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Introduction
The Volume's Context and Foci

Felix Riefer

On the evening of 23 February 2022, as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) convened an emergency meeting to prevent further escalation in Ukraine, Russia launched its full-scale invasion.[1] During the meeting, President Vladimir Putin's declaration of a "special military operation" was broadcast live. Simultaneously, Russian military actions commenced across multiple locations in Ukraine, starkly illustrating the disconnect between diplomatic engagement and the unfolding military aggression. Reflecting on this moment in a subsequent meeting, Germany's then Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock remarked: "You, Russia, broke the peace in Europe."[2] Her statement encapsulated the growing consensus among international leaders that Russia was not engaging in diplomacy in good faith, but rather exploiting the global stage to manipulate public opinion while pursuing a war of territorial expansion.

By 2025, between February and May, the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war entered a new phase marked by intensified international engagement and complex diplomatic maneuvering—reflecting both growing Western impatience and Russia's continued pursuit of revisionist objectives.

On 18 February 2025, the newly re-elected U.S. President Donald Trump, amid his campaign efforts, reignited controversy with inflammatory remarks directed at Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Concurrently, reports surfaced suggesting that Trump

1 United Nations (2022) "Russian Federation Announces 'Special Military Operation' in Ukraine as Security Council Meets in Eleventh-Hour Effort to Avoid Full-Scale Conflict," February 23, https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14803.doc.htm.

2 United Nations (2024) "Marking Two Years Since Russian Federation's Full-Scale Invasion, Secretary-General Stresses Charter, International Law Guides to Peace in Ukraine," February 23, https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15601.doc.htm.

may have promised significant concessions to Russian President Vladimir Putin, raising concerns about a potential dramatic shift in U.S. policy toward the war.[3] These developments culminated in a failed bilateral meeting between Trump and Zelensky on 28 February, which ended in scandal and a complete breakdown of the talks that day. This incident highlights the instability and fragmentation of international responses to the Russian aggression against Ukraine.[4]

Nevertheless, under mounting pressure to deliver on his campaign pledge to end the war swiftly, Trump's administration brokered a 30-day Black Sea ceasefire not covering the general frontline, and announced on 18 March 2025.[5] While initially welcomed, the ceasefire was widely perceived as tactical; observers noted Russia's lack of commitment to a durable resolution, as it continued to demand preconditions unacceptable to Ukraine and its allies such as the reversal of NATO's eastward expansion and the denial of Ukrainian sovereignty.

A significant diplomatic development unfolded on 10 May 2025, when four key European leaders—newly elected German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, French President Emmanuel Macron, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk—jointly visited Kyiv's Maidan to commemorate the victims of the Russian aggression.[6] The event concluded with the issuance of a European ultimatum demanding an immediate and

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3 Sharp, A. (2025) "Trump Trades Barbs with Zelensky," *Foreign Policy*, February 19, https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/02/19/zelensky-trump-dictator-ukraine-elections-putin/.

4 King's College London (2025) "Understanding the Fallout from the Trump–Zelenskyy Oval Office Meeting," March 3, https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/understanding-the-fallout-from-the-trump-zelensky-oval-office-meeting.

5 Cancian, M. and Snegovaya, M. (2025) "The Trump-Putin Phone Call: Some Promise, Some Disappointments, and Many Questions," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, March 18, https://www.csis.org/analysis/trump-putin-phone-call-some-promise-some-disappointments-and-many-questions.

6 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (2025) "Was Merz, Macron, Starmer und Tusk in Kiew erreichen wollen," May 9, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ukraine/ukraine-besuch-was-merz-macron-starmer-und-tusk-in-kiew-erreichen-wollen-110467982.html.

unconditional ceasefire,[7] symbolizing a moment of rare political unity and transnational solidarity among Western powers.[8]

Subsequently, on 19 May 2025, Russia appeared to moderate its rhetoric slightly by proposing the formulation of a memorandum to guide potential peace negotiations. However, this gesture was undercut by Moscow's simultaneous reaffirmation of its long-standing strategic objectives—particularly the dismantling of Ukrainian statehood and the rollback of the Western security architecture in Eastern Europe—casting significant doubt on the sincerity of its proposal.[9]

