

**CONSENSUS AND CONTINUITY:
THE USE OF IDEOLOGY IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA**

by

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Abstract

The literature on Russian politics has devoted limited attention to the role of ideational factors in the development of the post-Soviet political system. The aim of this work is to bring ideology back in the discussion on the evolution of the regime under Vladimir Putin. This work argues that Putin's regime has used ideology as a political tool to achieve two main goals: to foster consensus and to assure regime continuity beyond leadership change. Consensus was imposed around patriotism and through the figure of a *super partes* president. The emphasis on patriotic rhetoric allowed the Kremlin to gain control over the political spectrum and provided an ideational backing to the centralization of political power. Regime continuity was promoted by increasing the ideational capital of the presidential party – United Russia – in a threefold strategy: the formulation of “sovereign democracy,” the formalization of intra-party wings, and the adoption of “Russian conservatism” as an ideological label. This process to endow the party of power with an ideology marked a temporary decline in the regime's personalist component and a permanent strengthening of its party element. Because ideology was formulated post-hoc to consolidate power, its coherence and persistence are subordinated to its utilitarian purpose. The result is an ideological product that sacrifices coherence for political expediency and discards certain ideological tenets when they fail to achieve their goal (sovereign democracy) or when they are no longer needed (Russian conservatism).

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Fabio Resmini.

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1. Introduction

Scholars have generally neglected the role of ideology in Russian post-Soviet politics and little academic work has identified ideational factors as crucial in the evolution of the Russian political regime.¹ In particular, although several scholars have devoted attention to nationalism and identity in Putin's Russia, the literature has largely overlooked the regime's attempt to build an ideological framework beyond mere nationalist rhetoric or loyalty to its leader.

Putin's regime has been defined as pragmatic,² and its dominant party – United Russia – as characterized by a catch-all ideology,³ or lacking “an identifiable ideology or other nonmaterial source of cohesion.”⁴ These characterizations, although not completely inadequate, tend to downplay the importance of ideological discourse and reinforce the idea that the regime's ideological production is negligible or even nonexistent. As a matter of fact, the regime has actively engaged in ideological formulation, and it has developed or resorted to various ideological contents in order to pursue different political goals. As such, the resulting overall lack of ideological coherence that characterizes Putin's regime should not obscure the political significance of these efforts to construct an ideology. In fact, as this work will show, ideological concerns have been central to the development of the Russian political regime in the post-Soviet era. Ideology was crucial both in nation-building efforts to overcome the identity and political crisis following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and in regime-building efforts to consolidate Putin's rule.

The conception of ideology that I am using in this paper combines semantic and functional perspectives. A semantic approach – expounded by Michael Freeden – sees ideologies as “configurations of political concepts,” in which specific interpretations of each constituent concept are selected out of an indeterminate range of meaning they may

¹ Cheng Chen, “Muddling Through the Shadow of the Past(s): Post-Communist Russia's Search for a New

² Stephen E. Hanson, “Postimperial Democracies: Ideology and Party Formation in Third Republic France, Weimar Germany, and Post-Soviet Russia,” *East European Politics and Societies* 20, no. 2 (2006); Lilia Shevtsova, “Post-Communist Russia: A Historic Opportunity Missed,” *International Affairs* 83, no. 5 (2007).

³ Sean P. Roberts, *Putin's United Russia Party* (New York: Routledge, 2012)

⁴ Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 189.

signify.⁵ Political concepts are inherently contestable, yet “ideologies perform the crucial role of decontesting those concepts by assigning specific meanings that are logically arbitrary,”⁶ hence privileging a particular meaning and denying the validity of alternative interpretations. Thus, ideologies are more specifically defined as “loose composites of decontested concepts.”⁷ A functional and power-oriented perspective⁸ helps to understand how this process of “decontestation” of political concepts can be instrumental in establishing and sustaining relations of domination. Indeed, a dominant group can use ideology as a means to legitimize its power. Eagleton identifies six different strategies of legitimization: promoting beliefs congenial to the dominant power; naturalizing and universalizing such beliefs as to render them apparently inevitable; denigrating ideas that challenge it; excluding rival forms of thought; and obscuring social reality.⁹ As this paper will show, Putin’s regime commonly resorts to these strategies in order to consolidate its rule. Ultimately, by ideology I mean a more or less coherent multi-conceptual construct acting as a political device that a dominant power uses to perpetuate asymmetrical power relations.

This work speaks to the literature on authoritarian regimes, and in particular it looks at how ideational and discursive factors contribute to their consolidation and continuity. Following Geddes’ classification of authoritarian governments as military, single-party, and personalist,¹⁰ this case study wants to shed some light on hybrid cases, and in particular on the reasons and dynamics according to which regimes transition from one category to another. Putin’s Russia represents a case of personalist regime from its inception that, due to political calculations, made efforts to transform into a single-party regime in order to assure its continuity beyond leadership change.¹¹ Ideology substantially contributed to this

⁵ Michael Freeden, “Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology?,” *Political Studies* 46, no. 4 (1998): 749.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 88.

⁸ In Thompson’s words: “To study ideology, I propose, is to study the ways in which meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination.” John B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 4.

⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), 5-6.

¹⁰ Barbara Geddes, “What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999).

¹¹ Geddes defines personalist regimes as regimes in which “access to office and the fruits of office depends much more on the discretion of an individual leader. The leader may be an officer and may have created a

transformation process.

The central argument is that the Putin administration used ideology as a political instrument to achieve two main goals: to foster consensus and to assure regime continuity. The effort to attain the first goal characterized the first term of Putin's presidency (2000-2004). Ideological consensus was fundamental in the centralization of power and in strengthening the Kremlin's position vis-à-vis other political forces. Regime continuity became a major concern only during the second term (2004-2008), as the constitutional constraints on Putin's reelection for a third consecutive term caused a certain degree of political uncertainty and cast a shadow over regime survival.

After the strong ideological polarization of the early 1990s culminated with the constitutional crisis of 1993, Yeltsin pursued a policy of national reconciliation with the other political forces. In continuity with his predecessor, Putin built his discourse on the idea of *soglasie* – or consensus – around “traditional values” and carried on the process of rehabilitation of patriotic rhetoric started by Yeltsin. The imposition of ideological principles and the reappropriation of nationalist discourse enabled the Kremlin to regain control over the political spectrum and became crucial aspects of the policy of centralization of power pursued by the Putin administration.

During Putin's second term, the uncertainty stemming from the coming leadership change convinced the Kremlin to strengthen the party of power and transform it in an autonomous political force – independent from the executive – in order to mitigate the regime's personalist component. United Russia became the main vehicle of ideological content, as several efforts were made to endow the party with a more sophisticated ideology that would provide a guideline for political continuity. Since patriotism had become the ideological posture of all parties in the Duma, it could not be relied on anymore to set the

party to support himself, but neither the military nor the party exercises independent decision-making power insulated from the whims of the ruler.” *Ibid.*, 121-122. Hadenius and Teorell criticize Geddes' label by arguing that personalism is not exactly a regime type, but rather “a continuous trait that may be more or less present in a regime.” See Axel Hadenius and Jan Teorell, “Pathways From Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 1 (2007): 145. While I agree with their conceptualization of personalism (I will use the term “personalist *component*” throughout my work), I still think that, for the purpose of this study and the argument it is trying to make, it is useful to define a regime with a predominant personalist component – as Putin's regime initially was – as personalist. According to Hadenius and Teorell's classification, Russia would fall under the “limited multiparty regime,” a category to which it belonged throughout the whole Putin era. Thus, this classification prevents an understanding of the transformation that the regime has undergone during Putin's presidency.

party of power apart from the other political forces. This period was characterized by the tension between avoiding breaking consensus and endowing the regime with a more clear-cut ideological characterization.

In the first part of this work, I will outline the evolution of the Kremlin's ideological effort from Yeltsin to Putin. I will first examine certain aspects of the Russian political situation in the 1990s to explain why the formulation of a national ideology became a necessity. Then, I will look at Putin's first term, and try to explain how the emphasis on the idea of consensus and the appropriation of patriotic rhetoric impacted the Russian political environment. In the second part, I will analyze how, during Putin's second term, United Russia acquired a more central role and the Kremlin's ideological effort moved beyond patriotism. In particular, I will consider three main instances of this new ideological tendency: sovereign democracy, the emergence of intra-party wings, and Russian conservatism.

2. Rebuilding Consensus in Post-Soviet Russia

2.1 The Yeltsin era: ideology as a means of national reconciliation

Despite the ban that article 13 of the 1993 Russian Constitution imposed on state ideology, the idea of a new national ideology started to absorb the minds of the political elite already in the first half of the 1990s. The chronic crisis that affected a disoriented and politically fractured post-Soviet Russia called for a national consensus to be reached around widely shared values.

In particular, the excessive polarization of the political scenario, which had its climax in the events of fall 1993, pushed the Kremlin to step back and seek reconciliation with the other political forces.¹² The constitutional crisis of 1993, with the theatrical use of force displayed by the Kremlin against the parliamentary opposition, saw Yeltsin coming out victorious but seriously weakened, as the disappointing result in the December legislative election unmistakably showed.¹³ After the peak of political confrontation was reached, the Kremlin began to take gradual steps towards national reconciliation. The idea of national reconciliation came out of the disillusionment in the “westernization” process and the acknowledgment that priority was to be given not to what ultimately took the shape of an ideological crusade on economic reforms, but to what was in the real interest of the country, and in particular to its national cohesion. Given the harsh situation Russia was in, reconciliation with the other main political forces became a necessity in Yeltsin’s mind. It was instrumental not only in keeping him in power, but most importantly in holding the country together. The rifts that the shock therapy reforms brought about not only in the Russian economy but also in social and political life jeopardized the unity of post-Soviet Russia, and the Yeltsin administration had to change its priorities if it wanted to avoid the country’s break-up. Pursuing a policy of national reconciliation meant changing the political agenda, in an attempt to narrow the gap with the opposition and therefore reduce the tensions that polarized political competition. The main political adversaries it sought to

¹² Laruelle, *In the Name of the Nation*.

¹³ Vladimir Shlapentokh, “A Review: The 1993 Russian Election Polls,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (1994).

reconcile with were the major opponents of its policy of economic reforms: the members of the so-called nationalist camp – namely the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) and the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) – which at that time dominated the Duma. In order to do that, Yeltsin made several moves starting from January 1994, when he confirmed Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin. As a politician who represented continuity with the Soviet era and who was close to the military-industrial complex, Chernomyrdin was well thought of especially by the communists. Predictably enough, he announced right away a slowdown of economic reforms. In April, after the Duma granted amnesty to the putschists and insurgents of the August 1991 and October 1993 events, Yeltsin managed to have almost all the major actors of Russian politics and society (except the KPRF) sign a “civic accord” to refrain from strife. But Yeltsin did not work exclusively on the institutional level; he sought reconciliation at the symbolic level as well. It is probably under this light that his visit at nationalist painter Ilya Glazunov’s exhibition in July 1994 has to be understood.¹⁴ Moreover, the fiftieth anniversary of the victory in World War II in May 1995 offered the Kremlin a chance to foster national reconciliation around the cult of the military, as the Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Moscow was inaugurated.

Notwithstanding the Kremlin’s significant steps towards political compromise and capture of the symbols of national unity, the pro-Yeltsin liberal forces were defeated by the so-called nationalist camp in the 1995 legislative elections with a margin even wider than in 1993.¹⁵ Such electoral results cast shadows on Yeltsin’s reelection in the coming spring and forced him to reconsider his political agenda. He had to stoop to compromise by dropping his emphasis on reforms and move to more centrist stances. Consistent with its policy of “patriotic” revival and striving to attract nationalist votes, during the 1996 presidential campaign the Kremlin coopted Aleksandr Lebed, a general close to nationalist forces. This strategy, which would become more frequently used under Putin,¹⁶ aimed at stealing votes

¹⁴ Natasha Singer, “Yeltsin and Ilya Glazunov,” *The Moscow Times*, July 29, 1994, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/yeltsin-and-ilya-glazunov/349950.html>.

