

and uncompromising line against secessionist Chechnya in the late 1990s and early 2000s, he now seems to be consolidating and extending his popular mandate by flexing great-power muscle against Ukraine and demonstrating that Russia does not flinch in the face of Western sanctions.

The annexation of Crimea and the tensed relations with Ukraine have therefore, no matter how deplorable

they are for Western democracies, added new elements of vitality to Putin's power base. Putin has advanced his position and his personal popularity has no doubt been strengthened in the short run. For Ukraine the price is high. For Russia itself and the surrounding world, the final price tag is unknown as yet, but the increasingly used expression about this time being the New Cold War does suggest that the development does not come for free.

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ANALYSIS

The Return of Ideology—Russia's New Sense of Mission¹

By Jens Siegert, Moscow

Abstract

Since returning to the Kremlin, Putin and his regime have moved away from the informal “social contract” of the 2000s, in which the state refrained from playing a role in shaping people's lives towards promoting a neo-ideology—a crude mixture of a sense of threat from and resentment towards the foreign and the human, neo-religious bigotry and an anti-Western and anti-modernizing geopolitical world view. While this neo-ideology may secure the regime a few additional years in power, it is likely to lead the country into decline, as it is scaring off exactly those people—the young, (well-)educated, mobile and entrepreneurial—needed to modernize Russia.

An important differentiating characteristic between the Soviet Union and Putin's Russia was, until recently, the widespread freedom of its people to define their lives as they wish. This freedom, the freedom to think what you want and to say what you think, to travel where you want to go, return when you like, to live with whom you wish, to love whom you wish, to work where you wish (all within the framework of given social and economic possibilities, naturally) was, moreover, a part of the often discussed (even though it was not set out in writing) “social contract” of the 2000s. According to this “contract”, Putin determines politics and controls the most important economic resources. But he also cares for the growing prosperity of as many people as possible, does not interfere in the private lives of his citizens, and does not interfere in what they think and believe.¹

Putin once even spoke of this last part of the “social contract” himself. In his first speech on the “state of the

nation” in front of both chambers of parliament in July 2000, he explained that he was “against the reintroduction of an official ideology in Russia in any form whatsoever.” There have been, time and time again since then, moments of temptation, above all in the case of recent history, to prescribe or forbid something or other. But on the whole, Putin kept his promise.

He probably actually believed that things are better that way (also, or perhaps above all, for himself). Because it is only in this combination that both strands of his power basis hold together: on one side the so-called “Gosudarstvenniki” (from Gosudarstvo—the state), those who always put the interests of the state first (it is towards these who Putin himself very obviously leans, ideologically and biographically). They stand for the “rise of the Russian state from its knees,” for a more self-aware policy towards the West, for the uncompromising approach in the second war with Chechnya and also for the gradually strengthening of limitations on citizens' participation rights. They now, unanimously, support the annexation of the Crimea peninsula and certainly will support further steps to destabilize the Ukraine as a whole.

¹ This article is a slightly revised and updated version of that found on Rights in Russia, which is available at: <<http://www.rightsinrussia.info/archive/comment/siegert/obscurantism>>

On the other side, Putin leans on a free-market liberal elite, many of whom grew rich and influential during the 1990s. Their (as it tends to be) free-market liberal economic policy is to increase Russia's prosperity, to make it great again, and, not unimportantly, through their economic successes, to secure Putin's sovereignty and thereby his power. Furthermore, this elite served, until recently, as a counterweight to the "Gosudarstvenniki" (this might change now in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis). This all worked very well until around the end of the decade. The majority of people in Russia were certainly satisfied with the result overall.

Then came the economic crisis. Confidence in a rosy future in the country took a hit. The discourse on modernisation under the interim president Medvedev brought a bit of hope and something of a breath of fresh air. But, as Medvedev stepped down in September 2011 and Putin came back, this air quickly ran out. What followed were the winter protests which no one thought possible and a real fear probably crept into the Kremlin that Putin's rule could soon be over.

