



The Role of the Military in Russian Politics and Foreign Policy Over the Past 20 Years

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Abstract: The Vladimir Putin regime has framed the Russian national idea in terms of security and militarization, both domestically and internationally. This unifying vision emerged as a reaction against the 1990s and blended together a cultivation of militant and anti-Western patriotism, Soviet nostalgia, and religious orthodoxy. Emphasis on cultivation of the youth has been another key defining feature of these efforts. This vision required a growing Russian presence regionally and globally, which in turn necessitated restoration of Russian military power. It resulted in growing self-confidence, internal repressions, and external military interventionism. There are glimmers of hope, but the Putin regime has shown that it will fight to stay in power, and the cult of militarization which has permeated multiple aspects of the Russian society will influence Russia's uncertain future.

On May 9, 2000, the Russian Federation's newly inaugurated president, Vladimir Putin, met with World War II veterans. Every year, May 9 commemorates the surrender of Nazi Germany, one of the most important holidays in Russia. "You not only destroyed the enemy and won. You lifted up a devastated country, rebuilt it anew," Vladimir Putin told the veterans. He emphasized, "From time immemorial, Russia has been a victorious country."¹ Whether intentionally or not, his comments captured how he saw the Russia he inherited, and what Russia he wanted to see. His words foreshadowed the role the military and militarization narratives would play in the Kremlin's designs to restore Russia's image as a great power at home and abroad. Russia, as Arkady Ostrovsky observed, "is an idea-centric country,"² and Putin's regime crafted the country's national idea in terms of security. This definition stood in contrast to democratization of the 1990s and as

¹ "Speech at the Reception Dedicated to the 55th anniversary of the Victory in the Great Patriotic War," *Kremlin.ru*, May 9, 2000, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/page/540>.

² Arkady Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia* (New York: Viking, Penguin Publishing Group, 2015).

a reaction to this decade.³ Indeed, securitization propelled Putin into power in the first place, starting with the mysterious 1999 apartment bombings in Moscow, Volgodonsk, and Buynaksk, which resulted in over 300 deaths and many wounded Russians themselves found evidence that suggested Russia's security services orchestrating the bombings, a suspicion that remains to this day.⁴

Putin used the argument for security and the social unrest from the apartment bombings to legitimize his regime and to link military and political initiatives with domestic and foreign threats. He revived the longstanding historical narrative of Russia as a besieged fortress surrounded by enemies (chiefly Western ones). It is a narrative, in which citizens existed primarily “as a resource for wars.”⁵ As a result, a toxic brew emerged—a cultivation of militant and anti-Western patriotism, Soviet nostalgia, and religious orthodoxy. This vision required a growing Russian presence regionally and globally. In turn, this aspiration required restoring Russian military power. The role of the military and security services—and militarism—has therefore been crucial in Russian domestic and foreign policy during the Putin's two decades in power. As Russia expert and former head of Russia and Eurasia program and Chatham House James Scherr writes, “There is now an uncommon degree of political-military integration in pursuit of Russia's state objectives, its commitment to state and national mobilization, and its approach to peace, crisis, and war.”⁶

Rebuilding the Military—and Defining Threats

The military played a key role in Russian politics in the 1990s, a role that Kremlin leaders had to take to heart. In the August 1991 *putsch* (attempt to overthrow) against then-President Mikhail Gorbachev, Communist hardliners were defeated because the army refused to back them. And during the fall 1993 constitutional crisis, the army backed then-President Boris Yeltsin in his standoff against the Duma (parliament). The military played a geopolitical role in these domestic conflicts, but in reality, the Soviet military forces that Yeltsin inherited were built “to fight and win an all-out global war.”⁷ Therefore, in theory, the new Russian military could still muster the strength to fight on the global stage.

Yet, simultaneously, a clear definition of external enemies and threats for the military, along with financial and resource decay, meant that the armed forces badly needed reforms—indeed, talk of reform began as early as the 1980s, before the collapse

³ Stephen Blank, “Russia's Unending Quest for Security,” in Mark Galeotti, ed., *The Politics of Security in Modern Russia* (Post-Soviet Politics). (Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition), p. 171.