¹⁵ For a comparative analysis of the two elections see Beat Kernen, “The Russian Parliamentary Election of 1993: A Quasi-Historical Interpretation in Light of the 1995 Elections,” *East European Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (1996).

¹⁶ In particular, the case of Rogozin and his “Rodina” party is illustrative in this sense.

from the openly nationalist Gennady Zyuganov, leader of the KPRF and Yeltsin's main competitor in the coming elections. In the first round, Lebed received 14.5% of the total preferences, and then supported Yeltsin during the second round. Eventually, Yeltsin managed to win the election – partly thanks to a massive media campaign designed to discredit the Communist candidate¹⁷ – and, considering the little popular support he enjoyed,¹⁸ he decided not to deviate from the policy of reconciliation that partially contributed to getting him reelected. He even tried to reinforce it by clearly hinting at the formulation of a national ideology, in some sort of continuity with the Russian past.

Yeltsin's official opening to a national ideal to work as a means of national cohesion dates back at June 12, 1996, national holiday of the Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Russian Federation – then renamed Russia Day in 1998. The Russian president encouraged the development of a national idea that could unite the country: “There were various periods in the Russian history of the twentieth century – monarchy, totalitarianism, *perestroika* and, finally, the democratic path to development. Each stage had its own ideology. We do not have it.” He advocated its emergence in one year,¹⁹ and also explained how “the most important thing for Russia is the search for a national idea, a national ideology.”²⁰ During the same summer, the government-run newspaper *Rossijskaja Gazeta* launched a contest for a new “Russian Idea.” The editor in charge of the project, Aleksandr Batygin, said that almost all the respondents supported “stronger patriotism.”²¹ In line with this tendency, in late 1996 Igor Chubais – brother of the former Minister of Economy Anatoli Chubais – wrote a book called “From the Russian Idea to the Idea of a New Russia” which strongly emphasized the need for a new ideology.²²

This new ideological push, together with the policy of reconciliation, opened up a new space at the center of the political spectrum; a space that gave new political figures the

¹⁷ Yitzhak M. Brudny, “In Pursuit of the Russian Presidency: Why and How Yeltsin Won the 1996 Presidential Election,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 30, no. 3 (1997).

¹⁸ Hugh D. Phillips, “Leaving the Past Behind: The Russian Presidential Elections of 1996,” *Occasional Papers* 273 (Washington D.C.: Kennan Institute, 1999).

¹⁹ “Yeltsin Calls for ‘Unifying National Idea’,” *Itar-Tass*, July 12, 1996.

²⁰ “El'tsyn o ‘natsional’noj idee,” *Nezavisimaja Gazeta*, July 1, 1996.

²¹ Julia Rubin, “Meditations on Russia: Yeltsin Calls for a New National ‘Idea’,” *Associated Press News Archive*, August 2, 1996, <http://www.apnewsarchive.com/1996/Meditations-on-Russia-Yeltsin-Calls-for-New-National-Idea-/id-122cd732a8cf8b35989afeec4db69dcd>.

²² Igor Chubais, *Ot russkoj idei k idee novoj Rossii* (Moscow: CITIS, 1996).

opportunity to rise. These figures – Aleksandr Lebed, Yuri Luzhkov, and Evgeni Primakov – embodied the new “third way” of centrist consensus, not connected to the pro-Western faction or to the nationalist opposition. Generally critical of “shock therapy,” they promoted an image of Russia as a strong state domestically and a world power internationally, and put a patriotic face on nationalism, thus crippling the nationalist camp and marginalizing the liberals.²³ In the 1999 Duma elections, Luzhkov and Primakov led the “Fatherland-All Russia” (*Otechestvo-Vsja Rossiya* - OVR) bloc, which first challenged “Unity” (*Edinstvo*) – the party that supported the presidential candidacy of new Prime Minister Vladimir Putin – and then merged with it to form United Russia (*Edinaja Rossiya*). The OVR coalition well represented the new patriotic centrist tendency, even though the importance it gave to political ideals is debated among scholars. While Laruelle points out that, despite some center-periphery issue, it represented a “relatively coherent ideological platform,”²⁴ Hanson takes OVR as the example of success based on organizational capabilities “rather than appeals to political principles.”²⁵ It was nonetheless defeated in the 1999 legislative election by Unity. Contradictorily, the OVR coalition registered a political and ideological success, insofar as it was the first political entity to raise a banner that coupled centrism and patriotic rhetoric, but it incurred an unavoidable electoral failure, since it tried to challenge another party of power already linked to the Kremlin. The ensuing cooptation of the “Fatherland” faction that led to the creation of the party of power – United Russia – in December 2001 made it possible for the Kremlin to take control over the center of the political spectrum and to reinforce its patriotic rhetoric, preventing the formation of a separate centrist-patriotic pole.

2.2 *Imposed Consensus and Patriotism in Putin’s First Term*

Yeltsin’s policy of national reconciliation and the emergence of the new patriotic centrist tendency completely reshaped the Russian political landscape. Indeed, when Putin was

²³ Laruelle, *In the Name of the Nation*, 125.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁵ Stephen E. Hanson, “Instrumental Democracy: The End of Ideology and the Decline of Russian Political Parties”, in *The 1999-2000 Elections in Russia: Their Impact and Legacy*, eds. Vicki L. Hesli and William M. Reisinger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 163.

appointed acting president at the end of 1999 and then elected president in 2000, he inherited a political scenario that was less polarized than it had been in the early 1990s. Putin embraced the situation and set his political agenda on further reducing any possible divisiveness and promoting national cohesion. In his rhetoric, national unity was to be built around “basic” or “traditional values,” and consensus on certain fundamental ideological principles was depicted as crucial for the country’s development. These “traditional values” were spelled out in the so-called *Millennium Manifesto*,²⁶ published on the government website on December 30, 1999, the day before Yeltsin’s resignation and Putin’s appointment as acting president. In a section of the document entitled “The Russian idea” (*Rossiiskaja Ideja*), Putin puts the emphasis on “patriotism” as the first of four “primordial, traditional values of the Russians.” He defines it as “a feeling of pride in one’s country, its history and accomplishments,” and as “the striving to make one’s country better, richer, stronger and happier.” He also adds that “[w]hen these sentiments are free from the taint of nationalist conceit and imperial ambitions, there is nothing reprehensible and bigoted about them,” and recommends not to lose patriotism, or the Russians will lose themselves “as a people capable of great achievements.”²⁷ Together with *derzhavnost’* (the greatness of Russia), *gosudarstvennichestvo* (statism), and social solidarity, patriotism is presented as one – significantly, as the first – of those traditional values around which a “social accord” (*obschestvennoe soglasie*) is to be achieved.²⁸

Indeed, *soglasie* – consensus, accord – and the overcoming of social and political division are set as the essential precondition in Putin’s plan for future Russia, as his recurring references to the concept show.²⁹ In the *Manifesto*, he wrote that the “fruitful and creative work, which our country needs so badly, is impossible in a divided and internally atomized society, a society where the main social groups and political forces do not share basic values and fundamental ideological orientations.”³⁰ A few months later, after he was officially elected president, he reinforced this idea during the Message to the Federal

²⁶ Vladimir Putin, *Russia at the Turn of the Millennium*, December 30, 1999, in Richard Sakwa, *Putin: Russia’s Choice* (New York: Routledge, 2008). Original Russian version available at http://www.ng.ru/politics/1999-12-30/4_millennium.html.

²⁷ Putin, *Russia at the Turn of the Millennium*.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Evans, “Power and Ideology.”

³⁰ Putin, *Russia at the Turn of the Millennium*.

Assembly of the Russian Federation in July, when he acknowledged that “the past year and a half showed that in society there is already a rather high level of consensus on the fundamental issues of the country’s development.”³¹ During the same speech, he insisted that “the development of society is impossible without consensus on common goals” – which he defined as material, spiritual and moral.³²

Putin’s insistence on the idea of consensus represents the continuation and reinforcement of the policy of reconciliation pursued by Yeltsin. On the other hand, while during the Yeltsin era a weak executive was seeking reconciliation with other political forces on an equal level, under Putin political and ideological consensus was imposed from the top down as an anticipation of and justification to the centralization of power that would be implemented in the following years. In his words, social accord “can only be voluntary,”³³ yet his actual idea of consensus consisted in the imposition from above of a set of values, presented as “primordial” and “traditional,” and therefore supposedly belonging to the nation as a whole, but in fact handpicked by the regime as the cornerstones of its political agenda. The promotion of this idea of consensus and national unity was aimed at establishing an identity between the nation, the state, and the regime, whose interests were represented as perfectly overlapping. The facility with which these concepts can be deliberately mixed up is favored by the fact that historically Russia, as Goble notes, “has been a state-nation rather than a nation-state,” because “identity has been centered on the state, which became an empire long before the population consolidated as a nation.”³⁴

The rehabilitation of patriotic rhetoric is another aspect of continuity between the two administrations. Putin’s particular emphasis on patriotism can be understood as the next step in the policy of normalization of nationalist discourse initiated by Yeltsin to foster consensus. As we have seen, at the beginning of the 1990s, nationalist rhetoric was left completely in the hands of the opposition – namely the so-called nationalist camp – while the Yeltsin presidency was pursuing a pro-Western political agenda. Its ultimate goal was

³¹ Vladimir Putin, *Poslanie Federal’nomu Sobraniju Rossijskoj Federatsii*, July 8, 2000, http://archive.kremlin.ru/appears/2000/07/08/0000_type63372type63374type82634_28782.shtml.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Putin, *Russia at the Turn of the Millennium*.

³⁴ Paul A. Goble, “Regions, Republics, and Russian Reform: Center-Periphery Relations in the Russian Federation,” in *The Successor States to the USSR*, ed. John W. Blaney (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1995), 163.

Russia's integration into the West,³⁵ and the appeal to nationalist values would have been detrimental to that. After the early exhaustion of its reformist drive, the legitimacy-seeking Kremlin repositioned its political agenda to more centrist positions and, at the same time, it gradually took possession of the patriotic rhetoric, most definitely acknowledging the impossibility of ruling without resorting to widely shared "national values." Laruelle called this political idea "patriotic centrism." As she points out, the aim of this strategy "was to eliminate ideological oppositions and to encourage political reconciliation of different factions through patriotic rhetoric."³⁶ This represented the rationale behind the process of officialization of nationalism. References to the ideas of Motherland (*Rodina*), Fatherland (*Otechestvo*), and Great Power (*derzhavnost'*) were no longer a prerogative of the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary nationalist opposition, but became common to the Kremlin decision-making establishment as well. In a process of normalization and rehabilitation of Russian national rhetoric, such lexicon moved from "radicalism" to "centrism."

Putin's *Millennium Manifesto* sought to reinforce this tendency. His "Russian Idea" was grounded on ideas that were neglected during the Yeltsin era, especially in his first term – i.e. the pride in Russia, the immutability of its greatness, a strong state as the main driving force, and the predominance of collectivism over individualism. This acceleration in the process of appropriation of nationalist rhetoric underlay the passage from "patriotic centrism" to "official patriotism." This can be understood as the smooth and almost unnoticed transition from the convergence on common themes with a reconciliatory goal to the unilateral imposition from above of a new label of political legitimacy. In 1999, Putin perfectly embodied the new spirit of consensus in Russian politics. As such, he managed to use the situation to the Kremlin's advantage by imposing patriotism as the one and only "common denominator of political correctness."³⁷ Therefore, the emergence of patriotic centrism was instrumental for the Kremlin in reaching "hegemony over the spectrum of

³⁵ Heinz Timmermann, "Russian Foreign Policy under Yeltsin: Priority for Integration into the 'Community of Civilized States'," *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 8, no. 4 (1992).

