Interview with Nikolay Koposov
PUTIN'S ACTIONS AND IDEOLOGY ARE CHANGING THE WORLD, MAKING IT POTENTIALLY UNSAFE FOR EVERYONE FOR GENERATIONS TO COME

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Does the Russian Federation currently have a state ideology, and if so, what are its characteristics?[1]

– I think such an ideology has existed for quite some time. Ideology is a rather vague concept. Of course, Putinism does not reach the level of ideologies like Marxism or liberalism because of the absence of bright theoretical minds and the pragmatic tendency to subordinate ideology to propaganda. However, if we lower the bar and understand ideology somewhat broadly, it clearly exists in Russia. I would not call any system of beliefs or symbols an ideology. It is sometimes argued that anything with a symbolic dimension is an ideology. In my opinion, this definition is too broad. I prefer to understand ideology as located at an intermediate level between any system of beliefs and a theoretically grounded socio-political doctrine. Historians, in general, like vague concepts. Sometimes, they seem to correspond better to history itself.

In Russia, we see a set of purposefully promoted political attitudes that are contradictory and poorly articulated. These attitudes are inseparable from images, emotions, and symbols but sometimes entail simplified theoretical models. And the fact that dissent in Russia is punishable points to the existence of a state ideology.

In her book *Memory Makers: The Politics of the Past in Putin's Russia*,[2] **Jade McGlynn argues that history politics has replaced ideology in Russia. When exactly do you think this happened, and what institutions were behind this process?**

– I like her book, but she is not the only one who thinks so. We can probably agree with that if we understand ideology in the narrow sense we have just discussed. But I would rather talk about a shift from ideologies based on relatively articulated conceptions of global history to ideologies based on fragmented collective memories. There can also be ideologies based on economic theory, such as neoliberalism, which, unlike liberalism, does not need any consistent master narrative and relies on manipulated collective memories to make sense of the past.

When Putin came to power, influential segments of Russian ruling circles and society at large still shared a vague, fading, but essentially liberal ideology. Yeltsin's regime retained elements of liberalism until its very end, although it increasingly used nationalist motives, authoritarian tendencies, and elements of memory politics. However, it was still based

1 The interview was recorded on 25 August 2023. AREI's editorial board might not share the interviewee's views or opinions.
2 Jade McGlynn, *Memory Makers: The Politics of the Past in Putin's Russia* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).

on a liberal narrative adapted to Russian conditions; recall, for example, the idea of a "liberal empire".[3]

In the first years of his rule, when Alexander Voloshin[4] was his chief of staff and the new team was not yet fully formed, Putin used some elements of liberal ideology. Relatively liberal economic reforms, prepared by Yeltsin's government in the 1990s, were implemented in the early 2000s, and Russia's "infiltration" into European and international organizations continued. The liberal ideology disappeared gradually. At some point, there remained no room for it in Russia's political and cultural environment. Only some elements of neoliberal economic theories – or, rather, recipes – remained, but not to such an extent that one could speak of a liberal ideology.

The transition from history-based ideologies to the politics of memory-based ideologies as the dominant form of legitimizing power relationships and social institutions is not a specifically Russian phenomenon; it is also noticeable in other countries. Moreover, in Russia and elsewhere, it began well before Putin. The cult of the Second World War became a central element of Soviet ideology in Brezhnev's USSR. As liberal ideas weakened in the 1990s and the 2000s, the Kremlin, unable or unwilling to rely on them, leaned increasingly toward a politics of memory, quite in line with global processes. However, as is often the case in Russia, this happened in a highly exaggerated form.

One of the first steps was changing the national anthem.[5] This was an attempt to seize the initiative from the opposition, particularly the Communist Party (KPRF), which had already become a national-populist party by then. The national-communist opposition had to be domesticated, and Putin's advisers succeeded in doing so during the first years of his rule. Of course, there was an element of memory politics in this.

3 The concept of "liberal empire" refers to a concept that combines the ideas of liberalism and imperial ambitions. In Russia, the term was developed and actively used in political-intellectual circles in the early 2000s. The main promoter of this concept was Anatoly Chubais, who in 2003 came up with the idea of a "liberal empire" as a model for Russia's foreign policy and economic expansion. In this context, "empire" did not imply the traditional conquest of territories but more emphasized economic and cultural influence on neighbouring states. However, the term aroused much controversy and criticism. Some saw it as Russia's attempt to maintain control over the former republics of the Soviet Union, while others saw it as a manifestation of a hybrid policy that combines incompatible ideas of liberalism and imperialism.

4 Alexander Voloshin is a Russian politician. He was born on 3 March 1956 in Moscow. Voloshin was educated at the Moscow Institute of Transport Engineers (now the Russian University of Transport). In the 1990s, he began his career in politics and public administration, working on economic reforms. In 1999–2000, Voloshin was head of the Russian Presidential Administration under Boris Yeltsin and then continued his work under Vladimir Putin (until 2003). He played a significant role in the transfer of power from Yeltsin to Putin. He is considered one of the key figures who ensured a smooth political transition and consolidation of Putin's power at the beginning of his rule. After leaving government service, Voloshin went into business and was involved in major Russian companies and corporations.