The switch from an ideologically neutral, or better yet, only selectively and instrumentally ideological state of the 2000s, to one which calls for an ideological following, and, at the very least, restraint in dissent against it, showed itself at first in a change of concept. Instead of president of a whole, a "single" Russia, since early 2012 (the peak of the protests) Putin has claimed to be representing only the politics of an "overwhelming majority".

The outline of this form of politics was quickly sketched out. It can, very conveniently, be seen in the repressive measures used against the protesting opposition. The political classes have, ever since, been conducting themselves—as has been conveyed to western societies—like right-wing conservatives, religious zealots, closer to or already past the limits of obscurantism. The most prominent examples are the anti-homosexuality laws, the so-called Dima Yakovlev law forbidding the adoption of Russian children by US citizens, the law to "protect religious feelings" and the increasingly hysterical public discussion of apparent falsifications of history, in particular involving the Second World War (a full list would be very long). Taken together, these events have come to represent a kind of antithesis to the "Western" reviled (democratic) modernity.

At first, this development looked like a new, more tactical about-turn, thought up chiefly to secure sovereignty. Hardly anyone believed that all this could really be meant seriously. However, the whole lifestyle (and I do not fear this choice of words) of the ruling political class in Russia (and all the more so, the economic elite) has become completely Westernised, right down to family and wealth in the West.

And with time this crude mixture of a sense of threat and resentment towards the foreign and the human, neo-religious bigotry and a geopolitical world view has intensified into a kind of ideology. Not yet a very consistent one, but thoroughly usable one nonetheless. Internally, it is employed against the opposition and externally against the West.

Vladimir Putin gave credence to this ideological substrata in detail for the first time in September of last year in a half-hour speech before the so-called Valdai Club. A quick summary of the report is as follows: the West (in particular "Europe", by which the EU is meant) has strayed from its Christian-occidental path and deteriorated into a hotbed of decadence, sin and, from Putin's view probably the very worst of all, weakness (ideas straight from the grave of Oswald Spengler, a very popular man in Russia). A textbook example of this is the apparent rise of gays everywhere, which, from Putin's point of view, has led directly to discrimination against supporters of traditional sexual relationships.

A new (but essentially old) mission for Russia has arisen from this: saving the (Christian) West (even though it doesn't deserve it). This mission is leading to the discovery of interesting new allies in the West. In January this year, the French Front National leader, Marine Le Pen, was received in Moscow like a head of government on standby. There were meetings with Deputy Prime Minister, Dmitry Rogozin and the Chair of the State Duma, Sergei Naryshkin. It was not difficult for them to find common ground. Later on, members of Le Pen's organization, from the Italian Lega Nord, the Austrian FPÖ, the Belgium Vlaams Belang and other European right wing parties have been invited by the Russian government to "monitor" the illegitimate referendum in the Crimea peninsula and, to no one's surprise, they approved it as "free and democratic".

Elena Mizulina, member of the State Duma and the main agitator for the anti-homosexuality laws, was enthusiastically received as a guest speaker at a conference of the German political obscurantist scene in Leipzig at the end of November, organised among others by Thilo Sarrazin. And there has also been animated and friendly contact with religious fundamentalists from the USA, including from the same school as Pat Buchanan, occasionally referred to as "paleo-conservative".

There is not much fundamentally new in any of this. It was the preoccupation of the Soviet Union, not the West, to be the anti-West or the better West. A more accurate comparison in my view, however, would be with the late Russian Empire. It was then that many liberal men, like the Finance Minister, Sergei Witte from around 1890, and very conservative men, like Prime Minister, Pyotr Stolypin in the first decade of the 20th

century (who Putin refers to time and time again with clear veneration), tried to transform the country into a kind of dictatorship of modernisation using the power of the Tsarist autocracy. This approach was a reaction to the social and political rejection to which Russia (like the USA and Western and Central European countries before it) was submitted during the transition from an agricultural to an industrial country.