³⁶ Marlene Laruelle, "Rethinking Russian Nationalism: Historical Continuity, Political Diversity, and Doctrinal Fragmentation," in *Russian Nationalism and the National Reassertion of Russia* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 23.

³⁷ Laruelle, *In the Name of the Nation*, 10.

political belonging,” while placing “the unity of the nation, and therefore the unity of its political representation” under the unique banner of Putin’s presidency.³⁸

The appropriation of nationalist rhetoric and the drive to monopolize it, together with the formation of a proper presidential party – United Russia – had several dramatic consequences on party politics in the Russian Federation. First of all, nationalism has become the ideological posture shared by all parties, and this inevitably brought about a narrowing of the political spectrum, since “[t]hose who refuse to present themselves as ‘patriots’ are delegitimated and ushered off the public stage.”³⁹ No political figure can gain legitimacy without resorting to nationalist language, frequently under the “patriotic” label. As a proof of that, in the 2003 legislative elections, only parties with nationalist inclinations managed to obtain at least twenty seats in the Duma, and by 2007 those parties were the only ones who made it to enter the lower house at all.⁴⁰ Secondly, the fact that the authorities have gradually made the theme of the nation their own stripped the different forms of opposition nationalism – parliamentary and extra-parliamentary – of much their power of contestation. Thirdly, since nationalism is one of the sources of the authorities’ legitimacy, the more nationalist themes are widespread throughout the political spectrum and society, the more the Kremlin’s political legitimacy is strengthened.⁴¹ Russian politics also changed in nature. The fact that every political force took a nationalist posture represents the last step towards the disappearance of the old ideological divisions of the early 1990s. As Laruelle observes, Russian politics was no longer based on a contest between different worldviews, different set of beliefs, or different ideologies; but just competition internal to the bureaucracies in power. In the absence of meaningful debate on the political and economic guidelines that Russia should follow, the game of politics comes down to a turf war over seats of power.⁴² Politics is depoliticized. Therefore, in the ideological dullness of the Russian political scenario, patriotic sloganeering is the only

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Laruelle, “Rethinking Russian Nationalism,” 25.

⁴⁰ In 2003, those were United Russia, the Communist Party, the Liberal Democratic Party, and Rodina. In 2007 and 2011 Rodina’s place was taken by A Just Russia, a merger of Rodina itself, the Russian Party of Life, and the Russian Pensioners’ Party.

⁴¹ Laruelle, *In the Name of the Nation*, 10.

⁴² Laruelle, “Rethinking Russian Nationalism,” 25.

significant instrument of political self-assertion, the only way to present one's political offer as "legitimate."⁴³

However, not every nationalist force is automatically considered politically legitimate. In order to maintain control over the expanding nationalist section of the political spectrum, the Kremlin resorted to lexical manipulation to enforce an arbitrary distinction between "patriotism" and "nationalism." Putin in his *Manifesto* described "patriotism" as "a feeling of pride in one's Fatherland,"⁴⁴ and "the aspiration to make it better," and depicts it as absolutely normal and positive, as long as it is "free from the taint of *nationalist* conceit [emphasis added]."⁴⁵ The term "patriotism" was used during the 1990s to define the extra-parliamentary radical opposition – the so-called "patriotic camp" (*patrioticheskij lager*) – until the Kremlin took control over this label, rethought its meaning, and gradually gave it a positive connotation. As a result, "patriotism" is now portrayed as moderate, widespread throughout society, unifying, and therefore even necessary, as opposed to "nationalism," which is referred to as extremist, aggressive, sectarian, and detrimental to national unity and social cohesion. As Laruelle notes in her textual analysis of Putin's discourse, this division is not new to Russian political rhetoric, as it can be assimilated to "the opposition developed during the Soviet period, according to which only Soviet patriotism was positive and internationalist, while nationalism of the Soviet peoples and peoples of Western Europe was negative and chauvinistic."⁴⁶

Still, it is hard to define this arbitrary distinction in a meaningful way, especially if one considers the inconsistency that characterizes the Kremlin's policy towards certain nationalist figures and issues.⁴⁷ Scholars have defined Putin's "patriotism" in different ways, but all seem to agree on its instrumental use. In particular, March defines it as "moderate in its content" if compared to historical and contemporary forms of Russian nationalism, because "the aim is not the expression of nationalism *per se*, but its control

⁴³ Jean-Robert Raviot, *Démocratie à la Russe. Pouvoir et Contre-Pouvoir en Russie Post-Soviétique* (Paris: Ellipses, 2008).

⁴⁴ The word used is *Otechestvo* ("Fatherland") in the original version, and not "country" (*strana*) as most English translations report.

⁴⁵ Putin, *Russia at the Turn of the Millennium*.

⁴⁶ Laruelle, *In the Name of the Nation*, 144.

⁴⁷ Among the most illustrative examples are Dmitri Rogozin, Aleksandr Dugin, and the question of xenophobia.

and utilization for regime goals.”⁴⁸ In practice, loyalty to the Kremlin is the discriminant factor in determining what is “patriotic” and what is “nationalist.” This binary distinction is an instrument in the hands of the Kremlin, which defines its nationalism as the “good” patriotic one while condemning the “bad” radical nationalism of its opponents. These are generally defined as “extremists,” that is all the “forces that aim to destabilize the political situation in Russia.”⁴⁹ According to the Kremlin’s logic, those who rail against Putin and do not recognize his achievements are automatically labeled “enemy of the state and the nation, enemies of [the] Homeland.”⁵⁰ As Putin himself said during the Message to the Federal Assembly on December 12, 2012, the “nationalists and extremists [...] drag the country towards social decline and disintegration,” and the “attempts to provoke ethnic tensions and religious intolerance” have to be considered “as a challenge to the unity of the Russian state and as a threat to all of us.”⁵¹ The destabilizing effects of what he calls “nationalism and chauvinism” affect the integrity of the country and political unity of the state, whose “structure of subordination” has the Kremlin at its top. However, as mentioned before, the Kremlin’s approach to extreme nationalism is far from being so clear-cut. March describes it as “ambiguous and inconsistent:” on the one hand, the Kremlin “periodically coopts and mobilizes” even extreme forms of nationalism; on the other hand, “it repeatedly suppresses [it] when its political implications become destabilizing.”⁵² Some authors have called this strategy “managed nationalism,” and defined it as a consequence or

⁴⁸ Luke March, “Nationalism for Export? The Domestic and Foreign-Policy Implications of the New ‘Russian Idea’,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 3 (2012): 402.

⁴⁹ Pavel Danilin, Natalija Kryshal, and Dmitrij Poljakov, *Vragi Putina* (Moscow: Evropa, 2007), 137.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵¹ “But we must not forget that any nationalism and chauvinism do direct an enormous damage especially to the people and the ethnic group whose interests the nationalists are supposedly defending. That is why there is a grave danger for Russia in all manifestations of “simple and definitive” solutions offered by the nationalists and extremists of various stripes and persuasions. Whatever their slogans, they drag the country towards social decline and disintegration. We must regard attempts to provoke ethnic tensions and religious intolerance as a challenge to the unity of the Russian state and as a threat to all of us. We will not allow the emergence of closed ethnic enclaves in Russia with their informal jurisdiction, existing outside the country’s common legal and cultural norms, and disdainfully disregarding the accepted standards, laws, and regulations.” Vladimir Putin, *Poslanie Prezidenta RF Federal’nomu Sobraniju*, December 12, 2012, <http://er.ru/news/2012/12/12/poslanie-prezidenta-rossijskoj-federacii-federalnomu-sobraniyu>. See also Aleksandr Braterskij, “Putin Says Nationalism a Danger to the State,” *The Moscow Times*, January 24, 2012, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/putin-says-nationalism-a-danger-to-the-state/451514.html>.

⁵² March, “Nationalism for Export?,” 402.

a subset of “managed democracy” or “pluralism.”⁵³ Practically speaking, the Kremlin sets the limits of admissible socio-political competition – without suppressing pluralism – and allows forms of nationalism that do not challenge its authority while condemning those outside of the imposed consensus.

Putin’s initial approach to ideology was a cautious one. While, in his view, the national revival of Russia had to go through the reevaluation of national symbols and values, and a patriotic approach became gradually established, no effort was initially made to provide patriotism with a more clear-cut ideological connotation. Putin presented himself as the embodiment of *soglasie* and the appeal to “traditional values” was aimed at reinforcing this idea. A full-fledged and potentially divisive ideology was not needed at a time when patriotism alone was perfectly fulfilling the Kremlin’s main purpose – imposing consensus and strengthening the Kremlin’s position vis-à-vis other political forces. This approach began to change from 2005 onward.

⁵³ See among others Emil A. Pain, “Xenophobia and Ethnopolitical Extremism in Post-Soviet Russia: Dynamics and Growth Factors,” *Nationalities Papers* 35, no. 5 (2007); Laruelle, *In the Name of the Nation*; March, “Nationalism for Export?”

3. Assuring Regime Continuity: the new ideological drive and the role of United Russia

According to the Constitution, Putin had to step down and leave office at the end of his second term (2004-2008). The upcoming change of leadership was putting regime continuity into question and this generated political uncertainty for the elite and the country as a whole. Even when Putin finally identified Deputy Prime Minister Dmitrij Medvedev as his successor in 2007, the discontinuity he represented in terms of background (a lawyer and academic) and political views (markedly more liberal) did not help to reduce uncertainty. Although patriotic rhetoric was instrumental in building consensus around the regime, it was not enough to assure political continuity, as its non-programmatic nature did not provide any guideline for the country's future development. Moreover, the regime had to prove that it was not dependent on its leader's charisma, and that its political legitimacy went beyond the president's. For this reason, the party of power – United Russia – started becoming a more autonomous political entity and occupying a more central role in Russian politics. This process led to Putin's public endorsement of the party immediately before the 2007-2008 electoral cycle. He first agreed to head United Russia's list in the 2007 parliamentary elections and then finally became party member and formal leader at the beginning of 2008. The acquisition of party membership and acceptance of the role of leader revealed the president's will to commit to the party's political project and to – a certain extent – to subject himself to internal party practices, hence increasing the party's legitimacy.

However, United Russia started acquiring a new enhanced role in the regime's ideological formulation early on in Putin's second term. The new role of the party of power really marks discontinuity with the previous ideological posture of the regime. If every ideological product during Putin's first term was coming directly from the president himself – the *Millennium Manifesto* being the clearest example of this tendency – from 2005 United Russia represented the new vehicle for a renovated ideological message. All the ideological effort was conducted through the levers of the party, which was to become more than a mere bureaucratic network. The foundation of the *Evropa Publishing House* in 2005 was the first example of this new trend. As we read on the website, its establishment aimed at

“spreading political education, fortifying the institutions of civil society and the political system of Russia,” and it addresses “all those readers who are involved in real politics: regular electorate, young politicians and students, all the way to political activists, administrative, intellectual and media elites.”⁵⁴ *Evropa* was set up by presidential advisor Gleb Pavlovskij and its mission was to formulate the ideological core that United Russia was in need of. Despite the publication of some critical voices as well – such as Dmitri Trenin,⁵⁵ from the pro-Western think tank Carnegie Center of Moscow – the main part of the books it published (“United Russia’s agitator,”⁵⁶ “United Russia, the party of Russian political culture,”⁵⁷ “Putin’s enemies,”⁵⁸ “Putin. His ideology”⁵⁹ among others) reveal how it was specifically conceived as a tool of propaganda, focused on projecting a positive image of United Russia and aggrandizing its achievements.

