War nemesis, NATO."[130]

In November 2013, Viktor Yanukovich, the President of Ukraine, backed away from signing the agreement with the EU on which he had

---

[122] Igor Gretsky, Evgeny Treshchenkov, and Konstantin Glubev, "Russia's Perceptions and Misperceptions of the EU Eastern Partnership, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 47, nos. 3-4 (September-December 2014): 380.

[123] Carl Bildt, "Russia, the European Union, and the Eastern Partnership," ECFR Series, European Council on Foreign Relations, May 19, 2015, 6.

[124] Maria Lipman and Alexey Malashenko, "The End of an Era in EU-Russia Relations," Moscow, Carnegie Center, 2013, 11.

[125] Sakwa, "Politics," 9.

[126] Stent, *The Limits*, 303.

[127] Bildt, "Russia," 7.

[128] Gretsky, Treshchenkov, and Golubev, "Russia's Perceptions," 380-381.

[129] John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs*, 93, no. 5 (September-October 2014): 79; Andrei Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Last Stand: The Sources of Russia's Ukraine Policy," *Post-Soviet* Affairs, 31, no.4 (July 2015): 290.

[130] Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, 2015, 358.

المنارة للاستشارات

been negotiating; he did so partly in response to intensified efforts by the government of Russia to influence his decision. The protests in Ukraine that followed that decision led to the crisis in Kyiv that resulted in the sudden replacement of Yanukovich as president of that country in February 2014. The Russian government characterized that transfer of power as an unconstitutional coup, and charged that it had been brought about through covert manipulations by the United States. As a number of scholars have observed, for Putin, the overthrow of Yanukovich's government was the "last straw,"[131] after years in which Western countries, in his view, had ignored vital Russian interests and extended their influence more and more in Russia's neighborhood. In the perspective of Russian leaders, the chain of events in Ukraine that had led from massive protests to the replacement of Yanukovich was consistent with the pattern of the earlier "color revolutions" in some states of the former Soviet Union, which, in that perspective, had been the result of machinations by Western states, especially the United States. Russian leaders also argued that the Americans aimed to use similar means to generate political instability in their country with the hope of bringing a regime more acceptable to the US to power in Russia. In early March, soon after the fall of Yanukovich, Russian troops occupied the Ukrainian region of Crimea, in an operation that was executed smoothly, which clearly suggested that it had been planned carefully. After a rigged referendum in Crimea, the parliament of Russia approved Putin's proposal for the annexation of that region. Soon the government of Russia gave support for forces that arose with arms in hand, aiming to separate the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk from Ukraine. In August 2014 the Kremlin quietly sent in Russian military units to fight on the side of the separatist rebels after the Ukrainian army had made progress against the separatist forces.

This article does not suggest that the Putin regime's actions in Ukraine since March of 2014 have been a direct result of that regime's adoption of an explicitly conservative ideology during late 2013 and early 2014. Putin's policy toward Ukraine during 2013 and 2014 had all the signs of being primarily reactive, as he continued the pattern of acting in response to moves that Western countries initiated in relation to countries close to Russia that historically had been part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Russia's occupation of the Crimea followed the sudden collapse of the Yanukovich government in February 2014, which hardly anyone might have foreseen with confidence. More fundamentally, the Russian government's reactions to the EU's initiatives followed decades of eastward expansion by NATO and the European Union.

The actions of Putin's government in relation to Ukraine since

[131] Ibid. 281; Mearsheimer, "Why," 77; Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, 2015, 364.

المنارة للاستشارات

February 2014 illustrate the importance in practice of Putin's choice of a strategy of social creativity. The ideological stance that Putin had adopted by late 2013 signified a change in the calculus for his policy options. He signaled that Russia no longer cared what Western leaders thought about Russia's actions, because he rejected the notion that the values of Western societies were relevant for Russia's conduct. In fact, he regarded the values that had become dominant in the West as inferior to those that, according to him, are supported by Russian society. If most Western political leaders considered Russia's annexation of Crimea and its intervention in regions of eastern Ukraine to be unacceptable, Putin did not care. Also, Western criticism of Russia's violations of the sovereignty of Ukraine and Western countries' economic sanctions against Russia reinforced the credibility of Putin's warning that external enemies, principally in North America and Western Europe, were hostile toward Russia and constantly sought to undermine its security.

The sharply heightened perception of a threat from the outside facilitated the effort by the Putin regime (which it already had stepped up before February 2014) to persuade the majority of Russians of the necessity of internal unity, and reinforced the credibility of the regime's campaign to portray the minority who opposed the political regime as disloyal to their country because they served the interests of foreign governments. Those who led the major political protests that began in December 2011 have been divided between those who have supported the Russian government's policy toward Ukraine and those who have opposed that policy, and those who opposed it have become more and more isolated, as they are the targets of hatred that the mass media have focused on them. Through its impact on public opinion inside Russia, the annexation of Crimea and intervention in Luhansk and Dontesk have strengthened the legitimacy of the Putin regime, providing additional reassurance of its stability.