Amid ongoing developments, Pope Leo XIV offered the Vatican as a mediator in the peace process, proposing to suspend enforcement of the ICC's (International Criminal Court) arrest warrants against Russian leadership during formal negotiations. A prerequisite for Putin's participation in talks with Ukrainian President Zelensky would be Rome's assurance that it would not execute the ICC warrant against him. Reportedly, the Italian Ministry of Justice has not forwarded the ICC warrant to the Rome Public Prosecutor's Office, making it unenforceable under current law. Italian media also suggest the government may join the Vatican's mediation efforts, positioning Rome as a neutral venue for dialogue.[10]

Despite these diplomatic openings, the Ukrainian government and its Western allies have remained firm in their position: any negotiations must begin with an immediate ceasefire and aim toward a just and sustainable peace grounded in international law and the

7 The Economist (2025) "Ukraine's European backers challenge Putin to commit to a 30-day ceasefire," May 10, https://www.economist.com/europe/2025/05/10/ukraines-european-backers-challenge-putin-to-commit-to-a-30-day-ceasefire.

8 European Council (2025) "Press release EUCO 11/25 on Ukraine," March 20, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/03/20/european-council-20-march-2025-ukraine/.

9 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (2025) "Russland nennt Bedingungen für Waffenruhe," May 31, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ukraine/die-lage-in-der-ukraine-russland-nennt-bedingungen-fuer-waffenruhe-110509376.html.

10 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (2025) "Gibt es bald Verhandlungen im Vatikan?" May 20, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ukraine/ukrainekrieg-gibt-es-bald-verhandlungen-im-vatikan-110487772.html.

restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity. Deep skepticism persists regarding Russia's intentions, particularly given its continued military aggression and uncompromising demands.

Thus, Trump's peace initiatives concerning Ukraine dominated the second half of 2025, following a consistent pattern:[11] Washington first tabled a Kremlin-friendly proposal. Ukraine and its allies then sought to moderate it, yielding a compromise—only for Russia to reject it and demand impossible conditions. Pressure subsequently mounted anew on Ukraine.

Finally, the second Trump presidency has redefined the international order. Rather than anchoring and projecting liberal principles, it has consolidated personalized authoritarian rule and accelerated withdrawal from international institutions.[12] Speculation about Greenland's annexation, questioning Western alliance structures, and the recent capture of Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro underscores the destabilizing potential of this form of "unconventional diplomacy."[13] Nevertheless, the latest Paris summit on 6 January 2026 produced several noteworthy shifts in this emerging configuration of power.[14]

Consequently, European states must assume greater responsibility for their own security and defense. To deter Russia, Eastern Central European countries remain primarily reliant on the two nuclear powers, Great Britain and France, as well as on reassurance from Germany. Moreover, a rules-based order—intended for indefinite enforcement—requires more rigorous conceptualization in power-political terms to render it truly realizable.

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11 Economist (2025) "Ukraine struggles to cope with America's destructive peace plans," 11 December, https://www.economist.com/europe/2025/12/11/ukraine-struggles-to-cope-with-americas-destructive-peace-plans.

12 Riefer, F. (2025) "Russland–Politik im Spiegel der doppelten Zeitenwende" lecture at the Zwetajewa-Zentrum University of Freiburg, 20 May, https://youtu.be/RXEEzjGfscQ?si=deNjBln3UI3EElmk.

13 NSS (2025) "National Security Strategy of the United States of America" official document, November, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf.

14 Paris Declaration (2026) "Robust Security Guarantees for a Solid and Lasting Peace in Ukraine," official document, 6 January, https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2026/01/06/robust-security-guarantees-for-a-solid-and-lasting-peace-in-ukraine.

This ongoing situation exemplifies the intricate interplay of symbolic diplomacy, great-power rivalry, and the search for credible mediation mechanisms in a conflict at the heart of Europe's security order amid shifting paradigms in international affairs. Therefore, for many European nations, 24 February 2022 has become a historical watershed in relations with Moscow—a *Zeitenwende*, as former German Chancellor Olaf Scholz famously termed it. Germany, long known for its conciliatory posture toward the Kremlin, has since emerged as a central supporter of Kyiv. Yet many policymakers still fail to grasp the deeper dynamics at play in Russia, Ukraine, and other post-Soviet states. Against this background, our volume proposes to revisit earlier scholarly contributions published mainly (but not exclusively) in the *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* (JSPPS), and *Forum für osteuropäische Ideen- und Zeitgeschichte* (Forum for the Contemporary History and Ideas of Eastern Europe), with the aim of critically reflecting on certain relevant developments in Russia before 2022—namely, the evolution of its historical memory, ideological currents, and foreign policy ambitions.