This new ideological tendency further evolved into three main instances: the concept of sovereign democracy, the formalization of intra-party wings, and the formulation of Russian conservatism.

3.1 The “Sovereign Democracy” Experiment: emerging dissent among the elite

Putin’s ideological mindset, as Sakwa observes, is characterized by contradictions. The tension between the values of liberal individualism and statist collectivism, for instance, is one of the most glaring ones,⁶⁰ and it shows through the *Millennium Manifesto* as well as the works that will be analyzed later. The way these ideological contradictions are usually resolved in the Putin regime is through the “domestication” of imported values – i.e. values that the regime does not recognize as “Russian.” In his *Millennium Manifesto*, Putin wrote that “[Russia’s] future depends on combining the universal principles of the market economy and democracy with Russian realities.”⁶¹ The formulation of the idea of

⁵⁴ Evropa Publishing House. “Our Mission,” <http://europublish.ru/mission/>.

⁵⁵ Dmitri Trenin, *Integratsija i Identichnost’: Rossija kak “Novij Zapad”* (Moscow: Evropa, 2006).

⁵⁶ *Agitator Edinoj Rossii: Voprosy, Otveti, Politicheskie Poniatija* (Moscow: Evropa, 2006).

⁵⁷ Andrej Isaev, *Edinaja Rossija, Partija Russkoj Politicheskoi Kul’tury* (Moscow: Evropa, 2006).

⁵⁸ P. Danilin, N. Kryshchal, D. Poljakov, *Vragi Putina* (Moscow: Evropa, 2007).

⁵⁹ Aleksej Chadaev, *Putin. Ego ideologija* (Moscow: Evropa, 2006).

⁶⁰ Sakwa, *Putin: Russia’s Choice*, 55.

⁶¹ Vladimir Putin, *Russia at the Turn of the Millennium*.

“sovereign democracy” (*suverennaja demokratija*) tried to further develop this tendency of adapting imported values to the Russian foundations in order to preserve national specificities.

The father of the concept of sovereign democracy is Vladislav Surkov. A businessman from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s – he held managerial positions in the association of credit-financial enterprises “Menatep” (at that time headed by Mikhail Khodorkovskij) – Surkov became director for public relations of ORT television (Channel One Russia) in 1998. He began his political career just a year later, when in August 1999 he was appointed Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration. He became one of the founders and main ideologues of United Russia. He then remained inside the Presidential Administration until December 2011, when he was appointed Deputy Prime Minister, and stayed in office until his resignation in May 2013. After a period of political eclipse, he returned to the Presidential Administration in September 2013 as personal adviser of the president on Russia’s relationships with Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Ukraine. It is not by chance that the central years of his career as Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration coincide with the peak of the Kremlin’s ideological effort. In July 2005, he gave a secret speech at the *Delovaja Rossija* (Business Russia) economic forum in which he juxtaposed the concepts of “sovereignty” and “democracy” for the first time.⁶² Then, on February 7, 2006, during a speech at United Russia’s Center for Party Personnel Training, Surkov fully expounded the idea of sovereign democracy and advocated the development of an ideology to avoid party schism and increase the political capital of United Russia.⁶³ Published by *Moskovskie novosti* (Moscow News), the speech was made into an article and later included into the party’s program. Surkov was particularly worried and solicitous in calling for the formulation of an ideology, explicitly stating that the integrity of the country was at stake. At an international news conference in 2006 he said that “a bureaucratic way of keeping the country together cannot last, and we

⁶²Vladislav Surkov, *Vladislav Surkov’s Secret Speech: How Russia Should Fight International Conspiracies*, July 12, 2005, <http://www.network54.com/Forum/155335/thread/1164815166/last-1164815166/>.

⁶³ Vladislav Surkov, *Suverenitet – Eto Politicheskij Sinonim Konkurentosposobnosti*, March 9, 2006, <http://pln-pskov.ru/politics/29008.html>.

will be unable to maintain the country's integrity without complementing this vertical power with an 'ideology' recognized by the people."⁶⁴

Surkov defines sovereign democracy as "a mode of the political life of society in which the state authorities, their bodies and actions are elected, formed, and directed exclusively by the Russian nation in all its unity and diversity for the sake of achieving material well-being, freedom, and justice for all the citizens, social groups, and peoples that constitute it."⁶⁵ In defining sovereign democracy, here Surkov focuses on what he calls the "nationalization of the future," which is also the title of the document from which the excerpt is taken. In Surkov's view, the Russian nation (*rossijskaja natsija*) has to take full control over its future to improve its condition. This can be done only in a democratic and sovereign Russia. In Surkov's view, both democracy and sovereignty are "strategic conditions" that "have to provide a long-term sustainable development."⁶⁶ In his path towards modernization, Russia cannot do without either of them. Without democracy there would be no modernization, and without sovereignty there would be no attention to Russia's specific needs and circumstances – i.e. no sustainability. This is the foundational idea of Surkov's ideological tenet: Russia has to be both sovereign and democratic in order to pursue its own path to modernization at its own pace. Therefore, Surkov presents sovereignty and democracy as goals, but not as final ones; they are means necessary to attain the actual final goal – i.e. Russia's sustainable modernization.

Surkov acknowledges that adding an adjective to "democracy" would raise problems of theoretical nature, especially because the two terms have different scopes: while "democracy" refers to the internal structure of a society and state, "sovereign" denotes a country's position in the international scenario and its relations with other actors. Yet, Surkov justifies the juxtaposition by saying that the adjective "sovereign" is needed because "liberal politicians" do not consider the issue of sovereignty as actual.⁶⁷ In Surkov's mind, there was probably nothing more current than the problem of sovereignty in

⁶⁴ News conference of Vladislav Surkov on the website of the G8 presidency of the Russian Federation in 2006, at <http://en.g8russia.ru/news/20060704/1168817.html>. In Ken Jowitt, "Rus United", *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 24, no. 4 (2008): 503.

⁶⁵ Vladislav Surkov, "Nationalization of the Future: Paragraphs *pro* Sovereign Democracy," *Russian Studies in Philosophy* 47, no. 4 (2009): 9.

⁶⁶ Surkov, *Suverenitet – Eto Politicheskij Sinonim Konkurentosposobnosti*.

⁶⁷ Surkov, *How Russia Should Fight International Conspiracies*.

the mid-2000s. The “colored revolutions” (2003 Georgia; 2004 Ukraine; 2005 Kyrgyzstan) provoked a reaction from the Kremlin, and the idea of sovereign democracy was one of the countermeasures taken in the ideological field. As Okara points out, “sovereign democracy” is related to the idea of “managed democracy,” which characterized the early years of Putin’s presidency. However, while the latter refers to the domestic problems inherited from the Yeltsin era, the former puts emphasis on the international sphere, and in particular on the attempts of some countries to restrict the sovereignty of others.⁶⁸ Therefore, we can see why Surkov’s emphasis is clearly on “sovereignty” rather than on “democracy,” as to warn that no external interference would be accepted, not even in the name of democracy. Surkov identifies four main threats to sovereignty: international terrorism, military clashes (although less likely to happen), a noncompetitive economic system, and what he calls “soft absorption by ‘orange technologies’,” which “decrease national immunity to external influences.”⁶⁹

However, Surkov insists on the fact that sovereignty should not be conceived of as a synonym of closure. “Sovereignty is not a fortress,” said Surkov, “it is openness, it is an opening to the world, it is participation in an open struggle [...] sovereignty is the political synonym of competitiveness.”⁷⁰ Surkov maintains that embracing globalization is a crucial step towards modernization, while isolation would be detrimental to Russia’s development. “[I]f we are not integrated into the world economy, into the world system of knowledge, we will not have access to the modern technologies of the West, and without those [...] the modernization of Russia is impossible,” he stated. In order to regain its preeminent role in world politics, Russia cannot withdraw in itself in fear of jeopardizing its free rein; on the contrary, it has to open up to globalization and take advantage of it while preserving its autonomy. This vision leads Surkov to consider other actors in the international system – European countries in particular – not as “enemies,” but simply as “competitors.”⁷¹

Because national specificities matter, the timing of democratization is crucial in Surkov’s line of reasoning: democracy cannot be imposed upon Russia’s socio-political

⁶⁸ Andrej Okara, “Sovereign Democracy: A New Russian Idea or a PR Project?,” *Russia in Global Affairs* 5, no. 3 (2007): 18.

⁶⁹ Surkov, *Suverenitet – Eto Politicheskij Sinonim Konkurentosposobnosti*.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Surkov, *How Russia Should Fight International Conspiracies*.

system. According to him, “[b]uilding a democracy is not just about drawing democratic institutions, but also about making sure people reach that level of cultural development,” because “either [democracy] is in our heads or it is not.”⁷² While Surkov is convinced that the Russian people are fit for democracy, and that Putin already returned “the real meaning of the word ‘democracy’ to all democratic institutes,”⁷³ he is also aware that Russia’s path towards democracy is a long one (“a historic path,” as he calls it). Accelerating the democratization process would mean to take a leap that might damage the country: “[w]e are not trying to keep that process in check intentionally, as many think. It is just that we are afraid,” said Surkov.⁷⁴

Unsurprisingly, central to the idea of sovereign democracy is Russian exceptionalism. According to Surkov, “sovereign democracy” also has a psychological base: he argues that Russia has been a modern state for 500 years, and that “it made history and was not made by history.” This makes Russia different from “Slovaks, Baltic nations and even Ukrainians,” Surkov said.⁷⁵ In other words, Russia has always been an independent great power, master of its own destiny, and it should continue to be so. As we have seen, Russia’s uniqueness is at the center of Putin’s discourse as well, and this allows the regime to demand complete autonomy in ruling the country: the rationale behind this is that a special country needs special measures.

The ideological tenet of sovereign democracy had important political and ideological implications. From the political point of view, the Putin regime put forward the idea of sovereign democracy seeking a legitimizing effect. As Okara observes, the goal of sovereign democracy was to provide the political elite with grounds for maintaining its dominating position and legitimize itself in front of Russian society and the world stage. In particular, through sovereign democracy, according to Okara, the Putin regime sends two messages to the Russian nation. The first message emphasizes that the regime is the expression of a sovereign elite, and that the sources of its legitimacy are rooted in Russia, and not in the West – as it was during the Yeltsin era. The second message is that this sovereign elite operates to ensure the sovereignty of the country: the Putin regime is the

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Surkov, *Suverenitet – Eto Politicheskij Sinonim Konkurentosposobnosti*.

⁷⁴ Surkov, *How Russia Should Fight International Conspiracies*.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

guarantor of Russia's sovereignty and survival from external threats.⁷⁶ The enunciation of "sovereign democracy" came at a time when a more cogent ideology was deemed necessary to counteract the ideological impact of the colored revolutions. It is not by chance that sovereign democracy includes all the elements of Putin's ideological effort that we have analyzed thus far: nationalism-patriotism, "great-powerism" (*derzhavnost'*), anti-westernism with varying degrees – from clash to collaboration – state conservatism but also liberalism and economic openness. Sovereign democracy implies that Russia is willing to play the game of the West – i.e., pursue the path towards democratization – but according to its own rules – i.e., defending its sovereignty. Sovereign democracy encompasses all the different tensions and contradictions of Putinism, and tries to reconcile them. It could even be argued that sovereign democracy was designed to wrap up the Putinite ideological product and give it a coherent and less ambiguous face.