5 After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Mikhail Glinka's "Patriotic Song" became the anthem of the Russian Federation. Putin proposed bringing back the melody of the Soviet anthem, written by Alexander Alexandrov, but with a new text that would be relevant to post-Soviet Russia. The new text was developed by Sergei Mikhalkov, the author of the original text of the Soviet anthem. Vladimir Putin signed a decree changing the Russian anthem on 30 December 2000. The new anthem elicited mixed reactions: on the one hand, it was supported by many veterans and supporters of continuity; on the other hand, some saw the return of the Soviet anthem melody as a symbol of attempts to revive elements of the Soviet past.

The celebration of the 60th anniversary of the victory in the Second World War in 2005 was another decisive moment, although the rise of the war mythology had begun earlier: Putin created the Organizing Committee "Victory"[6] a month after coming to power, and huge funds were invested in this project. The large-scale propaganda campaign of 2004–2005 to prepare for the anniversary of the victory, as well as the strengthening of state control over business and society in general after the fall of Voloshin and the arrest of Khodorkovsky in 2003, contributed to the popularization of the cult of a strong state and the Second World War. Notably, Putin's ideology was created by people who were cynical but not stupid. Many of them were well-read, including Gleb Pavlovsky.[7]

As far as I know, Pavlovsky played a decisive role in Viktor Yanukovych's election campaign in 2004?

– Yes, Pavlovsky played on many "chess boards". Yanukovych's campaigns (especially in 2010) were saturated with Russian and Soviet patriotic motifs: the war cult was central to them. At the same time, an attempt was made to split Ukrainian society by contrasting the east and west of the country. War-related themes were also used here. This was essentially Pavlovsky's work, although not only his. Those people read a lot, although they did not always fully understand what they read. For example, they read the works of Pierre Nora and his followers, from which they borrowed the idea of the "age of memory". And we should not underestimate the contribution of pro-Russian Ukrainian politicians, who sometimes spoke like Russian nationalists.

Pavlovsky emphasized in his public speeches and articles that the politics of memory had become a winning ideological card. His article on memory, published in 2008, marked a critical moment when it

6 The Victory Committee was created in 2004 by Russian President Vladimir Putin to prepare the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Victory in the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945. The committee included representatives of various departments and public organizations, as well as heads of major Russian companies. The main task of the committee was to hold large-scale celebrations on 9 May 2005, as well as to prepare cultural and educational projects aimed at popularizing and preserving the memory of the victory over Nazism.

7 Gleb Pavlovsky (1951–2023) was a Russian political analyst, publicist and political consultant who had a significant influence on Russian politics in the 1990s and 2000s.
Pavlovsky was born in Odessa and educated at Moscow State University (MSU), where he studied history. In 1974, he came to the attention of the KGB for reading banned literature, participating in the dissident movement, and editing the samizdat magazine Poiski. In 1982, he was arrested and sent into exile until 1985. In 1995, he founded the Foundation for Effective Politics (FEP), which focused on political consulting and information campaigns. He played an important role in Boris Yeltsin's 1996 election campaign and then was actively involved in shaping Vladimir Putin's image, helping him in the presidential campaigns of the 2000s. He was also involved in Viktor Yanukovych's election campaign in Ukraine in 2004. In 2011, Pavlovsky split with the Kremlin and began criticizing Putin's policies.

became clear that this was not just the theoretical musings of a lone intellectual.[8] The first major raid on St Petersburg's Memorial occurred almost simultaneously.[9] This showed that an important decision had been made at the highest level: to focus on the politics of memory and to persecute those who disagreed with the official interpretation of the past.

2007–2008 were critical: a temporary transfer of power from Putin to Medvedev was being prepared, mass demonstrations and public protests were taking place, and the system seemed cracking. It was then that a harsh crackdown on dissent began, including the aforementioned attack on Memorial and the preparation of the first memory law. This also coincided with the sharp deterioration of relations with the West after Putin's Munich Speech in 2007 and especially the armed conflict with Georgia in 2008.

At this time, the politics of memory finally took center stage in the state ideology. But let me repeat that this tendency emerged much earlier. This was a long process in which it was difficult to identify a single turning point. The suppression of the 2011 mass protests and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 marked the following stages of this development.

To what extent do you think the processes taking place in Ukraine at that time could have influenced Russia's domestic policy?

– There is a direct connection here because, in 2004 and 2010, there were elections in Ukraine. Russia's intervention in them was prepared ideologically with the help of the war cult.

Who do you think shaped Putin's historical views?

– What is needed here is insider information, of which very little comes from the Kremlin. If we ever learn about that, it will be much later – just as we began to learn about what Stalin read decades after his death. Recent research into Stalin's library is very interesting – about the books he read and his notes in the margins. It helps us understand how Stalin

8 Gleb Pavlovsky's article on the politics of memory is seen as an important moment in the debate about the role of historical memory in Russian politics. Pavlovsky, a political technologist and one of the key architects of Putin's ideology in the early years of his rule, addressed in this article the use of historical memory to consolidate power and legitimize the state.
He argued that the politics of memory plays a central role in shaping a nation's identity and thus in supporting the political system. In his speeches and articles, Pavlovsky emphasized that control over collective memory is an important tool for power to manage perceptions of the past and thus influence the future.
In 2008, this discourse became particularly relevant given the increasing state intervention in the interpretation of historical events such the Second World War and the collapse of the Soviet Union.
See more: Vladimir Tol'c, 'Slovo i delo: ataka na "Memorial"', *Radio Svoboda*, 13 December 2008 <https://www.svoboda.org/a/476949.html> [accessed on 11 November 2024].