⁴ David Satter, *The Less You Know, the Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship under Yeltsin and Putin* (Yale University Press, 2016).

⁵ Alexander Golts, *Military Reform and Militarism in Russia* (Washington, D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, 2019), p. 9.

⁶ James Scherr, *The Militarization of Russian Policy*, Paper Series no.10, 2017, Transatlantic Academy.

⁷ Pavel Felgenhauer, “Russian Military Reform, Ten Years of Failure,” in Elizabeth Skinner and Mikhail Tsympkin, eds., *Russian Defense Policy Towards the Year 2000*, Proceedings of a conference held at the Naval Postgraduate School on March 26 and 27, 1997, <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/agency/Felg.htm>.

of the Soviet Union. Yeltsin's interests in the military, however, were limited to his need for its loyalty. Over the coming years, reform proceeded in a confusing manner and ultimately failed.⁸ Thus, Putin inherited a military in disarray and plagued by a multitude of problems, such as pervasive corruption; poor staffing; abysmally low salaries, especially for the junior staff; and draft evasion due to historic widespread practice of *dedovshchina* (hazing) that entailed abuse and often death for recruits.

If anything, Putin understood power. He made it clear that he was in charge as he sought to build a strong central government and the military. One scholar argued in early 2007 that Putin grew to be more in charge of the military than any post-Stalin Soviet leader.⁹ A crucial tactic Putin used to achieve this control was the provision of important government posts to retired officers and generals. Still, despite an increase in funding and other minor incremental steps towards improvement, the military continued to be plagued by serious problems.

These problems were on full display in August 2008 when Russia invaded Georgia. Russian forces prevailed over a five-day conflict, but with embarrassing difficulties, especially given that they were fighting a significantly smaller opponent. This poor performance spurred Moscow to begin full-scale military reforms, which Russian military expert Roger McDermott described in August 2009 as “unparalleled in the history of the Russian armed forces since the end of World War II, perhaps even earlier.”¹⁰ Unlike previous reforms, these efforts produced some clear partial successes, despite many shortcomings. For example, the “polite people,” or the “little green men” that took over Crimea, had been far more organized and disciplined (not to mention sober) than the military that showed up in Georgia six years earlier. The elite forces that entered Syria in September 2015 demonstrated further improvement. Although some reforms have fallen grossly behind, on other accounts, the military significantly modernized, to include new organizational structures and modernization of older equipment.¹¹ Reforms also encouraged qualities such as flexibility and innovative thinking, in field commanders.

Certainly, other crucial factors had played into Moscow's favor in both Ukraine and Syria. In the case of Crimea, Ukrainian politics were in utter disarray, which presented a unique window of opportunity; Russian forces already had a base in the Black Sea Fleet. In Syria, too, Putin correctly calculated that the West would not

⁸ Felgenhauer, “Russian Military Reform, Ten Years of Failure.”

⁹ Dale R. Herspring, “Putin and the Re-emergence of the Russian Military,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 54, no. 1, Jan./Feb. 2007, p. 24.

¹⁰ Roger McDermott, “Russia's Armed Forces Undergoing ‘Unparalleled’ Transformation,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, Aug. 13, 2019, https://www.rferl.org/a/Russias_Armed_Forces_Undergoing_Fundamental_Transformation/1798944.html.

¹¹ Michael Kofman, “Russia's Armed Forces under Gerasimov, the Man without a Doctrine,” *Riddle*, Jan. 4, 2020, <https://www.ridl.io/en/russia-s-armed-forces-under-gerasimov-the-man-without-a-doctrine>; and in Roger McDermott “Shoigu Reflects on Military Modernization Amid COVID-19 Crisis,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 17, no. 51, The Jamestown Foundation, April 15, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/shoigu-reflects-on-military-modernization-amid-covid-19-crisis/>.

oppose him. Moreover, knowing that the West was more risk averse than Russia, Russian forces purposely created dangerous situations in Syria, giving the impression of unpredictability designed to get the West to self-deter.¹² Regardless of these factors, Putin had the means and the preparedness to take advantage of these opportunities, and the successes of Ukraine and Syria would have been impossible without steps taken in previous years—it was not mere improvisation on the fly. These actions also demonstrated growing self-confidence.