However, Surkov's political decline and the relegation of the idea of sovereign democracy away from public debate clearly indicate the failure of this ideological experiment. One of the reasons for this failure was the fact that Surkov's idea of an alternative path to development for Russia exposed the existence of divisions inside the elite, which all of a sudden looked more fragmented than it seemed before. The future president Dmitri Medvedev himself openly spoke against the idea of sovereign democracy, voicing all his skepticism regarding the theoretical and normative content of the concept. In an interview with the magazine *Ekspert* in July 2006, he pointed out how "sovereignty" and "democracy" belong to separate political categories. He also stated that attaching any modifying term to democracy "leaves a strange aftertaste" and suggested that neither of the two terms should be allowed to "suppress the other".⁷⁷ Former Prime Minister Evgenii Primakov as well expressed his opposition to the term "sovereign democracy" arguing that it could be used to deny basic and universal democratic principles, such as the separation of powers and freedom of choice.⁷⁸ Direct attacks to Surkov's idea came also from United Russia's spokesmen. Oleg Morozov, Duma deputy speaker and prominent figure inside the party of power, said that building United Russia's program around the concept of

⁷⁶ Okara, "Sovereign Democracy: A New Russian Idea or a PR Project?," 18.

⁷⁷ Dmitrii Medvedev, "Dlja protsvetaniia vsekh nado uchityvat' interesy kazhdogo," interview by Valerii Fadeev, *Ekspert* 7 (July 2006).

⁷⁸ Vladimir Rudakov, "Sam sebe suveren," *Profil* 27 (July 2006).

“sovereign democracy” would be a mistake.⁷⁹ Finally in September 2006 even Putin stepped in to publicly support the view previously expressed by Medvedev (“sovereignty and democracy are concepts that assess two different phenomena”),⁸⁰ who later strengthened his criticism saying that democracy is more important than any adjective that might be attached to it.⁸¹ The finishing blow to the concept of sovereign democracy came in November 2007, before the legislative elections, when Putin criticized United Russia for its lack of ideology. He stated that United Russia did not prove to be an ideal political structure and that it had no formed ideology, “no principles for which the majority of its members would be ready to battle and stake its authority.”⁸²

Ultimately, while trying to establish the ideological bases for regime continuity, the concept of “sovereign democracy” was running the risk of jeopardizing both the consensus built around the regime and its legitimacy. It was somehow paradoxical that a theoretical tenet designed to promote further consensus among the elite ended up undermining it. The attempt to combine all the regime’s different ideological principles in a coherent whole was ambitious but clearly unsuccessful, as its contradictory nature fostered divisions that could not be kept beneath the surface. Moreover, the regime’s domestic and – to a lesser extent – international legitimacy was built on its democratic façade and rhetoric. Any official deviation from the classic conception of liberal democracy looked like an admission of the imperfections and authoritarian inclinations of the regime, which lay itself open to harsh criticism from the West, comparing Surkov’s idea to the Soviet-era notion of “people’s democracy.”⁸³ It soon became apparent that “sovereign democracy” represented more a weakness than a strength for the Kremlin, and that the regime had to develop another ideological product to secure its continuity.

⁷⁹ Francesca Mereu, “United Russia Pans ‘Surkov Democracy’,” *The Moscow Times*, July 26, 2006, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/united-russia-pans-surkov-democracy/203541.html>.

⁸⁰ Vladimir Putin, “Stenografi cheskii otchet o vstreche s uchastnikami tret’ego zasedaniia mezhdunarodnogo diskussionogo kluba ‘Valdai’,” September 9, 2006. In Evans, “Power and Ideology,” 17.

⁸¹ Mikhail Fishman, “Epokha bez nazvaniia,” *Gazeta.ru*, August 18, 2006.

⁸² “Putin: ‘Edinaja Rossiia – ne ideal’naja politicheskaja struktura,” *Vesti.ru*, November 13, 2007, <http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=147252>.

⁸³ Mereu, “United Russia Pans ‘Surkov Democracy’.”

3.2 United Russia's Wings: managed pluralism within the party of power

By the time that Surkov's initiative sparked discussion inside the elite, the existence of divergent ideological positions inside United Russia had already been made evident by the internal structure of the party, which from 2005 started to be organized around intra-party wings.

During the anti-government mass demonstrations of January 2005, United Russia was exposed to harsh criticism. The party of power was accused of unconditional support for president Putin and of neglecting to take responsibility for the controversial reforms in the sphere of social privileges.⁸⁴ This sparked discussion inside United Russia regarding its role, its functioning, and its internal structure. In particular, voices were raised inside the political elite in favor of more internal debate and the formation of ideological wings within the party. On April 19, 2005, Vladimir Pligin, lawyer and president of the Duma Constitutional Legislation Committee, and other members of parliament drafted a document in which they urged the party to take its responsibility by strengthening its authority and acting like an autonomous political entity.⁸⁵ In order to achieve this goal, the document demands open discussion inside the party, and calls for an ideology to guide the country's development. The ideology in question would have to be based on liberal values. Two days later, on April 21, a group of Duma deputies and members of United Russia led by Andrej Isaev, chairman of the Duma Committee on work and social policy since 2003, drafted another document in reply to the first one. It outlined the same problems inside the party and called for open debate and an ideology to guide the country; however, the document stressed the centrality of the state and the attention to social problems, while attacking the liberals for the damages they caused in the past. The ideology proposed is "social conservatism".⁸⁶ Even though both documents stress the unity of the party and explain how they do not want to create political fractions inside of it, two informal currents

⁸⁴ "V rukovodstve 'Edinoj Rossii' grjadut kadrobye perestanki posle prorostanija kryl'ev – 'pravogo' i 'leboego'," *Newsru.com*, April 21, 2005, <http://www.newsru.com/russia/21apr2005/wings.html>. The reforms under attack from the protesters concerned social benefits for the elderly: in particular, the abolition of some free government-funded benefits, such as medical care and transportation.

⁸⁵ "Tsentr sotsial'no-konservativnoj politiki stal pitatel'noj sredoj dlja oboikh kryl'ev," April 27, 2005, <http://www.cskp.ru/doklad/10123/>.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

seem to have formed inside United Russia – the liberal conservative and the social conservative. A few days after the social conservatives' reply, at the meeting of the general council of United Russia on April 23, party leader and Duma speaker Boris Gryzlov stated that there would not be wings inside United Russia. Although he acknowledged that discussion inside a party is “not only natural, but also necessary,” Gryzlov also stated that it should not be detrimental to party discipline.⁸⁷ On that occasion, he also pointed out a set of values – democracy, civil liberties, sovereignty, and legality – which are central to the whole party; he added that those values correspond to the interests of Russia, and that the party cannot and does not have the right to split between left and right. “We are bears, and we do not need wings. Bears do not fly,” he said.⁸⁸ Nonetheless, Gryzlov claimed that United Russia chose social conservatism. In his view, social conservatism is wider than any political trend – as its elements belong to both the traditional left and right – and it cannot be reduced to one.⁸⁹ He explained how social conservatism supports the middle strata of the population and “upholds the interests of those who do not need any kind of revolution – financial, economic, cultural, political, ‘orange,’ ‘red,’ ‘brown’ or ‘blue.’”⁹⁰ The maintenance of social stability, the protection of private property, the expansion of the middle class by lifting the standard of living and decreasing the number of poor are listed by Gryzlov as the main goals of social conservatism. As an exponent of such “leftist” trend, also Andrej Isaev commented the formation of currents inside United Russia. He said that the intraparty group he contributed to form could be called a “wing” or a “social current.”⁹¹ He also openly spoke against party split, and pointed out how the “left position” inside the party is much closer than the liberal one to the electoral program that allowed United Russia to win the 2003 elections. Isaev also emphasized that the distance between different positions inside the party is nothing compared to the “abyss” that divides United Russia

⁸⁷ “Boris Gryzlov: U “Edinoj Rossii” kryl’ev ne budet,” *Russkaja Linija*, April 23, 2005, <http://rusk.ru/st.php?idar=150593>.

⁸⁸ Mikhail Tulsij, “Javnye i tajnye kril’ja ‘Edinoj Rossii’,” *Argumenty Nedeli*, July 3, 2008, <http://argumenti.ru/politics/n138/37983>.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ “V rukovodstve ‘Edinoj Rossii’ grjadut kadrobye perestanki posle prorostanija kryl’ev – ‘pravogo’ i ‘lebovo’.”

from the KPRF, on the one hand, and the old liberals – Union of Right Forces and Yabloko – on the other.⁹²

Despite Gryzlov's words, two currents have thus constituted. The liberal conservative current was led by Vladimir Pligin and Valeri Fadeev. Pligin started his political career working as a lawyer in the administration of the mayor of Saint Petersburg Anatolij Sobchak, where many liberals were formed. Fadeev is editor-in-chief of the business magazine *Ekspert* since 1998, director of the *Institut Obschestvennogo Proektirovanija* (Institute of Social Forecasting),⁹³ and co-president of the all-Russian social organization *Delovaja Rossija* (Business Russia).⁹⁴ The liberal conservative current includes many figures that started their political career in the Union of Right Forces before joining United Russia. The social conservative current, on the other hand, is led by Andrej Isaev. A professor of history, he developed his ties with labor unions over time. From 1995 to 2001 he was secretary of the Federation of Independent Labor Unions of Russia (*Federatsija Nezavisimyh Profsojuzov Rossii*). In December 1999 he was elected Duma deputy with the Fatherland-All Russia bloc, and in 2003 he became a member of United Russia and head of the Duma Committee on work and social policy. As we have seen, the two currents were not officially recognized; however, they found a way to identify themselves through discussion clubs, or *kluby*. The liberal conservatives' club is called the Club of November 4 (*Klub "4ogo nojabrja"*). The club does not have its own website; it is hosted on the Institute of Social Forecasting website:⁹⁵ this suggests a close correlation between the two entities. The club's name refers to a national holiday – the National Unity Day – introduced in 2004 to commemorate the uprisings in 1612 that expelled the Polish-Lithuanian occupiers from Moscow. The club supports the development and realization of a "liberal conservative" political agenda: it emphasizes Russia's liberal past, it opposes its isolationist tendencies, and it points out the preservation of freedom and private property as the state's overriding task.⁹⁶ Interestingly enough, the club states that it relies on the ideas formulated

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Institut Obschestvennogo Proektirovanija*, www.inop.ru.

⁹⁴ *Delovaja Rossija*, www.deloros.ru.

⁹⁵ *Materialy Kluba "4ogo nojabrja"*, <http://www.inop.ru/page642/>.

⁹⁶ "Liberal'no-konservativnoe videnie buduschego Rossii", *Nezavisimaja Gazeta*, November 18, 2005, http://www.ng.ru/ideas/2005-11-18/10_future.html.

in the Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, and it considers United Russia as its “most significant political partner,” still, it defines itself as “a nonparty platform.”⁹⁷ The club also highlights its “lobbyist character.” As regards the social conservatives, they created the Center of Social Conservative Policy (*Tsentr Sotsialnoj-Konservativnoj Politiki*) in 2005.⁹⁸ The CSKP is a non-profit partnership, a private club that deals with public policy. It was conceived as a tool to counteract economic recession and develop the concept of Russian conservatism.⁹⁹ Although it is a non-state and non-party organization, all of its members are connected with United Russia and its Duma factions.