9 In December 2008, Russian law enforcement officers raided the office of the St Petersburg branch of the Memorial Society. The main purpose of the raid was to seize archival materials devoted to political repression of the Soviet period, in particular files relating to the activities of the NKVD and repressed citizens. The raid resonated widely in Russia and abroad as Memorial was known for its work in investigating the crimes of the totalitarian regime. Many perceived these actions as an attempt to suppress independent research work and limit access to the truth about the past.

worked with historical materials. As for Putin, he certainly has some basic education in history.

Do you mean training as part of the official Soviet school curriculum?

– Yes, of course, but Putin also graduated from the Leningrad University School of Law. In addition to the history of the CPSU, his university curriculum included several legal history disciplines, such as the history of state and law and the history of political theories. This is already some training, although we do not know how well he performed in those courses.

How good was the education provided by Leningrad University at that time?

– The university provided basic training. However, Putin's interests were far from science. He was a KGB officer and a mafioso, not a scientist or a practicing lawyer. When Putin came to power, first as vice-mayor of St Petersburg and then as a prominent figure in the Yeltsin administration, he was minimally interested in history. He did not come to power alone but with a team of people who, like him, had a Soviet education and Soviet ideas about history. These ideas were based partly on Marxism but mostly on patriotic claims because, in Soviet times, the CPSU history course was quite patriotic. And its Marxist component was quickly forgotten by post-Soviet rulers and politicians, including communists.

Later, in 2004, with the intensification of memory politics, the Putin administration began to be influenced by people like Dugin,[10] Yuriev,[11] and other ultra-nationalist, semi-fascist, or even openly fascist "theorists". These people appealed to the same ideas that Putin and his entourage had, especially nationalist ones; after all, they were also products of the Soviet education system. They created an ultra-nationalist, state-centered version of history for Putin and his team, with some elements of fascist ideology. Putin has been actively reproducing this ideology ever since, as Dina Khapaeva has shown in a recent book.[12]

10 Alexander Dugin (born 7 January 1962) is a Russian philosopher, political scientist, sociologist, writer and public figure known for his nationalist and Eurasianist views. He is one of the leading ideologists of modern Russian Neo-Eurasianism and the author of the concept of the "Fourth Political Theory". He is the author of numerous books, including Foundations of Geopolitics (1997), which outlines his ideas on Russia's role as a Eurasian superpower. His views include calls for Russian-led integration of the post-Soviet space and opposition to Western liberalism.

11 Mikhail Yuryev (1959–2019) was a Russian politician, businessman, publicist and writer. He was educated at Moscow State University, graduating from the Faculty of Biology. He was an active participant in Russian political life in the 1990s. In 1996–1997, he served as Deputy Chairman of the Russian State Duma. He is also known as a publicist and writer, being the author of The Third Empire, a utopian novel about a hypothetical future of Russia as a superpower. He is known for his nationalist and conservative views.

12 Dina Khapaeva, *Putin's Dark Ages Political Neomedievalism and Re-Stalinization in Russia* (London: Routledge, 2023). A Russian translation of her book, entitled Terror and Memory: Medievalism and Stalinism in Putin's Historical Politics, is forthcoming and will soon be in the public domain.

Has Dugin specifically influenced Putin's historical worldview? On the one hand, Dugin heads a department at Moscow State University, where he develops his theories, but do they have any real weight in state policy?

– It's hard to say anything definite here because many things happen behind closed doors. But I do not think Dugin or any other individual "theorist" has had a decisive influence. There was a whole circle of similar people who, at some point, began to actively promote ultra-nationalist ideas to the top, where there was growing interest in them.

Sometimes, these people sent their writings to the Presidential Administration. Many officials from the Administration and the Ministry of Culture joined the club, as well as political technologists and others who just "hung around". Some acted out of personal ambition and career considerations, others, perhaps, out of ideas. Together, they created an atmosphere where ideas were "brewing," gradually becoming part of state policy.

Much of this "literature" emerged from behind-the-scenes conversations, memos, and reports. This work continued for over twenty years. Officials who submit memos to the president's desk always have influence, but they know their influence depends on how much the president likes their ideas.

Who then oversees historical policy: the Ministry of Culture? On the one hand, there is Vladimir Medinsky,[13] who directly stated that historical myth is much more important than historical accuracy; on the other hand, there is the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation.

– Virtually all major government agencies have departments and strategies for implementing memory politics. For example, Shoigu started to deal with this topic when he was head of the Ministry of Emergency Situations. His ministry's website had an extensive section devoted to history, which is funny – where is the Ministry of Emergency Situations, and where is history politics?