In recent memory, Russian forces had three operations that provided live training—Georgia, and especially Crimea and Syria. The latter also provided fertile ground for testing and advertising Russian arms sales beyond the training aspect alone. Indeed, the Syria Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov hinted that “the Syrian experience . . . may serve to guide future defense decision making.”¹³ From a broader geostrategic perspective, the Crimea annexation propelled Russia into the forefront of European politics as an aggressive revisionist power. But the Syria intervention officially returned Russia to the Middle East, helped restore Russia’s great power status there at the expense of the West, and improved the image of the Russian armed forces. Paradoxically, in the Middle East, Russia is a power that works to preserve the status quo, unlike in Europe.

Moscow’s military aggression abroad went hand-in-hand with the growing emphasis on driving domestic militarization—both in expanding state control and repression, but also as a tool of domestic psychological influence. Russian military expert Alexander Golts wrote, “For Moscow, the resurgent military has become its most important, if not its only, foreign and domestic policy tool.”¹⁴ Regime survival animated at the Kremlin’s militarization. To that end, the Kremlin’s definition of threats—from Chechnia, to color revolutions in the post-Soviet space, to the Arab spring, to domestic protests within Russia itself—focused on the perceived hostility of the West. When Putin explained why he annexed Crimea, he framed it as a defensive response to centuries, not years, of Western hostilities towards Russia.

[W]e have every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment, led in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, continues today. They are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position. . . . But there is a limit to everything. And with Ukraine, our western partners have crossed the line.¹⁵

¹² Andrew S. Weiss and Nicole Ng, “Collision Avoidance: The Lessons of U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Mar. 20, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/20/collision-avoidance-lessons-of-u.s.-and-russian-operations-in-syria-pub-78571>.

¹³ Roger McDermott, “Gerasimov Unveils Russia’s ‘Strategy of Limited Actions,’” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 16, no. 31, Jamestown Foundation, March 6, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/gerasimov-unveils-russias-strategy-of-limited-actions>.

¹⁴ Alexander Golts, *Military Reform and Militarism in Russia*, p. 4.

¹⁵ Address by President of the Russian Federation, *Kremlin.ru*, March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

In Syria, Putin framed the intervention in terms of security—Moscow needed to intervene to prevent “terrorists” from coming to Russia, but in the context of the West driving destabilization in the Middle East in the first place. Indeed, during and after Putin’s 2016 presidential campaign, emphasis on militarization and war preparations became so common that many began to refer to Putin as a “wartime president.” This reference highlights the drive for militarization of the public consciousness as a tool of domestic legitimacy. Meanwhile, Putin’s creation of the National Guard is another example of personalizing politics and the revival of the cult of personality, as well as his growing personal insecurity.

Soviet Nostalgia and WWII Narratives

Soviet nostalgia has been a crucial hallmark of Putin’s reign. It began the moment he unveiled a plaque, aimed at projecting images of perceived glory, to the infamous Former Head of the KGB Yuri Andropov as one of his first official acts as president. To that end, the Kremlin methodically restored Russia’s propaganda machine. By 2018, Freedom House Distinguished Fellow for Democracy Studies Arch Puddington described it as “far more nimble than the lumbering system developed under Stalin.”¹⁶ As the state took increasing control of the media over these last two decades, it pounded a narrative of security, strength, and respect, as well as societal unity as associated with the Soviet Union. A crucial component of this narrative has been the Kremlin’s revisionist version of World War II history and the overall revival of Stalinism throughout the country. These efforts intensified, especially after Putin assumed his third presidential term in 2012.

The pompous celebrations commemorating the World War II victory on May 9 each year, along with aggressive displays of military prowess and the unveiling of new military equipment, have emerged as a crucial ideological pillar of these narratives, with an almost religious undertone to it. In more recent years, Russians themselves have described these celebrations as “pobedobesiye” (victory frenzy). Schools also have played a critical role in spreading these narratives. Putin himself took a particular interest in preparing a history guide for teachers of Russian history. Puddington wrote, “According to the [new teaching] manual, Russia’s dark chapters—its domination of Eastern Europe, Stalinist purges—were the understandable responses to the country’s underdevelopment and encirclement by foreign enemies.” The world, in this narrative, owes victory in the war primarily to the Red Army—a narrative that pushes psychological buttons in the minds of the public. It helps drive hostility towards the ungrateful West, for whom Russia had thanklessly sacrificed, and redirects the public away from the Kremlin’s own failings—past and present.