The first part of this omnibus volume examines various aspects of Russian post-Soviet nationalism, imperialism and anti-Westernism as components of current Russian identity. The second half explores geopolitics and conspiracy theories, highlighting the factors contributing to Russia's involvement in regional conflicts and its military actions against Ukraine.

The anthology opens with **Michael McFaul's** chapter, which critically examines the evolving relationship between Russian society and imperialism under Vladimir Putin. Initially, post-Soviet Russia showed promise for democratic reform and Western alignment. However, over two decades, Russia regressed into autocracy, driven by Putin's manipulation of political institutions, media control, and anti-Western rhetoric. The Russian public, once diverse in opinion, now includes a mix of staunch regime supporters, oppositionists, and a politically apathetic majority. McFaul argues that Russia's imperial aggression in Ukraine is no longer solely Putin's war and reflects broader societal complicity. Yet, he also suggests hope. As in previous eras, a shift away from autocracy and toward

democratic engagement may reemerge once Putin's regime ends, reshaping societal attitudes anew.

Kaarina Aitamurto's chapter explores *Rodnoverie* (Slavic Native Faith)—a revivalist Slavic Pagan movement intertwining spiritual, nationalistic, and political discourses in post-Soviet Russia. Rooted in a rejection of Western liberalism and Christian universality, *Rodnoverie* seeks to reestablish a native Russian identity through ethnic spirituality. The movement's permutations vary widely: from extreme ethno-nationalist and xenophobic factions to more pluralistic, ecologically oriented groups like the Circle of Pagan Tradition. Although once marginal, *Rodnoverie* has gained visibility within nationalist politics, particularly as a critique of globalization, multiculturalism, and liberal modernity. Simultaneously, it embodies postmodern religious individualism, mirroring global Pagan trends. The study underscores *Rodnoverie's* dual role in both reinforcing nationalist mythologies and fragmenting them through decentralized, adaptive spirituality. Aitamurto presents *Rodnoverie* as both a cultural critique and a complex identity-making practice in modern Russia.

Leonid Luks critically examines the Russian journal *Elementy*, which aligns itself with classical Eurasianism but substantially diverges from its ideological core. While Eurasianism sought to preserve Russian cultural identity against Western influence through isolationism and unity among diverse ethnic groups, *Elementy* embraces a radical, militant worldview rooted in the anti-liberal extremism of the Weimar German Right. The journal exalts National Bolshevism and praises aspects of Nazi ideology, particularly its opposition to liberal democracy and universalism. Luks argues that *Elementy* distorts Eurasianist thought to legitimize far-right extremism, conspiratorial antisemitism, and geopolitical ambitions of Russian imperial revival, favoring ideological confrontation over cultural autonomy.

The chapter by **Andreas Umland** discusses whether Vladimir Zhirinovskii's ideology, as expressed in his 1993 book *The Last Dash to the South*, can be classified as a form of fascism. Umland argues that Zhirinovskii's vision of a Russian empire expanding to the Indian Ocean, framed as a civilizing mission against the "South," fits

Roger Griffin's definition of generic fascism as "palingenetic ultra-nationalism". The article critiques a 1994 court ruling against Egor Gaidar's description of Zhirinovskii as a fascist, asserting that such a label is justified. Umland also introduces the concept of "revolutionary imperialism" to describe this peculiar form of Russian fascism, which centers on national rebirth through a revolutionary rather than restorationist territorial conquest, i.e. an expansion going beyond lost irredenta of the past and rejuvenating the imperial nation.