I studied this issue in the context of the so-called memory laws. In 2009, Shoigu played a key role in promoting the first version of the memory law, which was adopted in 2014.[14] He spoke at various meetings, including the Organizing Committee "Victory" and meetings with veterans,

13 Vladimir Medinsky (born 18 July 1970) is a Russian politician. He is one of the leading ideologists of Russian state cultural policy. From 2012 to 2020, he headed the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation. Medinsky was born in Smila, Ukraine; then he moved to Russia, where he graduated from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO). In the 1990s, he worked in public relations and became involved in political activities. In the 2000s, Medinsky became a deputy to the State Duma from the United Russia party and chaired the Culture Committee. As Minister of Culture, Medinsky actively supported projects related to the revival of historical memory, popularization of patriotism, and strengthening of Russian cultural identity and traditional values.

14 This law, which criminalizes the dissemination of knowingly false information about Soviet policy during the Second World War, was passed in 2014.

proving the need for such a law. In late January 2009, it was announced that such a law would be adopted, and even earlier, a working group for its preparation was created under the leadership of Konstantin Zatulin.[15] Zatulin was Luzhkov's man[16] but simultaneously had contact with various "patriotic" political forces.

Of course, the military and the law enforcement structures also supported the war cult because they have always been involved in patriotic education. When Shoigu became the head of the Ministry of Defence, this cult received a new impetus there. Since the 1990s, this Ministry's political propaganda department has been reorganized several times. Its history goes back to the 1917 Revolution, Trotsky, and the Red Army, but it was not disbanded after the fall of the USSR, even during the liberal reforms. The people who ran the propaganda institutions adapted to new conditions and then again to even newer ones. As a result, Soviet propaganda did not disappear, and the country plunged back into military-patriotic work. The government introduced new "historical" remembrance days, increased veterans' privileges, and so on. This began in the mid-1990s.

The Foreign Ministry also actively promoted Putin's commemorative agenda, not just Lavrov, although he spoke out most on the subject. All Russian embassies monitored historical memory-related events in the Czech Republic, Poland, Ukraine, and other countries, provoking diplomatic scandals, such as in Latvia and Estonia.[17]

15 Konstantin Zatulin (born 7 September 1958) is a Russian politician, State Duma deputy, public figure and political scientist. He graduated from the Faculty of History of Moscow State University. In the 1990s, he became known as an expert on relations with the former Soviet republics. Co-founder and director of the Institute of CIS countries. Takes conservative positions. Criticizes the West and its policy towards Russia.

16 Yuri Luzhkov (1936–2019) was a Russian politician, mayor of Moscow from 1992 to 2010. He was born on 21 September 1936 in Moscow. He graduated from the Moscow Institute of Petrochemical and Gas Industry. Luzhkov began his political career in the 1970s, holding various positions in the government system. In 1992, he was appointed mayor of Moscow by decree of President Boris Yeltsin and was subsequently re-elected to the position. Luzhkov was known as a conservative politician, a supporter of strong presidential power and strengthening state institutions. In 2010, Luzhkov was dismissed by a decree of President Dmitry Medvedev, which caused a great public outcry. He died on 10 December 2019 in Munich.

17 A scandal involving the demolition of Soviet monuments in Estonia in 2007 involved the relocation of the Bronze Soldier, a monument to Soviet soldiers erected in the centre of Tallinn. The monument symbolized the Soviet Union's victory in the Second World War, but for many Estonians it was also a symbol of the Soviet occupation. The Estonian government decided to move the monument from Tõnismägi Square to a military cemetery in Tallinn, which sparked mass protests among Estonia's Russian-speaking population and led to a diplomatic crisis between Russia and Estonia. Events came to a head in April 2007, when the protests culminated in riots and clashes with the police, known as "Bronze Night". The riots lasted several days, damaged buildings and cars, injured dozens of people and killed one. Russia sharply condemned Estonia's actions, calling the relocation of the monument an insult to the memory of those who died in the Second World War. Russian authorities said Estonia was violating the rights of the Russian-speaking minority and trying to rewrite history. Russia responded to the events in Tallinn with protests outside Estonian diplomatic offices, and cyberattacks on Estonian government websites and banks caused major infrastructure disruptions. The incident strained relations between Russia and Estonia and became a symbol of a broader conflict over historical memory and attitudes toward the Soviet past in the Baltic States and other former Soviet republics.

The statements of the Russian Ambassador to Poland, Sergey Andreev, are worth mentioning![18]

– Exactly. Of course, the Foreign Ministry was actively involved in all of this. I'm afraid one cannot be a successful diplomat in present-day Russia without accusing other nations of "Russophobia". The Ministry of Culture and Medinsky himself did the same. One should not forget his activities in the field of education either. The players in this field also include the State Duma, the Council of the Federation, the Presidential Administration, and the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS), not to mention the *Russky Mir* ("Russian World") organization.

As far as I know, Chubaryan[19] has been involved in this at the Russian Academy of Sciences for quite some time?

– Yes, that's right. I sympathized with him at first. He was a relatively liberal Soviet academic administrator, and in the 1990s, he supported the Russian "branch" of the *Annales* School and such historians as Bessmertny,[20] Gurevich,[21] and Batkin.[22] He played quite a positive role then. But later, he became a Putinist – an apparatchik is an apparatchik. Chubaryan is said to have been involved in preparing Putin's history-related speeches and articles and developing new history curricula and textbooks.

