



**Authoritarian Legitimation  
through  
Consolidating Collective Identity**

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## Introduction

The role of historical legacies associated with communism in shaping political and social outcomes in Russia today is hard to deny. Both Russian and Western academic and intellectual circles increasingly bring up the past in attempts to understand Russia's failed transition to democracy and the return of the politics of confrontation between Russia and the West. Various arguments have focused on political culture, attitudes, and even personality traits associated with the Soviet regime.[1] Some analysts refer to pre-communist legacies, too, positing that historical matrices and civilizational codes have shaped the trajectory of Russia's development.[2]

The following argument uses a social cognitive approach to posit that historical legacies have aided both national identity formation and the Kremlin's political legitimization strategy. By convincing Russians of the increased salience of specific historical legacies, the political leadership has both capitalized on and sought to ameliorate the societal fragmentation resulting from the painful transition of the 1990s. This leadership strategy has relied on *selected*, shared cognitive and affective structures originating in the Soviet past to appeal to Russians' lost sense of national identity. Specifically, a sense of national exceptionalism and the rhetoric of confrontation with the West (and especially the United States) were key cognitive pillars that supported the Soviet identity. These narratives have been reconfigured to appeal to contemporary Russian audiences, and together, they encourage national consolidation while discouraging dissent.

## The Group Process and Consolidation of Collective Identity

The social cognitive approach considers the role of historical legacies in the group process: the formation and consolidation of groups and their identities—in this case, national identities. Understanding the impact of historical legacy on the group process is of key importance. A community that has undergone a *historical rupture*—in this case, the disintegration of the Soviet Union—faces particular challenges. Such a society often finds itself in a state of disarray, confusion, and lack of agreement on shared normative, ideological, and cultural resources—resources that can help a collection of individuals that used to think of themselves as a nation (or a smaller community) to imagine themselves, once again, as a unified body, providing each individual with an accepted and a positive sense of a social self. In the process of reformulating a sense of collective identity, certain memories or narratives of the past can become meaningful legacies, while others never resurface.

The group process and articulation of social identity—i.e., an understanding of “who we are”—also relies on leadership. This is especially true in the aftermath of social rupture, group disintegration, and the loss of existing group ties and identities formerly taken for granted. Rebuilding group ties and reasserting the group's purpose and place among other communities relies on political agency and political entrepreneurs, who take on

the task of reinventing the group's identity and seeking group recognition. How do they do this?

The process of group reinvention relies on political choices regarding the symbols and ideas that are seen to have a "uniting" potential. Such choices are constrained by potentially unifying elements of history, as well as the socio-economic and political context. Centrally, the ideas and symbols used by leaders need to *resonate* with the group; potential followers have to relate to these ideas and representations to be moved by them. National identity, at least in part, is crafted through the key ideas and issues that provide a sense of "who we are." Leaders pick and choose key ideas, symbols, and selected cognitive structures associated with the past—in a way, bringing back selected "ghosts from the past"—in a way that is carefully designed to resonate with the populace. This has certainly been the case in Russia's recent history.

In order to find ideas and representations that resonate with the public, leaders must seek *credibility* and *salience*. Snow and Benford highlight these features in the construction of "frame resonance" in social movements.[3] A frame's credibility depends on its internal consistency, empirical validity (whether it fits with the observed events), and the credibility of those who articulate it. Salience, in turn, can be manipulated through media and politics. For instance, collective identity becomes salient when leaders start relying on rhetoric claiming that their country is under threat, and when their foreign policies lead to international polarization and confrontation.

While there are certainly many components of Russia's national identity, rhetoric on Russia's exceptional status as a conservative country and great power, as well as a "besieged fortress," have made these features both credible and salient to many Russians. In a country still reeling from the historical rupture of the loss of empire and the difficult 1990s, these narratives have proven powerful in the group process of rearticulating national identity, and contributed to the regime's legitimation strategy.