¹⁶ Arch Puddington, “The Ministry of Truth for the 21st Century,” *InFOCUS Quarterly*, Jewish Policy Center, Summer 2018, <https://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/2018/07/05/the-ministry-of-truth-for-the-21st-century/>.

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¹⁶ Arch Puddington, “The Ministry of Truth for the 21st Century,” *InFOCUS Quarterly*, Jewish Policy Center, Summer 2018, <https://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/2018/07/05/the-ministry-of-truth-for-the-21st-century/>.

Russia.”¹⁹ Most recently, these narratives have gone further, to “boisterous celebration of the [Stalin-Hilter] pact and resulting conquests.”²⁰ In addition, a slogan appeared at one May 9 parade “*mozhem povtorit*” (“we can repeat”). The phrase quickly spread in the last several years, and even became a bumper sticker.

It is revelatory that last year, during a performance at the St. Isaac Cathedral, the St. Petersburg Concert Choir sang—as an encore—a satirical Soviet-era song about a nuclear attack on the United States.²¹ The performance itself came on the eve of Defender of the Fatherland Day. While the song was originally meant to mock the military build-up during the Cold War, the audience could be forgiven for taking it seriously in the context of state media’s overall focus on narratives of war, including nuclear war, and Putin unveiling new missiles that could reach the United States, adding “they didn’t listen to us before but they will now.”²² The Duma’s most recent official change of the end of World War II is both a testament to a return to Stalinism when looking at history²³ and the fact that Russia continues to live by an old Soviet joke—a country where history is difficult to predict. It should not be surprising that one person, Sergey Naryshkin, holds two posts as director of the Russian Historical Society (RHS) and the Foreign Intelligence Service, and that in the midst of the current COVID-19 pandemic, advises parents to tell children about WWII during self-isolation.²⁴

Emphasis on the Youth

Although the Kremlin directed its rhetoric towards all sectors of Russian society, it put a particular emphasis upon Russian youth—an effort rooted in the Soviet period, when children played a crucial role in indoctrination of Communist ideology (not to mention spying on adults in their families). It was a time when most schools had incorporated an element of military training together with other activities through

¹⁹ Peter Eltsov and Klaus Larres, “Putin’s D-Day Diss, How Russia’s leader is rewriting WWII history to justify his aggression,” *Politico*, June 4, 2014, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/putins-d-day-dis-107446>.

²⁰ Konstantin Eggert, “Vladimir Putin Shows his Hand as Moscow Rehabilitates Stalin’s Conquests,” *Deutsche Welle*, Aug. 22, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-vladimir-putin-shows-his-hand-as-moscow-rehabilitates-stalins-conquests/a-50113448>.

²¹ The song is available from Gennadiy Mokhnenko, *Facebook*, Feb 25, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/gennadiy.mokhnenko/videos/10213952903403507/>.

²² “Putin Showed Russia’s Newest Nuclear Weapon,” *Novaya Gazeta*, Mar. 1, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oo_zuzBvVxg.

²³ Konstantin Eggert, “Vladimir Putin shows his hand as Moscow rehabilitates Stalin’s conquests,” *Deutsche Welle*, <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-vladimir-putin-shows-his-hand-as-moscow-rehabilitates-stalins-conquests/a-50113448>.

²⁴ “Naryshkin Urged Parents to Tell Children History of War at Time of Self-Isolation,” *TASS*, April 10, 2020, https://tass.ru/obschestvo/8209379?utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=smm_social_share.

a variety of youth programs, such as sports, as the state aimed to dictate all aspects of life.