Many historians working for major universities and research institutes have participated in this ideological work and have never tried to hide it. Of course, some universities and institutes resisted the government, but they were gradually brought under control or closed. Today, there are no independent educational institutions in Russia. It is hard to name

18 Russian Ambassador to Poland Sergey Andreyev has repeatedly made scandalous statements about Poland's role in the Second World War. In September 2015, Andreyev was summoned to the Polish MFA following an interview in which he claimed that Poland was responsible for the start of the war, thereby causing outrage on the Polish side. In April 2016, in an interview with Onet.pl, Andreyev stated that "being a Russophobe in Poland gets you benefits", which also drew criticism. These and other remarks by the ambassador have contributed to the deterioration of Russian-Polish relations. See 'Posol RF v Pol'še vyzvan v MID iz-za ocenok Vtoroj mirovoj vojny', *TASS.ru*, 28 September 2015 <https://tass.ru/politika/2295833> [accessed on 11 November 2024]; Katarzyna Szewczuk, 'Ambasador Siergiej Andriejew: bycie rusofobem w Polsce bardzo się opłaca', *Wiadomości Onet*, 14 April 2016 <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/tylko-w-onecie/ambasador-siergiej-andriejew-bycie-rusofobem-w-polsce-bardzo-sie-oplaca/nxn1x5?utm_source=chatgpt.com_viasg_wiadomosci&utm_medium=referal&utm_campaign=leo_automatic&srcc=undefined&utm_v=2> [accessed on 11 November 2024].

19 Alexander Chubaryan (born 1931) is a Russian historian, academician of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS), a specialist in the history of international relations and modern history. For a long time he headed the Institute of General History of the Russian Academy of Sciences. He actively participated in international scientific projects aimed at preserving historical memory and often acted as a consultant on historical policy and education.

20 Yuri Bessmertny (1923–2000) was a Soviet and Russian historian, specialist in the history of medieval Western Europe, Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor. He worked at the Institute of General History of the Russian Academy of Sciences and made a significant contribution to the development of Russian historical research.

21 Aron Gurevich (1924–2006) was a prominent Soviet and Russian historian, a specialist in medieval history and mentality. Gurevich is considered one of the founders of the school of historical anthropology in Russia, which investigated the mental structures and worldviews of the people of medieval Europe.

22 Leonid Batkin (1932–2016) was a Soviet and Russian historian, culturologist and philosopher, a specialist on the Renaissance, an active participant in the political life of the perestroika era, and the initiator of the Moscow Tribune political club.

a Russian educational or research institution with no history of participating in such matters.

It turns out that every university in Russia has been an actor of historical policy in one form or another.

– Yes, independent institutions and associations such as Memorial have gradually been replaced by state-owned or ostensibly independent ones fully controlled by the authorities: the Russian Historical Society,[23] the Russian Military Historical Society,[24] and the Historical Memory Foundation.[25] It suffices to look at the people who head these organizations: Patrushev,[26] Naryshkin,[27] Medinsky, and so on. Or take the Institute for Scientific Information on Social Sciences of the Russian Academy of Science. Academician Pivovarov,[28] considered a liberal, had long headed it, yet a team of nationalistically minded historians linked to Medinsky's Military Historical Society also formed there. Another example is one of the leading

23 The Russian Historical Society (RHS) is a public organization founded to promote the study and popularization of Russian history. It was originally founded in 1866 and existed until 1917. In 2012, the organization was reconstituted by a state initiative. The main purpose of RIO, according to its charter, is to promote the study of Russian and world history, support historical research and the preservation of historical memory, and promote educational initiatives in the field of history. In practice, RIO has become a tool for promoting state history policy. Since its re-establishment, RIO has been chaired by Sergei Naryshkin, who also heads the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service.

24 The Russian Military Historical Society (RVIO) is a public organization founded in 2012 on the initiative of the Russian Ministry of Culture and with the support of President Vladimir Putin. The main goal of the RVIO is the study, popularization and preservation of Russia's military-historical heritage. The Society organizes historical reenactments, exhibitions, conferences and educational projects dedicated to Russian military history. RVIO also participates in the publication of scientific and educational materials, as well as in the restoration of monuments and memorials related to Russian military history. The Chairman of the Russian Military Historical Society is the Minister of Culture of the Russian Federation, which emphasizes RVIO's close connection with government structures and its role in shaping historical policy.

25 The Historical Memory Foundation is a Russian non-profit organization founded to study and popularize history, with a special focus on the events of the Second World War, Stalinist repressions and historical memory. The Foundation was established in 2008 to support research aimed at preserving the historical truth about the tragic events of the twentieth century and to counter attempts to rewrite history. The Foundation also promotes international contacts in the field of historical memory and actively participates in public debates on history and its interpretation. It maintains close ties with state structures and plays an important role in shaping and promoting Russian historical policy. The Director of the Foundation is the Russian historian Alexander Dyukov, who is known for his imperial views.