During the 2007 electoral campaign, new groups were announced to emerge inside United Russia. One was called “Russian Project” (*Russkij proekt*) and it had a marked nationalist character; another was labeled “Christian-conservative.”¹⁰⁰ While the latter was dropped without much publicity, the former was utterly implemented, and it became the third current inside United Russia – the patriotic conservative one. A round table at the Center of Social Conservative Policy presented the project on February 3, 2007, and the group published its manifesto – the “Russian Project” – in the same month.¹⁰¹ Surprisingly enough, Andrej Isaev took part in the creation of the project. Ivan Demidov was put at the head of it. Demidov was a television host and author during the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s; he later became involved in TV production and founded the Orthodox channel *Spas* in 2005. His political career started in late 2005, when he was appointed coordinator of “Young Guard” – United Russia’s youth group – on ideology and political work. In 2008 he became chief ideologue of the political department of United Russia, and in 2009 he was appointed secretary of the Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia’s Interests. Since April 2010, he is the deputy head of department on domestic policy of the presidential administration, and in 2012 he became deputy Minister of Culture. Demidov did not conceal United Russia’s main use of the “Russian Project,” which was, in his words, “to revive the terms of

⁹⁷ *Tseli i zadachi kluba*, <http://www.inop.ru/page642/>

⁹⁸ *Tsentr Sotsialnoj-Konservativnoj Politiki*, www.cskp.ru.

⁹⁹ *Tsentr Sotsialnoj-Konservativnoj Politiki*, <http://www.cskp.ru/about/>.

¹⁰⁰ “‘Edianja Rossija’ razdelitsja na techenija”, *Nezavisimaja Gazeta*, November 2, 2007, http://www.ng.ru/politics/2007-11-02/1_er.html.

¹⁰¹ The website www.rus-proekt.ru was closed in February 2008 and it is no longer available.

nationalism, nation, and Russian, which have been privatized and discredited by organizations such as the Movement Against Illegal Immigration.”¹⁰² It is not by chance that the name chosen for the project was *russskij* (“Russian”) and not *rossijskij* (“of Russia”): the latter emphasizes the civic identity of the Russian Federation, while the former has an ethnic meaning. During the presentation of the project, Aleksej Chadaev – also a member of the Civic Chamber – declared that “professional Russians” (*professional’nye russkie*) are necessary to adequately treat the concept of nationalism and keep it detached from extremism and xenophobia.¹⁰³ The emphasis on concepts like “Russian nation” (*russskaja natsija*) and “russianness” (*russskost’*) informs the political stance of the current. According to Demidov, the mission of the Russian state is not to safeguard the interests of the individual, but to ensure the survival and prosperity of the Russian people. For this reason, he radically opposes both the liberals and social democrats, and talks about the “patriotic choice” as a third way – the way of “national egoism” – to resist the “utopian altruism of all the idealists” of leftist and liberal positions.¹⁰⁴ After the 2007-2008 round of elections, the Kremlin decided to restrain the “Russian Project” due to its radical nature and political incorrectness. The supervision of the project was transferred to the Center for Social Conservative Policy: the website was closed in February 2008, even before the presidential elections, and the *CSKP* republished the least radical articles. Demidov was appointed chief ideologue of the political department of United Russia and moved away from the project. Yuriy Shuvalov, who was among the supporters of the project, talked about a conceptual reorganization for it. He argued that the “Russian idea” promoted by the *Russskij proekt* had to have a supra-ethnic character, setting the goals and ideals for all the people living in the Russian Federation.¹⁰⁵ One of the documents formalizing this new approach for a nationalist current inside United Russia – called “Russian Matrix. Reloaded” (*Russskaja matritsa. Perezagruzka*) – was written by Sergej

¹⁰² “Edinaja Rossiya sozdaet Russskij proekt”, *km.ru*, February 5, 2007.

¹⁰³ “Edinorusskij proekt: partija vlasti voz’met pod krylo natsionalistov,” *Obschaja Gazeta*, February 5, 2007, <http://www.og.ru/articles/2007/02/05/22043.shtml>.

¹⁰⁴ “Rasshirennoe zasedanie CSKP v TPP: ‘Partija parlamentskogo bol’shinstva. Obnovlenie i razvitie,’” *Vsemi.ru*, November 12, 2007, <http://www.vsesmi.ru/news/1257279/>.

¹⁰⁵ Vera Kholmogorova, “Vzjali pod krylo,” *Ekspert Online*, February 26, 2008, <http://expert.ru/2008/02/26/krylo/>.

Volobuev, member of the *CSKP*.¹⁰⁶ However, despite the closure of the “Russian Project,” the idea of a third “patriotic” current inside United Russia was not abandoned. The project was transformed into a much more moderate State-Patriotic Club (*Gosudarstvenno-patrioticheskij Klub*). Irina Yarovaya was appointed coordinator of the club. A former member of the party Yabloko, Yarovaya joined United Russia in 2007 and was elected at the Duma that same year. In 2008-2009 she was vice-chairman of the Duma Committee on Affairs of the Federation and Regional Policy, while in 2009-2011 she was vice-chairman of the Committee on Constitutional Legislation and State Construction. In 2011 she was appointed chairman of the Duma Committee on Security and Anti-Corruption Activity. The State-Patriotic Club’s declaration emphasizes Russia’s uniqueness, endorses a strong state as the driving force in Russian society, and adheres to conservatism and its defense of national traditions.¹⁰⁷ The top priorities of the club are education – from the improvement of the quality of teaching in Russian national history and literature, to the emphasis on patriotic youth training – and the diffusion of moral values and respect for state institutions and national symbols.¹⁰⁸

The State-Patriotic Club was officially created on April 8, 2008, when the Central Executive Committee of United Russia and the coordinators of the three currents signed the Charter of political clubs of the party.¹⁰⁹ The document officially recognized the existence of clubs or platforms inside United Russia, in an attempt to consolidate the “vertical power” structure of the party and avoid party splintering. The three “discussion clubs” – the Center of Social Conservative Policy, the Club of November 4, and the State-Patriotic Club – expressed unity of purpose in promoting the values, ideals and programs of United Russia, and regarded themselves as the most important instrument of inner-party democracy.¹¹⁰ At the end of May 2008, Boris Gryzlov insisted once again that the formation of the “left,”

¹⁰⁶ Sergej Volobuev, *Russkaja matritsa. Perezagruzka*, February 9, 2010, <http://www.cskp.ru/content/10000298/10869/>.

¹⁰⁷ *Politicheskaja Deklaratsija*, <http://www.patriotplatform.ru/news/0x1x2.html>.

¹⁰⁸ *Patrioticheskaja Platforma*, www.patriotplatform.ru/news/0x1x3.html.

¹⁰⁹ The Charter (*Khartija politicheskikh klubov Partii “Edinaja Rossija”*) is available on the State-Patriotic Club website, <http://www.patriotplatform.ru/news/0x1x3.html>.

¹¹⁰ *Khartija politicheskikh klubov Partii “Edinaja Rossija”*.

“right,” and “patriotic” wings was a mere formality, and that it was possible “to take part in the work of all wings at the same time.”¹¹¹

The lively debate around “sovereign democracy” proved that the existence of multiple ideological positions inside United Russia was genuine and not orchestrated. As Ivanov points out as well, the party is characterized by internal ideological heterogeneity.¹¹² This is not surprising considering that the party’s centrist positions and its original purely bureaucratic nature made it a vessel capable of hosting almost any kind of political content. The emergence of intra-party wings is therefore the mere formalization of different ideological positions inside the party. Using Sartori’s categorization,¹¹³ these wings – or “fractions” – are more than simple “tendencies” but less than “factions,” as they are formally organized but do not represent any specific power group. Most importantly, these fractions, although they are given voice through different platforms, are not sovereign to any degree. Thus, pluralism is real, but managed.

Why were these different ideological positions formalized? What is the purpose of this strategy of party diversification? The officialization of party fractions targeted both the elite and the electorate, and it was intended to present United Russia’s ideological product as diverse, yet well articulated. On the one hand, the strategy addressed the issue of internal party conflict. Preventing party splintering and elite defection was one major goal. According to LDPR leader Vladimir Zhirinovskij, this ideological diversification is necessary for United Russia to prevent some of its members to leave the party and join others.¹¹⁴ He talks about an “internal specialization” that would create a political space big and diverse enough to discourage defection. On the other hand, the strategy aimed at increasing electoral support and weakening the opposition’s ideological appeal. A common opinion among commentators is that this strategy was designed to undermine the electoral support for the opposition parties, with a view to the upcoming electoral cycle 2007-2008.¹¹⁵ The display of a wide range of ideological products stemming from the same

¹¹¹ Tulsij, “Javnye i tajnye kril’ja ‘Edinoj Rossii’”.

¹¹² Vitalij Ivanov, *Partija Putina: Istorija Edinoj Rossii* (Moscow: Ulma, 2008), 194-195.

¹¹³ Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

¹¹⁴ “‘Edianja Rossija’ razdelitsja na techenija”.

¹¹⁵ Neil Buckley, “Party behind Putin Strives to Weaken Rivals with Ideology Shift,” *Financial Times*, April 20, 2005; Marlene Laruelle, *Inside and Around the Kremlin's Black Box: The New Nationalist Think Tanks in*

political entity was aimed at enticing the electorate in order to grab votes from other parties, whether liberal, left-leaning or merely nationalist. Also, Leonid Gozman – president of the Union of Right Forces – emphasizes United Russia’s need to create a façade of pluralism, because, in his view, “the one-party system it has built contradicts all the developmental tendencies of the country.”¹¹⁶ Regarding the emergence of the “patriotic” current, Viktor Militarev, vice-president of Institute of National Strategy, stated that United Russia wanted to “destroy the opposition’s monopoly of nationalist rhetoric, understanding that its demand among citizens grows.” On the same topic, Vitalij Ivanov, deputy director of the *Tsentralnaja politicheskaja konjunktura*, pointed out how United Russia openly offered the electorate a “civilized nationalism,” to oppose the Movement Against Illegal Immigration and, at the same time, steal votes from the “Rodina” and “Just Russia” parties.¹¹⁷

The discussion around “sovereign democracy” brought to the surface United Russia’s ideological fragmentation, which until that point was latent. Ideological debate was not sanctioned by the cadres of the party. With the final formalization of party wings in 2008, ideological debate inside the party became officially accepted and began being conducted through formal channels. This facilitated the imposition of boundaries to the debate over the party’s ideological stance, and ultimately helped preserving consensus inside the party. Most importantly, this sanction of internal pluralism also aimed at building the image of the party as an autonomous political entity, independent from its leader, with its own political and ideological profile. This enhanced the credibility of United Russia as an independent political force and as a legitimate party of power, that consolidates its position in the Russian political spectrum by accommodating and appealing to a wide range of ideological preferences. The ultimate goal was to present the party – and not its leader – as the true driving force behind the regime. This became even more evident in 2009, when all the different ideological stances came under the umbrella of Russian conservatism. After the formalization of different ideological positions inside United Russia, an overarching ideological label was needed foster a sense of party unity.

Russia, Institute for Security and Development Policy (2009), 30.

¹¹⁶ Buckley, “Party behind Putin Strives to Weaken Rivals with Ideology Shift.”

¹¹⁷ “Edinorusskij proekt: partija vlasti voz’met pod krylo natsionalistov”.

3.3 Russian Conservatism: a disposable ideological label?

The introduction to the 2009 United Russia programmatic document – adopted at the 11th party congress – envisions the future of the country as one predicated on innovation (“to build the new”) as well as preservation of past achievements (“preserve the best”).¹¹⁸ In order to attain that goal, the document calls for a strategy of development, at the core of which stands an ideology that needs to be “accurate and clear to society.”¹¹⁹ This ideology is “Russian conservatism” (*rossijskij konservatizm*) – United Russia’s ideology. It is described as an ideology of “stability” and “development,” which combines “preservation” and “modernization” and is set on avoiding both “stagnations” and “revolutions.”¹²⁰ These ideas are further and more thoroughly developed by Andrej Isaev, who in 2008 became first deputy secretary of the presidium of the general council of United Russia.