## Exceptionalism and Confrontation at the Core of Collective Identity under Putin

The end of the Soviet Union decentered the Russians' collective consciousness—which was not clearly delineated from the Soviet one in the first place—thus posing the national community with the challenge of reinventing itself, rearticulating its collective vision, and securing its future orientation.[4] Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin, presiding over the period of social and economic involution and reforms, was not successful in instilling a new Russian sense of "we-ness." In the 1990s, the general negation of all aspects of the Soviet past was not only a political and economic process: centrally, the disintegration of the Soviet Union also entailed the loss of social cohesion, a sense of security, and pride in belonging to a preeminent national community. Lacking a sense of group identity and group purpose, many Russians in the 1990s and early 2000s felt uprooted.

Vladimir Putin has successfully reclaimed and embodied Russia's collective

identity. He spoke of the importance of a “Russian idea” and national unity as early as his Millennium Message, published days before Yeltsin named him acting president at the end of 1999.[5] His reputation as a leader reached new heights when he developed the aspects of his legitimation strategy that focused on national identity issues, which became central to his third and fourth terms in power especially.

There are two key elements of this process. *First, a new politics of morality and traditional values presented Russia as a savior of Christian fundamental values.* This rhetoric worked to prop up the new civilizational discourse around Russia’s special historical path and its millennial culture by placing the country among the world’s greatest cultures and civilizations. This was arguably an ideological response to the western critics of the growing authoritarianism in Russia, providing the population with symbolic resources necessary to counter these criticisms.[6] This strategy involved a clear confrontational stance vis-à-vis the dominant liberal values of the West and followed, to some degree, the framing of Soviet exceptionalism and the ideological divide of the Cold War era.

The confrontational rhetoric, ideological at first, soon materialized in foreign policy decisions—as in the case of Crimea’s annexation. The result was aggravated relationships between Russia and Western countries, followed by Western sanctions and Russian counter-sanctions.[7] Russia continually asserted its civilizational autonomy in opposition to the West, which it blamed and resented for ignoring Russia’s national interests and betraying Russia’s good will. This framework worked as an ideational prop for the Kremlin’s provocative decisions.

Second, *increasingly confrontational rhetoric has positioned Russia as a “besieged fortress” under threat by the West.* This was another element of the Kremlin’s “international” strategy of legitimation. Not surprisingly, public opinion polls reflected a dramatic reorientation of public attention and concerns away from domestic issues and toward the international. The number of those who felt high social stress from the aggravated international situation increased from 8% in 2011 to 42% in 2015, while the number of those who felt social stress in relation to national problems plunged from 38% to 19% in the same years.[8] At the same time, the number of those who felt that Russia was moving in the right direction also increased dramatically during 2014-2015.[9]

These two steps—highlighting Russian exceptionalism and “the enemy at the gate” at the same time—worked to revamp Russian citizens’ national identity by tapping into vestiges of Soviet identity template. In particular, this method revived two very important pillars of Soviet identity: a sense of national exceptionalism and the formative role of international confrontation used by the Soviet government as the “glue” of collective identity.[10] This “familiar, affective, robust...self-portrait”[11] was activated especially powerfully in the aftermath of the Crimea annexation, which deepened Russia’s confrontation with the West. Its activation involved a powerful affective component, eliciting a strong surge of public sentiment in support of Putin’s legitimacy, and thus endowed his leadership with an air of charisma. The personalistic aspects of Putin’s regime are thus complemented by Russia’s political

leaders' ability to manipulate public sentiment and capitalize on the shared beliefs and memories of the past that comprise Russians' group identity.

## Policy Implications

What do these observations mean for policymakers around the world, and U.S. policymakers specifically?