26 Nikolai Patrushev (born 11 July 1951) is a Russian politician, Army General, Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation (2008–2024). Patrushev is a key figure in Russian politics and is a member of Putin's inner circle. He was born in Leningrad (now St Petersburg) and graduated from the Leningrad Shipbuilding Institute and later from the USSR KGB Higher School. In 1975, he began his career in the state security agencies, where he worked his way up from an operative to the head. From 1999 to 2008, Patrushev headed the Federal Security Service (FSB), succeeding Vladimir Putin. In 2008, Patrushev was appointed Secretary of the Russian Security Council, remaining an influential figure in defence, national security, and foreign policy. Patrushev is also known for his conservative views and support for increased state control in various spheres of society.

27 Sergey Naryshkin (born 27 October 1954) is a Russian politician and Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) since 2016. He is a key figure in Russian politics and national security and is a member of Putin's inner circle. He was born in Leningrad (now St Petersburg) and graduated from the Leningrad Mechanical Institute and then from the USSR KGB Higher School, which was the beginning of his security career. In the 1990s, he worked in various positions in the Russian administration, dealing with economic and foreign economic issues. From 2004 to 2008, he served as Deputy Chief of Staff of the Russian Government. From 2008 to 2011, he was Head of the Russian Presidential Administration, and from 2011 to 2016, he was Chairman of the State Duma. In 2016, he was appointed director of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). Naryshkin is also an active participant in a number of state commissions and committees related to Russia's national security and foreign policy.

28 Yuri Pivovarov (born 1950) is a Russian historian and political scientist, Doctor of Historical Sciences, Academician of the Russian Academy of Sciences. He is a specialist in the history of political doctrines, Russian history, and comparative politics. For a long time, he headed the Institute of Scientific Information on Social Sciences (INION) of the Russian Academy of Sciences. He actively participates in public debates and criticizes authoritarian tendencies in contemporary Russian politics.

Russian historians in the field of memory politics, Alexei Miller,[29] who formerly worked for this institute. He recently created the Centre for the Study of Historical Memory at the European University in St Petersburg. This university was one of Russia's most innovative and independent academic institutions for two decades, but this is no longer true. According to Miller, Russia's history politics is just a reaction to the anti-Russian politics pursued by the West and the East European countries. This is precisely what Pavlovsky claimed in his 2008 article and what "Putin understanders" worldwide say. Also, Miller is very critical of the so-called cosmopolitan memory, or the memory of the Holocaust, which has been central to Western memory politics since the 1980s and was designed to suppress national narratives. However, this politics, Miller argues, has failed because national narratives cannot be suppressed. Miller refers here to left-leaning Western historians critical of the cosmopolitan memory, which they view as an instrument of Western hegemony. Indeed, Western critics of Western narratives have proven useful to the Russian authorities, not for the first time in history. Nationalistically minded Russian scholars and propagandists actively use their ideas.[30]

Can this turn be said to be a reaction to globalization caused by the fear of losing cultural identity? To what extent do Eastern Europeans fear "dissolving" into the EU, and how does this relate to the Soviet past and the desire to build nation-states?

– Let us consider how similar things worked in the past. The USSR and the Warsaw Bloc countries had a Marxist ideology diluted with elements of identity politics, especially nationalism. These elements could not fully develop within the communist system and often became the basis of oppositional ideology. The collapse of the Soviet Bloc occurred largely because of the conflict between particularistic national narratives and the global Soviet narrative. In addition, many East European cultures were more in tune with European traditions than Russia was.

I suspect that Ukrainians understand the idea of "national particularity" better than I do because of my Russian experience. Yet, I think the universalist and humanist ideal of European integration fuelled this idea. Liberal nationalists in Eastern Europe often claim that "we are a Western nation".

29 Alexei Miller (born 1959) is a Russian historian, Doctor of History, leading researcher at the Institute of Scientific Information on Social Sciences (INION) of the Russian Academy of Sciences, a specialist in the history of Eastern Europe and the national question in the twentieth century. Miller is widely known for his research on the national policy of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, as well as Russian historical politics.

30 For more on the Kremlin's use of Western narratives, see Sergei Zhuk, *The KGB, Russian Academic Imperialism, Ukraine, and Western Academia, 1946–2024* (Lexington, 2024).

Why, despite the memory of the horrors of the Second World War the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya, does Russian society support the war against Ukraine? Witnesses and veterans of those conflicts are still alive, but this memory has not become a kind of "inoculation" for society, just like the popular line from a Soviet song: "as long as there is no war".

– It is difficult to determine precisely what attitudes prevail in Russian society. Is it the real "support," as some sociologists claim, or is it more of a desire to ignore what is happening? As in other authoritarian societies, a reliable assessment of public opinion is complicated.

If we step back from the data of sociological polls, we can note that there have been no mass protests of Russians against the war.

– No genuine mass protests were even against the pension reform, which affected millions of Russians. And in France, for example, large-scale demonstrations against a similar reform led to a deep political crisis. There have been almost no protests against mobilization in Russia either.

We could see people bringing flowers to Prigozhin's improvised memorial. It is hard to imagine what different ideological constructs are combined in the heads of these people.