In the 1990s, these youth programs did not disappear entirely, but were reduced significantly. For the Kremlin, they re-emerged as a priority again with Ukraine's Orange Revolution. The Kremlin saw the outsized role young people played in these events, and felt it must put in safeguards to prevent the same uprisings internally. In March 2005, the Kremlin unveiled the youth group Nashi (Ours), the brainchild of Vladislav Surkov, the so-called "gray cardinal," who promoted the vision of Russia's "sovereign democracy."²⁵ In two years, group membership reached 200,000. In exchange for taking part in pro-Kremlin activities, its members received benefits, such as education and career opportunities. Beyond that, membership involved brainwashing into the Kremlin ideology, which provided a sense of belonging to young people.²⁶ The group's leaders—tellingly called commissars, a reference to the Soviet Union—openly talked of using force to protect the ruling regime. Their summer camps, for instance, involved military drills, and the group's leadership aimed to reduce draft evasion. The group's activities included physical and psychological harassment of those who spoke out against the Kremlin, including prominent human rights activists. The onset of the Arab Spring reinforced Nashi, but ultimately the group also caused some embarrassment. By 2012, as Putin assumed his latest term as president, it closed down.²⁷

While Nashi shut down, the Kremlin's need to mobilize and militarize the youth's consciousness only grew. In his May 2012 state of the nation address, Putin emphasized that "Russia must increase its population and develop its patriotic and spiritual values or lose its soul and face collapse."²⁸ After the annexation of Crimea and covert involvement in southeastern Ukraine, Russia's 2014 military doctrine for the first time raised concerns about the youth in particular. The doctrine stated that Russia's youth were being influenced by "subversive information activities . . . aimed at undermining historical, spiritual and patriotic traditions related to the defense of the Motherland."²⁹ Reading between the lines, the doctrine referred to Western influence.

In spring 2016, when the Russian Defense Ministry unveiled a different youth movement—Yunarmia (Youth Army)—efforts to influence the younger generation became more overt. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu openly said he aims for the

²⁵ Armine Ishkhanian "Nashi: Russia's youth counter-movement," *Open Democracy*, Aug. 30, 2007, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/russia_nashi/.

²⁶ A useful reference is the 2012 documentary "Putin's Kiss," directed by Lise Birk Pedersen, about Russian youth activist Masha Drokova. It highlights Drokova's rise through the Nashi ranks and her ultimate decision to break away from its ideology.

²⁷ Shaun Walker, "Russian youth group outlives its usefulness. Hacked emails suggest that Nashi could be closed down after the presidential election," *Independent*, Feb. 16, 2012, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russian-youth-group-outlives-its-usefulness-6950316.html>.

²⁸ Alexei Anishchuk and Steve Gutterman, "Population, Russian values key to our future—Putin," *Reuters*, Dec. 12, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-russia-putin/population-russian-values-key-to-our-future-putin-idUKBRE8BB0JF20121212>.

²⁹ The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, Approved by the President of the Russian Federation on Dec. 25, 2014.

group's members to build direct links with the army.³⁰ The Defense Ministry serves as the primary source of funding while military-industrial firms also contribute. The group's activities include playing war games.³¹ As of this writing, according to the organization's website, Yunarmia's membership reached 700,000—not quite the one million Shoigu said he would like to see reached by 2020, but close, and certainly far bigger than Nashi.³² Officially membership in the group is voluntary, but in practice, harking back to the Soviet period, the Ministry of Defense has resorted to “various forms of coercion.”³³ The group places a particular emphasis on attracting orphan children. Some of the organization's members are as young as eight years old, an age that human rights advocates in Russia described as a crime of militarization of childhood, banned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.³⁴

Use of children is not limited to Yunarmia alone, nor is the Defense Ministry the only agency involved in indoctrinating children. In November 2017, Duma deputy Anna Kovycho made a widely circulated, frightening video clip with school children, chockful of Kremlin propaganda imagery and narratives, espousing a willingness to die for Putin if he calls them “to the last battle.”³⁵ Some Russian press reports showed schools teaching the song in classrooms.³⁶ And last year, the Kremlin launched a new channel Pobeda (Victory), broadcasting round the clock programs on World War II, which are specifically focused on Russia's youth.³⁷ Children also play a prominent role in May 9 parades.