Mikhail D. Suslov investigates two competing forms of contemporary Russian pan-Slavism: nationalist pan-Slavic fundamentalism and imperialist Eurasian pan-Slavism. While both ideologies claim historical and cultural legitimacy, they differ in scope and intent. Pan-Slavic fundamentalism, rooted in Orthodox Christian revivalism or neo-paganism, emphasizes cultural and spiritual unity among Slavs, often driven by anti-Western sentiment. Conversely, Eurasian pan-Slavism advances a broader imperial vision, aligning Russia with non-Western civilizations in opposition to Atlanticism. Suslov argues that Russia's pragmatic foreign policy masks an underlying ideological agenda shaped by these utopias. Ultimately, he predicts a synthesis of both movements—combining Orthodox messianism with imperial Eurasianism—highlighting their shared isolationist and anti-Western orientations as central to modern Russian identity politics.

Rosalind Marsh rounds up the first half of this volume by arguing that the late 1990s and early 2000s saw the emergence of a "new political novel" in Russia. This genre, encompassing varied ideological perspectives, reflects renewed literary engagement with political issues under Putin's "managed democracy." The paper examines the resurgence of right-wing, national-patriotic fiction, focusing first on established figures like Aleksandr Prokhanov and Eduard Limonov, who gained prominence in the early 21st century. It then explores a newer wave of nationalist literature, notably the *imperskii roman* (imperial novel), by younger authors such as Pavel Krusanov and Dmitrii Bykov. These works, advocating a strong state and imperialist vision, have found broad readership and critical acclaim.

The second half begins by the examination of the rise of oil-related conspiracy theories in post-Soviet Russia, focusing on their cultural, political, and economic underpinnings. The chapter by **Alexander Etkind** and **Ilya Yablokov** argues that Russia's dependence on oil has not only shaped its economy but also fostered a conspiratorial worldview, particularly during crises like the 2014-ruble collapse. The authors analyze how public figures, from state officials to media personalities, propagate narratives blaming the West for oil price manipulations. These theories serve both to justify domestic policy failures and to reinforce national identity. The study situates these narratives within the discipline of "Energy Humanities," highlighting their role in Russia's ideological demodernization and political discourse, ultimately portraying conspiracy theories as strategic tools used by elites to manage public perception and assert geopolitical agency in an unstable global energy market.

The paper by **Andrey Makarychev** and **Alexandra Yatsyk** explores the Night Wolves motorcycle club's performative anti-Maidan activism as a cultural manifestation of Russian imperial nationalism. Applying frameworks from cultural semiotics, critical discourse analysis, and popular geopolitics, the authors analyze how the Night Wolves' spectacles—especially their annual biker shows—blend Orthodox Christianity and Soviet nostalgia to construct a hegemonic nationalist discourse. These performances symbolically reaffirm Russia's moral and historical superiority while vilifying the West and post-Maidan Ukraine. The shows operate within a biopolitical and than atopolitical logic, glorifying sacrifice and violence. Ultimately, the article argues that such cultural performances contribute to normalizing imperial ambitions and justifying political aggression, including the annexation of Crimea.

Boris Barkanov's account analyzes how Sergei A. Karaganov, a leading Russian realist intellectual, perceived threats and U.S.-Russia relations between 2003 and 2019. Using narrative analysis and self-categorization theory (SCT), it tracks Karaganov's shift from viewing the U.S. as a realist partner to an ideological adversary and finally an existential enemy. Key turning points include NATO's expansion, the 2008 Georgia war, the Obama Reset, the 2014 Ukraine crisis, and Western sanctions. These events prompted

reevaluations of American rationality and realist alignment, shaping threat perception. The study categorizes Karaganov's evolving views through a revised "cultures of anarchy" framework and identifies identity-based cognitive mechanisms underlying threat construction. It contributes to international relations theory by linking identity formation with threat perception and offering hypotheses about realist identity schemes in the Russian elite's foreign policy discourse.

This is followed by **Michael Kirkwood's** review of Alexander Zinoviev's extensive body of work on ideology, which reflects an evolving perspective shaped by historical and political shifts. Initially critical of Soviet communism, Zinoviev examined its ideological structure as central to its societal function, warning the West against its influence. However, following the Soviet Union's collapse, Zinoviev reoriented his critique toward the West, portraying it as ideologically dominant and culturally corrosive. He argued that Western "pluralist" ideology, though decentralized, functions with greater efficacy than Soviet ideology through pervasive social institutions. In his later years, Zinoviev proposed a new "logical sociology" and a scientifically grounded ideology as an antidote to "Westernoid" dominance, as he formulated it. Zinoviev's paradoxical trajectory—from anti-Soviet to neo-Communist—raises questions about the ideological neutrality of his analyses and reflects his disillusionment with global ideological developments.