– Let's try to explain this. Even though Putin has not been in prison, he is as much a representative of the criminal milieu as Prigozhin. Stalin's regime was criminal not only because of its crimes against humanity, but also because the country was run by real criminals led by Soso, a specialist in bank robbery. We see something similar now: the KGB-FSB, closely linked to the Russian mafia, is a criminal structure organized on the model of a mafia group.

Part of Russian society accepts this kind of "politics". For people who are not critical thinkers and who were poor for a long time, Putin's regime has brought some improvement. This has not been to Putin's credit; it is just that oil prices rose sharply at the beginning of his rule. However, ordinary Russians see much richer people around them and envy them, especially since their fortunes are very recent. How did they get rich? They stole! In most cases, this is true. So, the Russian makes an unambiguous conclusion: if he, too, wants to succeed, he must steal and resort to violence because, in his opinion, that's what everyone does. For example, Russian soldiers send loot from Ukraine back home to their families, who unhesitatingly use stolen washing machines as legitimate "trophies of our troops".

A quarter of a century under the rule of a criminal regime has led to severe degradation of moral values in a society that had already been

prepared for this by the Soviet regime (although the communist ideology had humanistic motives, albeit hypocritical and perverse, which to some extent affected the norms of behaviour). The attitudes formed in the environment of the KGB and mafia have contributed to the blurring of the concepts of good and evil, blurring their clear boundaries in the public consciousness.

Can we say that KGB/FSB officers, acting within their system, may not perceive their actions as crimes?

–I think they believe that the world lacks universal moral criteria, and those that exist serve only as a tool to promote private interests. This is a simplified Marxism for criminals. Millions of people have grown up in this atmosphere, and millions recognize only violence and robbery as the way the world is. It is hard to argue that such attitudes are inherent in the majority, but they are, I believe, widespread, and the minority that promotes them has considerable influence. This minority has educated millions whose views are based on such simple ideas. The general moral decay of society creates the ground on which specific propaganda imposed by television can motivate aggression and hatred.

"Average" Russian people often display anger, envy, and a tendency to steal. Beautiful words about the "good-natured" Russian people are just part of the positive image that every nation wants to have. However, the reality is that up to 80% of Russia's population were still serfs 150 years ago. Then, the country lived under the rule of a terrorist regime for another seventy years, albeit it softened in the last decades of its existence. Serfdom did not improve people, no matter how much Russian writers praised all sorts of Gerasims, Khoreys, and Kalinychs.[31]

After the events of 2014, we organized a screening of the excellent film *Winter on Fire*[32] about the Maidan revolution in Ukraine at Emory University. About two hundred people came. Afterward, we discussed it with the audience, and one of the key questions was: why is there no resistance in Russia while there is resistance in Ukraine? One of the reasons we discussed is that in Russia, serfdom existed from the late sixteenth century to 1861, while in Ukraine, it was introduced at the end of the eighteenth century. In the case of Russia, this is eight or nine generations; in the case of Ukraine, it is just two or three. This is a significant difference. In Russia, national pride often manifests in bitterness, compensating for centuries of internal humiliation. In Ukraine, on the contrary,

31 These are characters in Russian literature that represent peasants.
32 Documentary film directed by Eugene Afineevsky about the events of the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity in the winter of 2013–2014, also known as Euromaidan.

this pride, in many cases, manifests itself in freedom-loving behaviour. At least, I hope it does.

In the past, the source of morality was religion, which formed moral guidelines for new generations. In modern secular societies, this role is partly fulfilled by history – *Historia est Magistra Vitae*. But does it really influence the formation of moral values?

I'm afraid I disagree that history today is mainly used for moral education due to the decline of religion. History has had this purpose since antiquity.

However, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, historians began to avoid discussing moral issues with the general decline of religion. This position gradually triumphed with the formation of professional historiography. Over time, the motto of historians became "to understand but not to judge". Moral issues were taken out of the scope of their research. Modern historiography was formed in this spirit in Germany, France, and the United States, the countries that succeeded each other as its leaders. Only very recently, as part of the so-called ethical turn in historiography, historians began discussing the need to bring moral discourse back into historical research.

The role of the professional historian and public attitudes towards his work have also changed. A classic example is Le Roy Ladurie's book *Montaillou, an Occitan Village*,[33] published in 1975. Although it is about the fourteenth century, it sold 150 thousand copies. Tens or hundreds of thousands bought academic books on history in the 1970s and 1980s! Today, selling even a thousand copies is a success.

The relationship between the reading public, intellectuals, and universities has also changed. In the 1950s and 1970s, the number of universities in Europe and the United States increased dramatically. Many graduates continued to keep in touch with their alma mater, hoping someday to return and continue their academic careers as old universities expanded and new ones continued to be created. Throughout their lives, they remained part of the university's intellectual culture to some extent. In contrast, now that there are too many universities and too many students, most simply cannot maintain that connection. And there are fewer incentives – the proletarianization of academia is taking place, after all. Most students and graduates of European and American universities are hardly bearers of academic culture anymore: they rarely read scholarly books and are not interested in the internal life of their universities.

33 Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou, village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1975).

Richard Pipes remarked in an interview that in his time universities were a source of enlightenment and professional knowledge. Today, he says, universities are more like social institutions where people interact on a social level rather than studying in the former sense.