³⁰ Roman Popkov, “General Shoigu's YunArmia,” *Open Russia*, Aug. 12, 2016, <https://openrussia.org/media/140099/>.

³¹ “Russia's Youth Army play war at summer camp,” *Deutsche Welle*, Aug. 23, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/russias-youth-army-play-war-at-summer-camp/av-45153983>.

³² Evan Gershkovich, “Russia's Fast-Growing ‘Youth Army’ Aims to Breed Loyalty to the Fatherland,” *Moscow Times*, April 17, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/04/17/russias-fast-growing-youth-army-aimst-to-breed-loyalty-to-the-fatherland-a65256>.

³³ Major Ray Finch, “Young Army Movement Winning the Hearts and Minds of Russian Youth,” *Military Review*, Sept.-Oct. 2019.

³⁴ Vesti Obrazovaniya, “A million Children to Yunarmia—a Cell for Each School,” *Education News*, Sept. 16, 2019, <https://vogazeta.ru/articles/2019/9/16/upbringing/9398-million-detey-v-yunarmiyu-po-yacheyke-v-kazhdyyu-shkolu>.

³⁵ “Uncle Vova, We are With You,” Duma Deputy Dedicated Video Clip to Putin, Uralinform, 14 ноября 2017, <https://www.uralinform.ru/reports/politics/282465-dyadya-vova-my-s-toboi-deputat-gosdumy-posvyatila-putinu-videoklip/>; and Irina Petrovskaya, “‘Uncle Vova, We are with You!’ TV as Time Machine: Here, There, Back Again,” *Novaya Gazeta*, Nov. 17, 2017, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/11/17/74576-dyadya-vova-my-s-toboy>.

³⁶ “Children in Krasnodar School Forced to Sing Song ‘Uncle Vova, We are with You!’” *TJournal.ru*, Jan. 26, 2018, <https://tjournal.ru/flood/65515-v-krasnodarskoy-shkole-detey-zastavlyayut-pet-pesnyu-dyadya-vova-my-s-toboy>.

³⁷ “Russia Launches World War II-Themed TV Channel Targeting Youth,” *Moscow Times*, April 10, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/04/10/russia-launches-world-war-ii-themed-tv-channel-targeting-youth-a65175>.

Centrality of the Church

In tsarist Russia, the Orthodox Church played a crucial role in the Russian consciousness, national identity, statecraft, and warfare. Thus, the link between religion and militarization in politics is historic in Russia. Indeed, religious considerations played an important part in Tsar Nicolas' zeal in the Crimean War (1853-1856)—a war Russia lost disastrously. Yet, upon its defeat, the state “built a patriotic myth, a national narrative of the people’s selfless heroism, resilience and sacrifice.”³⁸ Communism aimed to abolish religion on paper, but, in practice, the church continued to operate in the Soviet Union. Stalin murdered tens of thousands in the clergy, but when World War II was on his doorstep, he realized that the church could play an important mobilizing role in rallying patriotism and sacrifice.³⁹ To that end, he reestablished the Moscow Patriarchate in September 1943—under the control of the Communist Party—and the church turned into a KGB collaborator. As the Soviet Union declined, the degradation was not only physical and economic, but also, and perhaps most importantly, spiritual. The 1990s was a uniquely diverse and pluralistic decade in Russia. After decades of communist repression, a widespread yearning for a spiritual connection penetrated all areas of life. As a result, in the 1990s, the state helped reestablish the central position of the Orthodox Church.

In this context, Putin had designs on the church from the very beginning as he crafted militarization narratives of national ideas. Russia’s January 2000 National Security Concept highlighted the need for “spiritual renewal,”⁴⁰ and the Church soon emerged as both the “glue for Russian nationalism,” and as a key instrument supporting foreign policy objectives.⁴¹ A persistent refrain of spiritual values has permeated Russian officials’ speeches, as well as key strategic government documents. Domestically, the church increasingly became involved in all aspects of life—it “has become an alternative to—and will eventually become a replacement for—an independent Russian civil society.”⁴² The state and the church have been in sync in terms of the policies they advocate for—from so-called “traditional values,” in contrast to the “morally corrupt” West, to the “protection” of Eastern Slavic people. In this

³⁸ See, Orlando Figes, *The Crimean War: A History* (New York: Metropolitan Books, February 2012), Epilogue.