In his articles, Isaev presents a specific version of conservatism – “social conservatism” (*sotsial’nyj konservatizm*) – as United Russia’s ideology. In what appears to be a manifesto of United Russia’s conservatism, Isaev spells out all the ambivalence of the party’s ideological posture. He points out how both pragmatism and ideology are crucial for the party and the country as a whole. Pragmatism, according to Isaev, does not contradict ideology – it follows from it, as political solutions are based on a certain set of values, and not the other way around. As Isaev puts it, “ideology does not prevail over us, it does not make us slaves.”¹²¹ He argues that Russia has always been a “ideologized country,” and claims that social conservatism would take on this continuity as an ideology “above classes,” that would unite the country without destroying its variety.¹²² Isaev identifies Russia’s mission as that of a superpower (*sverkhderzhava*), playing a decisive role in world politics and regional stability.¹²³ Isaev’s articles emphasize how the political concepts of “left” and “right” are not applicable to today’s Russia. Those better fit the main political

¹¹⁸ *Rossija: Cokhranim i Priumnozhim!*, Programmnyj Dokument Partii “Edinaja Rossija”, 21 November 2009, <http://kamchatka.edinros.ru/part/program/default.aspx>. See also “Boris Gryzlov: Ideologija stabil’nosti”, *Russia.ru*, November 23, 2009, http://www.russia.ru/video/er_8223/.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Andrej Isaev, *Sotsial’nyj konservatizm – ideologija “Edinoj Rossii,”* <http://isaev.info/vzglyad/6/>.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*

conflict in Western Europe between the conservatives supporting market economy and the social democrats supporting strong social policies. Social conservatism would be a combination of both currents, and it would therefore transcend that distinction.¹²⁴ Instead, Isaev talks about a tripartite Russian political spectrum: social conservatives are opposed on the one hand by the radical liberals (“Westernizers,” or *zapadniki*), who favored “shock therapy,” reject Russian national traditions, and push for a rapid transition toward the Western model; and on the other hand they are also opposed by the supporters of socialism and communism, who are against modernization and would like a return to isolationism.¹²⁵ Social conservatism would represent the third way, in which social justice – upheld by socialism – and economic efficiency – upheld by liberalism – could coexist without crippling each other. Indeed, social conservatism’s stated purpose is to bring about modernization, and not “stagnation” or “conservation” of the system.¹²⁶ The main principle Isaev outlines for social conservatism is strong statism. The state is defined as the “guarantor of freedom,” and it is seen as “the major force that keeps society from disintegration.”¹²⁷ The state is in charge of elaborating and implementing a strategy of development; redistributing resources; protecting the rights and freedoms of the people; forming, developing, and strengthening the principles of market economy.¹²⁸ As to the form of government, democracy is not seen as an end in itself, but as a means toward development. Although it has proved to be “the only effective means so far, [...] democracy,” in Isaev’s words, “is always specific and always national.”¹²⁹ This means that its development has to take into account the conditions and the traditions of the country implementing it. Democracy should not be treated as something abstract that can be simply applied to every state regardless of its political identity: “it has to be sovereign and effective.”¹³⁰ Another principle outlined in Isaev’s “manifesto” of social conservatism is the recurrent idea of rejecting revolutions. The idea of revolution has already proven

¹²⁴ Andrej Isaev, *Sotsialno-konservativnaja programma, i ee mesto v politicheskom spektre*, <http://isaev.info/vzglyad/4/>.

¹²⁵ Isaev, *Sotsial'nyj konservatizm*; Andrej Isaev, *Sotsial'nyj konservatizm kak ideologija modernizatsij rossijskogo obschestvo*, <http://isaev.info/vzglyad/5>.

¹²⁶ Isaev, *Sotsial'nyj konservatizm*.

¹²⁷ Isaev, *Sotsial'nyj konservatizm kak ideologija modernizatsij rossijskogo obschestvo*.

¹²⁸ Isaev, *Sotsial'nyj konservatizm*.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

detrimental to Russia's development and the population's well being, and social conservatism opposes it with reformism, which is depicted as the only way, because "revolution and stagnation are two parties of the same illness."¹³¹

As regards Russian conservatism, the *CSKP* website, among many articles, also displays two books, which expound the philosophical and theoretical bases of contemporary Russian conservatism.¹³² Again, their ambivalence and vagueness is patent. The authors include Yurij Shuvalov, deputy secretary of the general council of United Russia, and Sergej Volobuev, chairman of the commission on ideological and agitation-propagandist work of the central office of supporters of United Russia. The main focus of both works in defining the nature of conservatism is how it relates to history and to the idea of progress. Regarding the topic, Volobuev puts conservatism in contrast with traditionalism and revolutionism. From Volobuev's point of view, while conservatism can include traditionalism, it certainly does not overlap revolutionism, which absolutizes only one of "the eternal principles of social life" – e.g. freedom for liberalism and social justice for socialism – thus denying or ignoring all the others. Because of the tendency to create a "new society" and a "new man" by neglecting the immutable features of human life, Volobuev blames revolutionism for being utopistic, and describes it as "destructive,"¹³³ while, by contrast, depicts conservatism as "authentic realism."¹³⁴ Similarly, Shuvalov and Posadskij emphasize how Russian conservatism is set to the future while hanging on to Russian traditional values.¹³⁵ According to the authors, these values are based on the traditional religious groups of Russia, their thousand-year history of coexistence, and on the "inseparable unity of the spiritual and material lives of the peoples of Russia."¹³⁶ Indeed, conservative ideology supports the idea of the harmonious development of society according to "basic values" and "spiritual meanings" that formed in the course of history. The conservatives firmly oppose economic or socio-political transformations that are

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Yurij Shuvalov and Aleksandr Posadskij, *Rossijskij konservatizm: cennostnye osnovanija i strategija razvitija* (Moscow: Atkara, 2010); *Sovremennij russijskij konservatizm: sbornik statej* (Moscow: NP-Print, 2011).

¹³³ Sergej Volobuev, "Smysl i zadachi sovremennogo rossijskogo konservatizma," in *Sovremennij russijskij konservatizm: sbornik statej*, 10

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 9

¹³⁵ Shuvalov and Posadskij, *Rossijskij konservatizm: cennostnye osnovanija i strategija razvitija*.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

carried out neglecting those basic values.¹³⁷ From the authors' point of view, the preservation of these "historically formed values" is exactly the main source of development for society. Again, the emphasis is put on the refusal of revolutions: indeed, the conservatives are "ready to support moderate changes in order to avoid revolutionary changes."¹³⁸ Moreover, the authors recognize Russian Orthodoxy as one of the main sources of Russian conservative ideology.¹³⁹

Given conservatism's inherent malleability, the lack of coherence of this ideological framework should not be surprising. As Huntington pointed out, conservatism, unlike liberalism and socialism, does not have its own "substantive ideal," but it is constituted by a number of stylistic features that are opposed to other situational orientations, such as "radicalism."¹⁴⁰ This lack of a substantive core necessarily precludes the formulation of an autonomous and universal definition of conservatism. For this reason, Huntington stresses the situational character of conservatism and sees it as "that system of ideas employed to justify any established social order [...] against any fundamental challenge to its nature or being [...]. The essence of conservatism is the passionate affirmation of the value of existing institutions."¹⁴¹ Under this light, conservatism appears highly adaptable and malleable, since its specific features can be used to defend any institutional order or ideological content.

Even considering the flexibility inherent to conservatism, the works expounding the contemporary Russian version of it appear still too vague and ambivalent, especially when discussing its philosophical and theoretical bases. For instance, the "eternal values" or "spiritual principles," although presented as crucial to Russian conservatism, are never defined in a precise and meaningful way. Isaev's articles, on the other hand, apart from the distinguishing ideas of strong statism, respect for Russia's specificity and traditions, and the anti-revolutionary stance, refrain from dictating a precise developmental path or defining a

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹³⁹ Yuriy Shuvalov, "Novyj etap razvitija rossijskoj demokratii," in *Sovremennyj rossijskij konservatizm: sbornik statej*, 5; Sergej Volobuev, "Smysl i zadachi sovremennogo rossijskogo konservatizma," 9; Yuriy Shuvalov and Aleksandr Posadskij, *Rossijskij konservatizm*, 10.

¹⁴⁰ Samuel P. Huntington, "Conservatism as an Ideology," *American Political Science Review* 51, no. 2 (1957): 457; For an in-depth discussion of the relation between conservatism and the substantive ideologies – i.e. liberalism and socialism – see Freedon, *Ideologies and Political Theory*.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 455.

clear-cut ideological stance. Isaev's writings perfectly epitomize the tension between developing a clear-cut ideological agenda and preserving consensus. Priorities are not set – e.g. pragmatism and ideologization, economic efficiency and social justice – and this mirrors an ideological incoherence, a “catch-all” ideological posture, the Putin regime is no stranger to. Ideological coherence is not a top priority for Putin, and it is usually sacrificed in favor of consensus, legitimacy, stabilization. The authors considered are all voices of the Kremlin, members of United Russia actively involved in politics. What one can read through their works is the attempt to construct a quasi-theoretical structure to make policies look like they followed from a prescriptive system of coherent principles. The goal is to build a guideline that would follow an alleged continuity with Russian philosophical, cultural, and political tradition, and thus give the country a clear sense of direction into the future.

Moreover, by Western European standards, Russian conservative tradition is almost absent. As Kochkin illustrates, in Western Europe the conservative parties have always relied on the propertied classes – especially landowners – which demanded the defense of deep-rooted traditions and the protection of private property against infringement from the state. In Russia, instead, the propertied classes were wiped out, and conservatism is therefore not built on objectively existing economic interests, but on ideological dogmas promoted by the various regimes.¹⁴² Moreover, Russia's economic and socio-political system has changed so often in the last century that it became hard to determine which values and traditions contemporary conservatism should build on. According to Kochkin, this is the reason why Russian conservatism “so often resembles not conservatism as the rest of the world knows it, but banal chauvinism. [Russian conservatism offers] a mélange of religious mystical rhetoric, traditionalism, isolationism, and a conviction that the interests of the state should take priority over the interests of the individual.”¹⁴³

Therefore, the Putin regime in its attempt to build a broader ideological framework does not have a Russian conservative tradition to lean on. If we also consider that the theoretical structure of contemporary Russian conservatism seem to be constructed *ad hoc*

¹⁴² Mikhail Kochkin, “The Birth Pangs of Russian Conservatism,” *Russia and Eurasia Review* 2, no. 6 (2003).