– This is indeed true: the figure of the scholar, the university professor, is no longer an attractive role model for students.

Under current conditions, historians are increasingly involved in new forms of cultural politics. This is due, among other things, to the decline of the historical profession's public role. Collective representations of the past, and occasionally even the historians' research agenda, are defined today primarily by politicians and the media. The autonomy of the academic milieu has largely been lost.

We have discussed the views of Russian politicians representing the regime. Is the Russian opposition ready to revise Russia's historical relations with the peoples of central and eastern Europe?

– The Russian opposition currently consists of disparate groups, often in conflict with each other and expressing very different views. Some in the opposition realize that the regime is using manipulative memory politics. However, many—perhaps most—still believe in the basic imperial myths on which this politics is based. Therefore, it is difficult to speak of a willingness to revise the history of Russia's relations with neighbouring nations.

So, if the opposition comes to power, we should not expect a revision of historical policy, de-imperialization of Russia, or at least a symbolic farewell to the imperial past?

– Revision can begin if the opposition comes to power, which is unlikely. However, Russian culture is imperial. Take Brodsky's poem "On the Independence of Ukraine"[34] or Bulgakov's "The White Guard". The imperial component is also inherent in many other national cultures.

Even if a liberal government led by pro-Western politicians suddenly came to power in Russia, complete de-imperialization is unlikely – at least, it will take a very long time.

34 Iosif Brodsky – On the Independence of Ukraine (1992), see Elvis Presley, *Iosif Brodskij – Na nezavisimost' Ukrainy (1992)*, online video recording, YouTube, 9 April 2015 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grFRNnPePJw> [accessed on 11 November 2024].

Could a conventional reformer like Khrushchev in Stalin's circle emerge in Putin's milieu?

– I don't think the inner circles of those dictators are comparable. Stalinism was an attempt to realize the communist project, at least at the level of ideology. Putin's regime lacks such a project and a "general party line". "United Russia" is not an analogue of the CPSU: it does not rule or lead the country to the "future". It is an instrument used for propaganda and mobilization – and, of course, for simulating the democratic process.

Reforming Putin's regime from within is not impossible but with certain reservations. People in his inner circle know they can be removed from power at any moment. Periodic – albeit very selective – purges of the state apparatus could create the motivation to dismantle the existing system. Yet Putin's regime does not practice repression against its inner circle. Prigozhin was an exceptional case, and key figures in leadership positions feel relatively safe, if not for their careers, at least for their lives and property. So, their motivation to end the terror and reform the regime to save themselves, which Khrushchev and the company had, is much weaker.

Public discontent will unlikely reach the level necessary to initiate reforms without a significant military defeat or economic crisis. Another possible scenario is if Putin dies or goes missing, and a power struggle among his associates begins.

Putin's regime is stable today thanks, among other things, to the instrumentalization of Russian culture. How important is cultural identity for the retention of power?

– Russian culture is highly contradictory – I think, more so than most other national cultures, due to the extreme and long-standing despotism of several consecutive political regimes. On the one hand, this culture is closely connected with the imperial component; on the other hand, it includes a robust tradition of struggle against it. Often, these opposites coexist in the work of the same author. This raises the thorny question of how to evaluate a particular cultural figure. For example, Dostoevsky, for all his talent and humanistic pathos, was an anti-Semite, a monarchist, and a gambler. Brodsky, despite his anti-Soviet views, wrote terrible things about Ukraine.

The question arises: does talent alone matter? Is it possible to read and honour Dostoevsky and Brodsky today? Is Tchaikovsky worth performing if his music is associated with imperial culture? These questions should be approached on a case-by-case basis. Some works of Russian

culture that have become part of the world's heritage cannot be expunged. Today, there is no rational reason not to perform, for example, Tchaikovsky's "Eugene Onegin," but it will probably be inappropriate to perform "Mazepa" for some time.

It is essential to maintain a balance: we should not label all Russian culture as exclusively imperial, but we should not idealize it. As for contemporary artists who support Putin's policies while enjoying the benefits of Western society, they should, in my opinion, be boycotted and deprived of earning opportunities and a comfortable life in the West. This part of Russian culture is dangerous, not only for Ukraine but for the whole world.

Putin's actions and ideology are changing the world, making it potentially unsafe for everyone for generations to come. Putin's regime has already caused many tragedies, including famine in Africa. It is a global evil that is spreading around the world, and Russian imperialism is a common problem that goes far beyond the war in Ukraine, even if this war is our focus right now. That is why this war requires a global solution, and Ukraine – as some, including in America, say – is today the first line of defense of the free world.

In the 90s, many believed that liberalism had triumphed in Russia, but the political situation began to unfold differently. How do you see Russia's future now?

– There is no clarity about Russia's future at this point. At the beginning of the war, it seemed that it wouldn't last long and the regime would fall... That all turned out to be naive. There's a sense of confusion in intellectual circles because too many hopes were pinned on what didn't come to pass. Unfortunately, I don't believe in the imminent collapse of Putin's regime, but I would be glad to be proven wrong.

Interview conducted by YANA PRYMACHENKO