The Use of Ideology by the Putin Regime

As we have seen, some commentators recently have asserted that the political regime of Vladimir Putin has produced a new ideology. The evidence that has been examined in this paper points to a more complex reality. That evidence does not show that Putin's core values have changed since he first became president of Russia. Indeed, his programmatic statement of December 1999 still serves as a good guide to his central values, with its emphasis on political stability, social consensus, and national strength. From the day that manifesto was published to the present time, Putin's highest priorities have not changed,[132] but in some ways the manner in which he hopes to realize those values has changed, as conditions have

[132] Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, 2015, 388.

المنارة للاستشارات

changed, leading him to revise his assessment of the factors that threaten the stability of the regime that has been institutionalized under his leadership. His interpretation of those threats apparently has persuaded him that there is a need to assemble a collection of themes with the explicit label of a conservative ideology for Russia.

Perhaps one reason that Putin refrained from openly endorsing an ideology for several years after he came to power is that such a comprehensive system of beliefs is likely to penetrate the sphere of private life, reaching into every area of a person's behavior. Putin was born and raised in the Soviet system, and therefore was thoroughly familiar with that tendency of Marxist-Leninist ideology. His presidential address in 2005 was the first of those annual addresses in which he said that he was going to discuss "ideological" questions.[133] In that speech he showed his awareness of the danger that an official ideology might invade people's personal affairs when he quoted Ivan Il'in, a Russian philosopher whose writings Putin has often cited. Putin told his audience, "State power, wrote the great Russian philosopher Ivan Il'in, has its limits," and then quoted that philosopher as explaining, "The state should not intrude in moral, family, and everyday life, or, without extreme necessity, inhibit people's economic initiative and creativity."[134] Putin seemed to be trying to reassure Russians that any development of ideology under his leadership would not go that far. As recently as December 2012 he attempted to provide further reassurance when he remarked, "Attempts by the state to encroach on the sphere of people's convictions and views are absolutely a manifestation of totalitarianism. For us, that is absolutely unacceptable. We are not preparing to go down that path."[135] Yet, as we have seen, recently he has placed more emphasis on the means of achieving unity in society—the *skrepy*, the braces or clamps that can bind the society together and guard against the danger of internal division. Putin's frequent references to clamps imply, and recent actions by the regime confirm, that he is now willing to use more aggressive means of enforcing the boundaries that define the framework of national unity.

During the first several years after Putin came to power, while he placed first priority on protecting Russia's independence, he mainly focused on the *economic* basis of his country's sovereignty and its status in the world. (That emphasis was evident in his programmatic statement of December 1999.) Recently, however, he has shifted to a more explicit emphasis on the *cultural* basis of his country's capacity to protect its right to follow its own path in accordance with its unique national traditions. As Putin has entered into the culture wars, anti-Western themes have moved

[133] Putin, "Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniiu," 2005.

[134] Ibid.

[135] Putin, "Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniiu," 2012.

المنارة للاستشارات

closer to the core of his world view,[136] and opposition to Western liberalism has become more essential for Russia's national identity, as perceived by Putin. For years after he came to power, Putin refrained from claiming that post-Soviet Russia had created a model that others would be asked to imitate.[137] But recently he has become more willing to present his regime and its worldview as a model that others around the globe may approve and some states may imitate, so he has begun to reawaken the spirit of messianism that was inspired by some thinkers in tsarist Russia and was inherent in the official Soviet ideology.

Putin's emphasis on the importance of a unity of moral values for members of the Russian national community also calls into question his previous pledge that the state will not interfere in the personal life of the citizen. If challenges to traditional moral values are among the main sources of instability, and if the primary function of the state is to preserve stability, how can the political authorities refrain from intrusion into the sphere of private life? In his presidential address in 2012, Putin called for strengthening "the stable spiritual-moral foundation of society," and identified education, culture, and youth policy as the areas that "above all are the space for forming a morally harmonious person, a responsible citizen of Russia."[138] How can institutions controlled by the state strive to shape a "morally harmonious person" without entering into the realm of personal life? And we should recall that in 1999, in an interview for his biography, Putin said that above all else Russia needs something like the Moral Code of the Builder of Communism. That code, which was adopted by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the early 1960s, when Nikita Khrushchev was in power, contained mandatory guidelines for all aspects of the life of each individual.[139] There is a tension between Putin's promise that the state will not intrude in the citizen's private life and his insistence that the state must play a major role in molding the morality of all members of Russian society. Putin's current thinking poses a threat to the unwritten "nonaggression pact" between the regime and Russian citizens, which astute observers have described,[140] involving an implicit bargain in which citizens will not expect to control the actions of the state, and the regime will not invade the realm of personal behavior. In the long run the threat to that basis of mutual accommodation may have far-reaching implications for many Russians, and not just for those with dissenting political views.