³⁹ Paul B. Anderson, “The Orthodox Church in Soviet Russia,” *Foreign Affairs*, Jan. 1961, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1961-01-01/orthodox-church-soviet-russia>.

⁴⁰ *National Security Concept of the Russian Federation*, Approved by Presidential Decree No. 24 of Jan. 10, 2000, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/589768.

⁴¹ Robert C. Blitt, “Russia’s ‘Orthodox Foreign Policy: The Growing Influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Shaping Russia’s Policies Abroad,” *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law*, Nov. 28, 2011, p. 457, [https://www.law.upenn.edu/journals/jil/articles/volume33/issue2/BlittBoyd33U.Pa.J.Int%27IL.363\(2011\).pdf](https://www.law.upenn.edu/journals/jil/articles/volume33/issue2/BlittBoyd33U.Pa.J.Int%27IL.363(2011).pdf).

⁴² Iulia-Sabina Joja, “An Unorthodox Partnership,” *The American Interest*, March 10, 2020, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/03/10/an-unorthodox-partnership/>.

sense, the church has been another key instrument of militarization of politics. To that end, under Putin, the state returned to narratives about the Crimean war. In 2006, the presidential administration, together with Defense and Education ministries, cosponsored an academic conference that declared the war a moral and religious victory for Russia. It also portrayed Nicholas I as rightly standing up to the West to defend Russian interests.⁴³ Such actions fuel the narrative that the West is, and always has been, working to destroy Russia and that domestic and foreign militarization was necessary in the face of this threat.

On the foreign policy front, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, “The tradition of cooperation between national diplomacy and the Russian Orthodox Church stretches back into centuries. The church, in fact, solves the same problems as diplomacy.”⁴⁴ Indeed, the church and the state support the idea of a multipolar world. The church also became important for the military. As scholar of Russia and Russian Military Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky writes in his recent book, it had become integrated into the armed forces. This alliance has been especially visible in the nuclear weapons program, a story that he traces all the way from the late 1980s.⁴⁵ This example illustrates how the church plays a central role in spheres of security, deterrence, and patriotism. Indeed, Moscow had increased the role of nuclear weapons in Russian foreign and military policies after 2011. After assuming his third term as president, Putin emphasized that Russia would never “tempt” anyone by being “weak,” and to that end, should strengthen strategic deterrence.⁴⁶ Thus, the church plays a key role as a guarantor of the country’s security, while state narratives—including about itself—increasingly take Russia away from ideas of Western rationalism and secularism towards the mythical and the divine. To that end, it is not surprising that the walls of the main temple of Russian Armed Forces, still under construction, at one point planned to feature mosaics depicting Putin, Shoigu, and Stalin, along with the inscription “Crimea is ours.”⁴⁷ The Church partly scrapped these plans after Putin’s direct objection. But the fact that this idea went so far, and is not abandoned entirely (it is unclear if the image of Stalin and Crimea was removed), is significant in and of itself.⁴⁸

⁴³ “In Crimean War Russia Won Battle for Holy Sites,” *Interfax*, Nov. 6, 2006, <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=interview&div=109>.

⁴⁴ Blitt, “Russia’s ‘Orthodox Foreign Policy,’” p. 457.

⁴⁵ Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy, Religion, Politics, and Strategy* (CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

⁴⁶ “To Be Strong: Guarantees of National Security For Russia,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Feb. 20, 2012, <https://rg.ru/2012/02/20/putin-armiya.html>.

⁴⁷ “Mosaics with Portraits of Putin, Stalin and Inscription ‘Crimea is Ours’ Will Appear on Walls of Defense Ministry’s Main Church,” *Novaya Gazeta*, April 24, 2020, <https://novyagazeta.ru/news/2020/04/24/160981-mbh-media-na-stenah-glavnogo-hrama-minoborony-poyavitsya-mozaika-portretami-putina-stalina-i-nadpisyu-krym-nash>.

