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Dreams of a bygone era

Russia is on a quest for ‘traditional values’, where calls for family and patriotism clash with Soviet nostalgia and historical revisionism

‘We need to stop steering young women towards higher education.’ Contrary to what one might think, these are not the words of a religious fundamentalist but of a Russian senator. Margarita Pavlova, herself a university graduate and mother of three, thinks that young women should forget about a career and devote themselves to bearing children. That would help solve Russia’s demographic problem. The State Duma was thus considering banning abortions in private clinics, apparently at the behest of Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill.

Although this law foundered in the end, in some regions of Russia, private clinics subsequently announced that abortions would no longer be available. And in the Duma’s Health Protection Committee, there were heated discussions on the evils of condoms. Women under the age of 18, according to one female committee member, should take their pregnancies to term, come what may, because being a young parent is a wonderful thing. But that was just the tip of the iceberg. Recently, a draft law was put up for debate on banning ‘propaganda’ supposedly intended to encourage young people to remain childless.

Part of a larger campaign

These appallingly regressive initiatives have not come out of nowhere. A systematic campaign for ‘traditional values’ is currently being waged in Russia. A decree signed by President Vladimir Putin in November 2022 provides a list: ‘life, dignity, human rights and freedoms, patriotism, service to the Fatherland, high moral ideals, a strong family, creative work, priority of the spiritual over the material’. The document claims that it is incumbent on the state to reinforce ‘traditional Russian spiritual and moral values’ to counteract ‘destructive ideologies’ propagating ‘egoism, licentiousness and immorality’, not to mention ‘non-traditional sexual relations’. Such evils are alleged to come mainly from the United States and other ‘unfriendly countries’.

Russia's much-vaunted moral superiority over the decadent West has undergone something of a metamorphosis since the invasion of Ukraine. Starting out as mere lip service, it has come to be enshrined in legislation. Anything that deviates even slightly from the 'party line' is banned, eliminated or punished. Inconvenient authors who have spoken out against the war in Ukraine have been declared 'foreign agents', even terrorists. Libraries remove their books, even from the catalogue. The international 'LGBT movement' – which, ironically, doesn't actually exist as such – has been banned for its extremism. By contrast, museums are required to organise exhibitions on the 'special military operation' in Ukraine and schools are supposed to teach patriotism.

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There is no coherent ideology behind this torrent of bans and tighter restrictions. After all, what does 'traditional values' really mean? On one hand, Putin proclaims that families with eight or more children should become the norm, and makes a public display of his alleged commitment to Orthodoxy, but on the other hand, he believes that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century. Nostalgia for the Soviet Union is in full swing and, slowly but surely, even Stalin is being rehabilitated. It is well known that the Orthodox Church, which Putin professes to admire so much, was persecuted in the USSR. As for family values, in the 1980s, the Soviet Union led the world in terms of abortions, at around 4.5 million a year.

Not that these blatant contradictions appear to bother the Kremlin ideologues. On the contrary: the task of remaining in power requires clear legitimisation, and that calls for some sort of state ideology that seeks its justification in history. To this end, on 1 September 2023, for the first time since the fall of the Soviet Union, every school in Russia switched to using the same history textbooks. They provide citizens with the 'correct' interpretation of history. One of the authors is Presidential Advisor and former Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky. According to the introduction, the textbook's principal aim is 'the formation of a Russian civic identity and cultivation of patriotism among high school students'.

Both fear and longing for the past

Russian Historian and Human Rights Activist Sergei Lukashevsky, who headed the Sakharov Centre in Moscow until its closure in 2022, characterises the Kremlin's overall take on Russian history as something 'heroic and beautiful'. The ideology's prime focus is a strong state. 'It is forbidden to call into question the power of the people who lead this state or to express a negative view of any aspect of Russian history', the historian said.

At the same time, the Kremlin is subtly manipulating the nostalgia of many (especially older) Russians for the Soviet Union and thus their worries about a return to the 'wild 1990s', which followed the disintegration of this vast country. Indeed, fears of losing their country once again are key to understanding this generation's outlook. According to Lukashevsky, a strong state, backed by a strong president, and with the army and the church as its institutions, is indispensable for them. A popular aphorism doing the rounds on Russian social media is particularly apposite: 'we were so afraid of a replay of the 90s that we ended up in 1937'. Of course, that was the year Stalin's purges reached their height.

Putin demonstrated his obsession with history in his recent interview with US journalist Tucker Carlson. He launched into a 23-minute-long diatribe on the history of Ukraine and Russia, beginning in the year 862, leaving Carlson dumbstruck. This showcased the full range of the Kremlin's ideological contradictions.

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Ultimately, all these propaganda efforts are aimed at proving Russia's moral (and other) superiority over the decadent West. Russian propaganda even presents the war in Ukraine as a war against NATO. An aggressive anti-Westernism underpins this ideology. Having said that, when an American journalist goes to Moscow, his visit is positively celebrated and monopolises the whole of state media for days, which followed Carlson everywhere he went in Moscow, whether it was his visit to the Bolshoi Theatre or his admiration of an exhibit at the patriotic 'Russia' exhibition. Vladimir Solovyov even wanted to induct him into the Russian Union of Journalists, which he heads.

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a ‘prostration before the West’. In other words, precisely the opposite of what its propaganda so desperately struggles against, channelling the spirit of the campaign Stalin unleashed against ‘the worship of the decaying West’.

An important tenet of this anti-Western propaganda is the ‘cancel culture’, allegedly directed towards Russia in the West. But here, Putin’s regime is rather shooting itself in the foot. A list is circulating on social media of Russian writers who fell victim to state repression during various historical periods: ‘Pushkin was banned; Dostoevsky was condemned to death, then pardoned and banned; Tolstoy was excommunicated by the Church; Gumilev was shot; Mandelstam was banned and then killed; Brodsky was forced into exile; Solzhenitsyn was persecuted, banned and then exiled’. This mournful inventory concludes with the names of modern authors who have been exiled more recently, including Boris Akunin, Dmitry Glukhovsky and Lyudmila Ulitskaya. As one commentator wrote with painful irony: ‘Dear global community. Please don’t cancel Russian culture. Leave it to us.’



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