1. It is first important to recognize that, despite the visibility of Soviet legacies in present-day Russia, the relevance of specific elements from the Soviet past was not pre-determined, nor were the decisions made by the current leadership. Policymakers must pursue an understanding of contemporary Russia that takes into account the importance of political agency and symbolic instruments of governance, which are central to understanding the choices made in the Kremlin and current international affairs. This broader awareness can allow policymakers and analysts to imagine new scenarios of political development in Russia if and when political leadership changes or alters their legitimation strategy. While this development appears unlikely given the strategy's success, a deeper comprehension of its origin and resonance with many Russians can help policymakers forge informed responses to Russian actions.
2. Policymakers must seek to diminish the success of the Russian media and its role in disseminating pro-Russian information and disinformation abroad as well as in Russia. Domestically, media control (especially television) and the promotion of a dominant frame of interpreting the 1990s as a time of Russian "victimhood" are among the crucial tools of political and social control.[12] Supporting independent media with Russian audiences and deterring Russian-controlled disinformation campaigns abroad must be pursued in tandem. Relatedly, social media has emerged as an important space for articulating counter-narratives to the Kremlin's dominant frame, and Russia's more politically engaged youth in particular rely on social media networks to craft different visions of Russia's collective identity. The degree of youth political engagement, therefore, will play an important role in Russia's future political development, and must receive due attention.
3. U.S. policymakers need to focus on promoting social and political integrity as well as liberal and communitarian values in their own societies, not just abroad. This will aid in diminishing the sense of social and political disenchantment that has contributed to making illiberal values and ideologies attractive to some. Keeping Western societies open, welcoming, secure, and prosperous is the best tool against authoritarian regimes. While Putin-style identity politics in Russia appears to be successful, the West and the United States need to refocus their attention on re-asserting democracy and liberalism at home.

## References

- [1] Gessen, Masha. *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Retook Russia*. Riverhead Books, 2017; Pop-Eleches, Grigore, and Joshua A. Tucker. *Communism's Shadow: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Political Attitudes*. Princeton University Press., 2017; Beissinger, Mark, and Stephen Kotkin, ed. 2014. *Historical Legacies of Communism in Russia and Eastern Europe*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- [2] This viewpoint was developed by the Russian historian Yuri Pivovarov and is being popularized now. Sergei Nikol'ski, Russian philosopher, for example, was presenting on the 'Russian matrix' in the Open Russia Club, London on October 24th, 2017.
- [3] Benford, Robert D., and David A. Snow. "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment." *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 26, 2000, pp. 619–621.
- [4] On the issue of merged Soviet and Russian identities, see: Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (Summer 1994), pp. 414-452.
- [5] Владимир Путин, "Россия на рубеже тысячелетий," Новая газета, December 30, 1999. [https://www.ng.ru/politics/1999-12-30/4\\_millennium.html](https://www.ng.ru/politics/1999-12-30/4_millennium.html).
- [6] See Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, "Managing National Ressentiment: Morality Politics in Putin's Russia," in Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk (eds.), *Vocabularies of International Relations after the Crisis in Ukraine* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 130-51; Regina Smyth, Anton Sobolev and Irina Soboleva, "A Well-Organized Play: Symbolic Politics and the Effect of the Pro-Putin Rallies," *Problems of Post-Communism* 60/2 (2013), pp. 24-39; Marlene Laruelle, "Anti-Migrant Riots in Russia: The Mobilizing Potential of Xenophobia," *Russian Analytical Digest* 141 (December 23, 2013), pp. 2-4.
- [7] The argument here is not that this rhetoric works to produce such foreign policy actions; but it certainly plays an enabling role in the context when leaders confront policy/action choices.
- [8] Levada Center, "From Opinion to Understanding: Russian Public Opinion 2013-2015," 2016, p.17. <http://www.levada.ru/cp/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/2013-2015-Eng1.pdf>
- [9] Ibid., p. 33.
- [10] Yuri Levada (ed.), *Sovetskoï Prostoi Chelovek* (Moskva: Mirovoi Okean, 1993).

- [11] Susan Fiske and Shelley Taylor, *Social Cognition* (McGraw-Hill Series in Social Psychology, 2nd ed.). (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1991), p. 186.
- [12] Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, “Russia’s Struggle Over the Meaning of the 1990s and the Keys to Kremlin Power.” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 592. May 2019.