[136] Gurvich, "Bezvremen'e kak rezul'tat stabilizatsii."

[137] Evans, "Putin's Legacy," 907.

[138] Putin, "Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniiu," December 12, 2012

[139] Evans, *Soviet Marxism-Leninism*, 91-92.

[140] Maria Lipman and Nikolai Petrov, "Obshchestvo i grazhdane v 2008-2010 gg.," Moskovskii Tsentr Karnegii, *Rabochie materialy*, 2010, no. 2, 5.

المنارة للاستشارات

Conclusion: Implications of Putin's Conservative Ideology

In accordance with an identity management strategy of social creativity, Putin claims that Russia's foreign policy is guided by superior ethical and legal standards, since it allegedly supports international institutions and seeks to protect global stability, in the face of reckless attempts by the United States to achieve unlimited dominance. Putin also argues that Russia is a bastion of defense for traditional moral standards within its own society, and he says that his regime's conservative stance on social mores had evoked a positive response in many other countries. In accordance with the strategy of social creativity, Putin has chosen to focus on a different set of criteria of comparison with the major Western powers, drawing attention away from levels of economic development or the degree of institutionalization of democratic norms (the conventional standards of assessment of the status of nations in the post-Cold War period), and he asserts that, in relation to the criteria that he considers to be more important, Russia should be assessed more favorably, and Western states should be regarded more negatively. It would be easy to trace some similarities between the arguments that were encompassed by the concept of the "socialist way of life" in the mid-1970s under Brezhnev and the themes of the version of conservative ideology that is being promoted under Putin.

At any rate, it is clear that the Putin leadership had resolved to place primary emphasis on a strategy of social creativity, to abandon the strategy of social mobility that had sought acceptance of Russia by the Western democracies, and to continue and even increase emphasis on the secondary strategy of social competition, now defined more explicitly in terms of the elements of military strength and the degree of effectiveness in using force.[141] The content of the current ideology of Russia's leadership lends credence to the argument that the government has reacted to perceived threats to security, both in terms of threats to the security of Russia as a nation, and challenges to the stability of the political regime that Putin has constructed. The analysis in this article supports the interpretation that, after the large-scale protests during the winter of 2011-2012, the fear of threats to the stability of the political regime was a powerful source of motivation, so that, as Igor' Zevelev puts it, "internal political considerations ever more had an effect on the course of foreign policy. "[142] Putin's reaction to the sudden transfer of power in Ukraine in February of 2014,

---

[141] On Putin's recent emphasis on the importance of Russia's military strength, and particularly on his country's status as a major nuclear power, see Tat'iana Stanovaia, "Put' vokrug Putina. Piat' vyvodov iz fil'ma o prisoedinenii Kryma," *Slon.ru*, March 17, 2015; and Dmitrii Ivanov, "Burnyi rost na rynke konservatizma," *Profil'*, March 23, 2015.

[142] Zevelev, "Granitsy russkogo mira," 37. Another commentator has said that, for Russia's political regime, "The internal enemy is becoming the main threat to Putin." Tatiana Stanovaia, "Pochemy 'piataia kolonna' opasnee Zapada?," *Slon.ru*, December 2, 2014.

المنارة للاستشارات

following years of expansion of Western influence in the countries closest to Russia, showed that his perception of the threat to the security of his country and his regime had been heightened. It is safe to say that the recent changes in the ideas promoted by the government of Russia have been related to shifts in that government's strategy in its relations with other nations and in dealing with its own society, whose ultimate consequences must still be uncertain but surely will be far-reaching. It is already apparent that Putin's adoption of an identity management strategy that places primary emphasis on social creativity signifies an ideological challenge to Western states and societies on a level that is more fundamental than that of any issues that have arisen previously during the post-soviet years. Now Putin not only rejects the ethical and political values of Western countries as standards that might guide other nations, but insists that the Russian state defends values that can compete with Western liberalism for international influence.[143] Now his promotion of conservative ideology as a means of unifying his nation may make us wonder whether the heightened demand for uniformity in political views and moral values will negate Putin's previous promise that the state would not interfere in the most personal aspects of the daily lives of Russian citizens.[144]

[143] Lipman and Malashenko, "The End," 13: "Indeed, Moscow has not only accepted the values gap between itself and the EU but has begun to proudly advertise its own more conservative values, such as national sovereignty, religious faith, and traditional family."

[144] Sakwa, *Putin Redux*, 47.

المنارة للاستشارات

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

المنارة للاستشارات