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

for political purposes, we can see how Putin uses conservatism just as a label, “a mode of discursive self-definition,”¹⁴⁴ but, as Isaev writes in his articles, he is not a slave to it. Thanks to its adaptability, conservatism allows that, but the adherence to a specific political current would nonetheless require commitment, coherence, and conformity, and would therefore reduce the Kremlin’s room for manoeuvre. Putin always tries to stand above divisions – and avoids any risk of getting trapped in them – in order to preserve the consensus built during the years around his figure. Putin’s need to maintain flexibility is considered far more important than having a clear-cut ideological agenda. Such lack of commitment and instrumental use of the conservative ideological label is made evident by the fact that in the 2011 United Russia’s political program the term “conservatism” is not even mentioned anymore.¹⁴⁵

The development of a Russian conservative ideology can be considered as an attempt to reduce uncertainty connected with leadership change in a personalist regime such as Putin’s Russia. The formulation of an ideological framework leads to an increase of ideational capital, a concept that proves particularly useful in this case. Hale defines ideational capital as “a stock of core principles or ideas that form the basis for two key party functions” – i.e. solve the social choice problem of legislators by providing ready-made agreements on several policy issues; and solve the collective action problem since politicians can win votes by campaigning on these principles.¹⁴⁶ This way, parties are able to reduce the uncertainty connected with candidate behavior, both inside and outside the legislature. This is particularly salient for a party like United Russia that was created as a bureaucratic body to formalize preexisting informal networks. According on Hale’s categorization of party types, an increase in ideational capital would transform a clientelistic party (low ideational capital, high administrative capital) – like United Russia – into a programmatic one (high ideational capital, high administrative capital).¹⁴⁷ Ideology – or ideological capital – is a subcategory of ideational capital that has particularly powerful

¹⁴⁴ Sergej Prozorov, “Russian Conservatism in the Putin Presidency: The Dispersion of a Hegemonic Discourse,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 10, no. 2 (2005): 122.

¹⁴⁵ *Programmnoe obraschenie Partii*, September 24, 2011, <http://er.ru/party/program/>.

¹⁴⁶ Henry E. Hale, *Why Not Parties in Russia? Democracy, Federalism, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 12. See also Herbert Kitschelt, Zdenka Mansfeldova, Radoslaw Markowski, and Gabor Toka, *Post-Communist Party Systems* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

effects on party development and persistence.¹⁴⁸ As Hanson argued, ideologies generate collective action among party activists by artificially elongating their time horizons and lowering their “discount rates” in evaluating potential future payoffs, thus facilitating cooperation.¹⁴⁹ Ideological definition of political membership also ensures a certain credible commitment among party members. In his comparative analysis of postimperial regimes, he finds that in the case of post-Soviet Russia the lack of ideological parties is the reason why no regime type could be consolidated.¹⁵⁰ Interestingly, his analysis spans from early 1990s to 2004, right around the time the Putin administration started intensifying its ideological drive. If his argument is right, more ideological commitment should have led to a higher degree of regime consolidation, as seems to be the case. However, it is hard to assess to what extent the ideologization of the regime has contributed to its consolidation and survival.

The conservative label seems to be clearest example of the attempt to change the face of the regime in order to ensure its continuity, especially in view of leadership change. Endowing United Russia with an ideological framework, regardless of its incoherence, aimed at strengthening the party of power while relegating to the background the regime’s personalist component. The image of a party-based regime was better fit to pass the test of leadership change.¹⁵¹ Scholars seem to agree on this explanation. According to Laruelle, after Putin’s first mandate United Russia’s ruling elite came to realize that a coherent doctrine was needed if the party wanted to “leave its stamp on Russian political life for the coming decade.”¹⁵² The party-formation process was nothing other than the formalization of a pre-existing bureaucratic network around a charismatic political leader; and that was certainly not enough to achieve the ambitious goal of establishing a long-lasting political structure. Evans gave another possible explanation by arguing, similarly to Laruelle, that the attempt to formulate a “systematic set of ideas” may be aimed at ensuring political

¹⁴⁸ Stephen Hanson, “Ideology, Uncertainty, and the Rise of Anti-System Parties in Post-Communist Russia,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 14, nos. 1-2 (1998); Hanson, “Instrumental Democracy.”

¹⁴⁹ Hanson, “Postimperial Democracies.”

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ On the argument that single-party regimes last longer, see Geddes, “What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?”

¹⁵² Laruelle, *In the Name of the Nation*, 135.

continuity in the coming period of transition and beyond. However, he also adds that “[t]here was also an evident desire to present the thinking of the leadership in a form suitable for mass consumption,” in order to systematize and, therefore, facilitate the indoctrination of millions of political activists.¹⁵³ Furthermore, Evans claims that the contradictory messages on ideological matters mirror the dilemma between ideology and pragmatism that the Putin’s leadership found itself caught in.¹⁵⁴ The renovated ideological drive that characterized the presidential administration since 2005 probably has its rationale in the lack of cohesive and mobilizing power that the ruling elite detected in pragmatism while it was facing the political contestation. Chen, on the other hand, highlights the fact that the absence of an ideology can produce short-term advantages for the regime – e.g. flexibility and appeal to different political forces; however, long-term objectives are to be defined for a regime to be lasting. In her words, “the lack of a clear identity and sense of mission will pose serious problems when it comes to leadership succession and long-term regime legitimacy.” A “shared ideational framework for political action” is needed to ensure regime continuity beyond leadership changing, and to “enhance the regime’s internal cohesion and longterm durability.”¹⁵⁵

Laruelle also offers a concurring explanation, more related to short term considerations. She points out how “the return of political contestation in the name of democracy” would be behind the Kremlin’s ideological overturn.¹⁵⁶ Despite the self-implosion of the liberal forces following the failures of the Yeltsin era and the cessation of any public reference to Western-liberal values, a new wave of political contestation broke the consensus that characterized the 1999-2003 period. This wave – which gathered around Garry Kasparov and Mikhail Kasianov, leaders of the movement The Other Russia – was sparked and fueled by the so-called “colored revolutions” (2003 Georgia; 2004 Ukraine; 2005 Kyrgyzstan). Thus, the Kremlin realized that “the time when ideological combat seemed pointless was well and truly over.”¹⁵⁷ The large popular demonstrations of 2005 against welfare policies and the unexpected dissidence of Rogozin’s Rodina party – which

¹⁵³ Alfred B. Evans, “Putin’s Legacy and Russia’s Identity”, *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, No. 6 (2008).

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Chen, “Muddling Through the Shadow of the Past(s),” 39

¹⁵⁶ Laruelle, *Inside and Around the Kremlin's Black Box*, 20.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

was directly connected to the presidential administration – showed that “a space of political contestation existed, not only in the liberal-democrat camp, but also to [United Russia’s] left,” and it was “centered on topics of a more nationalist and social nature.”¹⁵⁸ According to this logic, the Kremlin’s reaction necessarily had to go through enhanced ideological formulation, in order to reaffirm United Russia’s legitimacy and assert (and possibly, stretch) its presence on the spectrum of political belonging.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

4. Conclusions

Despite the limited attention devoted to it, ideology has been central in the development of the political system in post-Soviet Russia. In particular, Putin's regime made instrumental use of ideology to pursue two main goals: enforce ideological consensus around "traditional values" and assure regime continuity beyond leadership change.

When Putin succeeded Yeltsin, a policy of national reconciliation and a policy of rehabilitation of patriotic rhetoric were already underway. These came along with the Kremlin's convergence on more centrist positions. In continuity with his predecessor, Putin carried on these policies and pushed them even further: national reconciliation became consensus imposed around patriotic values. This consistent ideological push to decrease the polarization that destabilized Russia in the early 1990s allowed the Kremlin to regain control over the political spectrum, with long-term consequences in party politics. In particular, thanks to the reappropriation of patriotic rhetoric, the regime could present itself as the gatekeeper of political correctness, deciding on the legitimacy or illegitimacy of any other political force. This strategy of imposed consensus can be understood as the ideational aspect of the process of centralization of power that the Putin administration carried out.

In view of the leadership change to the Medvedev presidency in 2008, the regime rearranged its priorities and focused on securing political continuity. In order to do that, the Putin administration embarked on an effort to decrease the level of political uncertainty and increase the degree of autonomy of United Russia from the Kremlin. These goals were to be achieved by raising the party's ideational capital through the formulation of a more sophisticated ideological core. There were three main instances of this effort. First, the experiment of "sovereign democracy," which failed because it ended up undermining the consensus built around the regime. Second, the emergence of intra-party wings, which formalized internal debate and helped preserving consensus. The fact that the different "clubs" are still operational today is a proof of the strategy's success. Third, the formulation of Russian conservatism, which acted as an overarching label that would endow the party of power with an identifiable ideological characterization. The label was adopted in 2009, at the beginning of Medvedev's mandate, and, despite the significant amount of literature

dedicated to expounding its theoretical foundations, it was already abandoned at the 12th party congress in 2011, before the electoral cycle that saw Putin running again for the presidency. The Russian conservative label was therefore conceived as disposable and its adoption was pure political expedience, as it was directly related to the specific political circumstances that the regime was facing.

However, the Kremlin's ideological effort under Putin did lead to a strengthening of the party of power, which acquired a more central and autonomous role in the Russian political environment. Russia as a personalist regime has used ideology as an important tool to modify its nature and adapt to new challenges and changing political circumstances. The regime was successful in limiting its personalist component in order to empower its party of power and stress its party-based nature to assure regime continuity, to the extent that now it seems to adhere more to a definition of single-party regime than of a personalist one. In ideal-type single-party regimes – according to Geddes' definition – “a party organization exercises some power over the leader at least part of the time, controls the career paths of officials, organizes the distribution of benefits to supporters, and mobilizes citizens to vote and show support for party leaders in other ways. Holding regular elections in which there is some competition, either from opposition parties or within the dominant party, is a strong indication that a party has achieved a level of organization and influence sufficient to be taken seriously as a political actor.”¹⁵⁹ It is arguable that United Russia now performs most or all of these functions, and this was achieved partly thanks to the regime's ideological impulse. Simply improving the administrative capacities of the party might not have been enough to increase its influence and strengthen its grip on the Russian political system. Nonetheless, when political continuity was assured in the short-term and Putin was reelected president, the regime's personalist component came back to the fore, as Russian conservatism was abandoned and no further ideological formulation was deemed necessary as long as the regime could cling to its leader's charisma. This means that in the long run the challenge to regime continuity is likely to come back.

The case of Putin's Russia also shows that even in the post-ideological era, ideology can still play a central role in the evolution of political systems. What is particular about

¹⁵⁹ Geddes, “What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?,” 124.

this case is that ideology did not actually contribute to the creation of the regime or its party but was formulated ex post and designed as a political tool to justify their existence and particular structure. In particular, ideological discourse was used to establish and reinforce asymmetrical relations of power between the Kremlin and the other political forces. Moreover, Russia's case also shows that when an ideology is vague and flexible, and it is coupled with strong organizational resources as in the case of United Russia, it constitutes an extremely powerful instrument for cooptation. The party's multiple ideological stances and programmatic ambiguities, the adaptability inherent to conservatism, and the inclusiveness of terms like "patriotism" and "centrism", all project the idea of blurry membership boundaries and contribute to increase the party's appeal to any kind of political and ideological position

Ultimately, the case analyzed suggests that when an ideology is developed post-hoc as a tool to solidify power, rather than separately as a holistic guiding political schema around which a party or regime forms, it is much less consistent and coherent. Inevitably, the utilitarian need that lies behind the formulation of an ideology affects its coherence as the ideological construct is developed just enough to accomplish its goal. The persistence of an ideological product is also subordinated to its utilitarian purpose. In this particular case, certain ideological components disintegrated when the utilitarian need for them decreased. Specifically, those tenets that were designed to assure regime continuity – Russian conservatism in particular – were abandoned once that goal was achieved. Patriotism, on the other hand, is still present in the regime's rhetoric insofar as it is crucial for the Kremlin in preserving consensus.

Putin is a transformist and a political chameleon. His tendency to change the façade of his regime when facing challenges is the source of much of his power and durability. Flexibility is his priority and the ambiguity of his regime's ideological profile is a clear sign of his refusal to commit to anything that could potentially reduce his room for political maneuver. This proved to have short-term advantages but the regime's personalist component has to be substantially and permanently reduced if the regime Putin built hopes to survive a definitive leadership change.

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