⁴⁸ “Russian Military Church Scraps Plan for Putin Mosaic,” BBC, May 1, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52510545>

Hope for the Future?

Putin's Russia has turned to militarization and mobilization as keys to the regime's legitimacy and survival. Relatedly, Putin's Russia has invoked Alexander III, who famously said that Russia's only two allies are its army and its navy.⁴⁹ The domestic aspect of militarization continues with searches for internal enemies and the increasing use of violence and other draconian means of repression. As scholars Marc Galeotti and Stephen Blank pointed out over the years, Moscow has been at war with the West, even if it's not a war that the West is accustomed to. Only one side has to decide it's at war, "and the Kremlin has already made the decision that the West has started it."⁵⁰ Moscow also made significant military reforms. While Western policymakers talk of great power competition, in effect, they are primarily pursuing competition with the People's Republic of China. But China has turned to Russia for military lessons, including its experience in Crimea and Syria.⁵¹ China, unlike Russia, lacks real world experience in competition short of armed conflict that straddles a high-end warfare threshold. Shortly after Russia annexed Crimea, a China scholar privately told the author that, the Chinese government observed how Moscow got away with certain actions and may conclude that brute force works. He feared that, encouraged by Putin's example, China might pursue similar policies. Indeed, recent years have shown growing Russia-China coordination and learning military issues, information warfare and government surveillance.

If there is a glimmer of hope, it is that the state is not killing its people on a massive scale, as expert on Russia and Russian security issues and Senior Consulting Fellow at Chatham House Keir Giles points out. For the first time in Russian history, "murders or attempted murders of individuals who have angered the Russian state or its rulers. . . are the exception, not the rule."⁵² And in parallel to state-driven militarization, Russia has also seen the rise of a younger generation that ridicules the current ruling regime, builds "special rooms for fur coats," (a reference to the ruling elite's over-the-top ostentatious consumerism and massive corruption), and cares more about professional accomplishments.⁵³

Russian citizens, consumed by domestic problems, are also increasingly tired of foreign adventures. "We see that the population is getting a little bit tired of helping everyone else," said Denis Volkov, sociologist at the Levada Center, an independent

⁴⁹ "Putin agrees with emperor that Russia's only allies are Army and Navy," *TASS*, April 16, 2015, <https://tass.com/russia/789866>.

⁵⁰ Mark Galeotti, *Russian Political War* (Taylor and Francis) p. 103; and Stephen Blank, "European lessons for American policymakers," *The Hill*, Dec. 10, 2019, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/473881-european-lessons-for-american-policy-makers>.

⁵¹ "Russia and China learn from each other as military ties deepen," June 23, 2016 <https://www.ft.com/content/a3e35348-2962-11e6-8b18-91555f2f4fde>.

⁵² Keir Giles, *Moscow Rules*, The Chatham House Insights Series, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press), p. 132.

⁵³ "A new generation is rising in Russia," *The Economist*, March 22, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2018/03/22/a-new-generation-is-rising-in-russia>.

and trustworthy pollster in Russia.⁵⁴ Without a doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic will test the Putin regime. Indeed, most recently, Shoigu pointedly provided no comment about the effect of the pandemic on Moscow's long-term defense planning.⁵⁵ At the same time, Putin had disappeared temporarily from public view as had been his practice at times of serious crises. Yet, Putin's regime, whatever its vulnerabilities, has shown over the last 20 years that it will fight to stay in power. The pandemic has also led to even more sweeping internal surveillance and control. In framing the national idea and the country's politics in terms of security, Putin has presented the public with a unifying vision, and its cult of militarism will influence Russia's uncertain future.



⁵⁴ Krishnadev Calamur, "Putin Makes a Move for Peace Through Force Russia is involved in many of the world's greatest crises—but there are signs public support for overseas ventures is waning," *The Atlantic*, Aug. 24, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/08/russia-foreign-policy/568183/>.

⁵⁵ Roger McDermott, "Shoigu Reflects on Military Modernization Amid COVID-19 Crisis," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 17, no. 51, The Jamestown Foundation, April 15, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/shoigu-reflects-on-military-modernization-amid-covid-19-crisis/>.