This autocratically led and controlled modernisation was thoroughly successful at the time. But, nonetheless, the basis on which the regime was built remained a pre-modern agricultural elite, with a world view which was already very out of fashion (to put it mildly) in other

places at the time. This elite was perched to grab the power of the Tsars, but the opportune time passed them and their rulers by. Something similar is threatening Putin. His new neo-ideological course has scared off just those people—the young, (well-)educated, mobile and entrepreneurial—who could pull off a modernisation of Russia today. This is, therefore, a course which can secure power for Putin for a few additional years (but also maybe not). But, the whole country could go to the dogs again in the process. One hundred years ago, things did not go well for Witte and Stolypin for very long.

Translated by Helen Corbett

About the Author

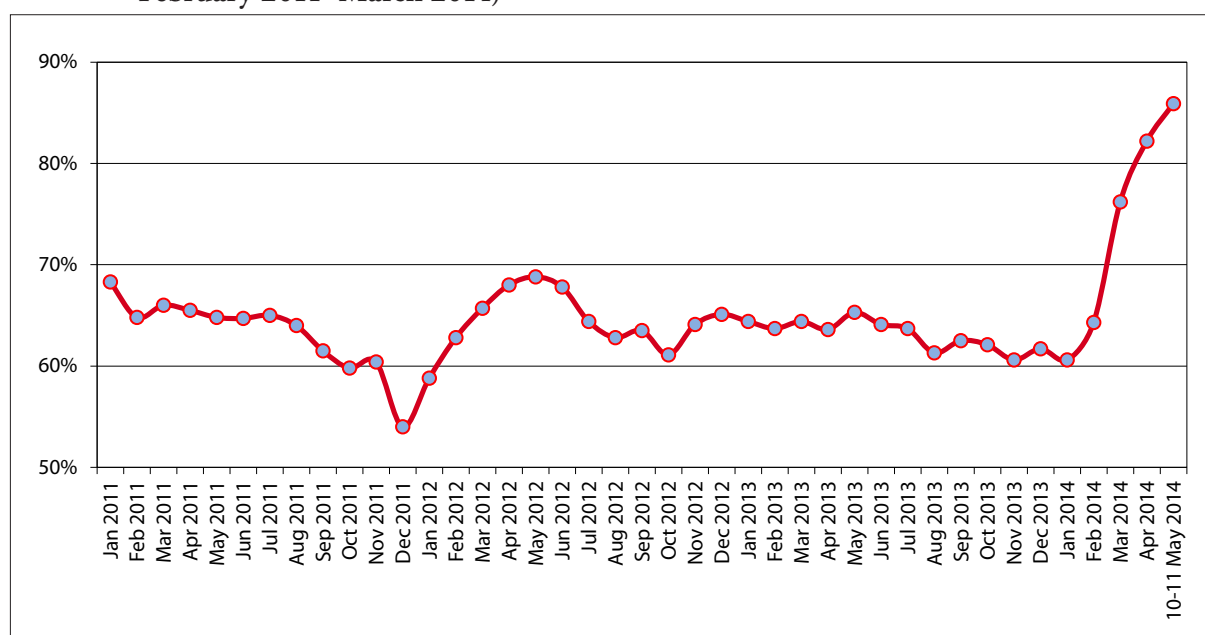
Jens Siegert is the Director of the Moscow office of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. He is an expert on Russian domestic and foreign policy with a special focus on civil society issues. He previously worked as a journalist in Moscow.

For more of Jens Siegert's analysis of contemporary developments in Russia, you can follow his *Russland-Blog* (in German) at <http://russland.boellblog.org/> and in the "Notizen aus Moskau" section of *Russland-Analysen*, available at: <http://www.laender-analysen.de/russland/>. English translations of some of his blog posting can be found on the *Rights in Russia* website, at <http://www.rightsinrussia.info/archive/comment/siegert/>

POLL

Putin As Leader

Figure 1: Do You Approve of Putin's Work? (Positive Answers in Percent, VTsIOM, February 2011–March 2014)



Source: representative opinion polls by VTsIOM, February 2011 – 22–23 March 2014, <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=114759>