Felix Riefer critically examines the Kremlin's assertion of a unified Russian-speaking diaspora in Germany, arguing that such a narrative distorts and oversimplifies the heterogeneous trajectories of post-Soviet migrants—most prominently the *russlanddeutsche (Spät-)Aussiedler*, or Russia German (late) resettlers. These ethnic Germans, long dispersed across various republics of the former Soviet Union, experienced systemic persecution under the communist regime. Permitted to emigrate collectively during Gorbachev's reforms, they have since evolved into one of Germany's largest migrant communities. The resettlement policies adopted by Bonn and later Berlin were driven less by ethnic affiliation than by a moral and political rationale of restitution for their *Kriegsfolgenschicksal* ("war effects fate")—a term denoting their wartime and

postwar discrimination and suffering in the USSR. In this context, Russia's recent efforts to instrumentalize Russophone populations for geopolitical purposes misrepresent both the origins and self-perception of these groups. Simultaneously, the anti-government demonstrations by Russian speakers in Germany in 2016 and 2022 reveal the resonance of Moscow's disinformation strategies among post-Soviet communities. However, German media and scholarship have at times reproduced these essentialist diaspora narratives rather than critically unpacking them. This chapter offers a nuanced perspective on post-Soviet German migration, providing critical analysis of Russian influence, immigration policy and overlooked historical contexts.

Mischa Gabowitsch's concluding chapter discusses the Russian Federal Military Memorial Cemetery (FMMC), which was inaugurated in 2013 as Russia's national military cemetery, intended to replace the Kremlin Wall Necropolis. Initially inspired by the US's Arlington National Cemetery in the State of Virgina, the FMMC evolved into a monumental, highly selective burial site dominated by Soviet-style aesthetics. The article traces the site's contentious planning and construction, highlighting conflicts between architects, sculptors, and state authorities, particularly within the Ministry of Defense. Gabowitsch introduces the concept of "panhistorical militarism" to analyze the cemetery's symbolic framework, comparing it to national cemeteries in postcolonial and revolutionary states. He argues that the FMMC serves more as a departmental cemetery for the Russian elites than as a democratic resting place for all soldiers.

I

Chauvinism & Imperial Echoes

Are Russians Imperialists?
From Putin's Wars to Russia's War[1]

Michael McFaul

In 1991, Russian society seemed firmly committed to democracy and strongly oriented toward the West. Russian attitudes about the market were more mixed, especially after the painful, partial, and long transition from the command economy to capitalism in the 1990s that caused most Russians to endure an economic depression far worse than that through which Americans and Europeans had suffered during the 1930s. The introduction of democracy in Russia at a time of economic turmoil undermined support for this new form of government. Yet even at the end of the 1990s, public surveys, including those conducted by Timothy Colton and me, still revealed strong support for democratic ideas.[2] Attitudes toward the West fluctuated with external events—falling during NATO's bombing of Serbia in 1999, for instance, and dropping even more sharply after Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008—but also dramatically improving during the Gorbachev and Yeltsin eras and again during the Reset years of the Obama-Medvedev era.[3]

Today, Russians' allegiance to democracy seems like ancient history. Russian voters have supported an autocratic leader, Vladimir Putin, for nearly two decades.[4] Societal support for Putin has often increased when the Kremlin leader has taken bellicose actions against the West. Putin's popularity skyrocketed in 2014 when he

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1 This chapter was first published in 2022 in *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 30(4): 421–432. Reprinted with permission from the editors.

2 Colton, T. and McFaul, M. (2002) "Are Russians Undemocratic?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 18(2): 91–121; McFaul, M. and Ryabov, A. (eds.) (1999) *Rossiiskoe obshchestvo: stanovlenie demokraticheskikh tsennostei?* Moscow: Moscow Carnegie Center.

3 McFaul, M. (2018) *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin's Russia*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: 139-157.

4 Frye, T., Gehlbach, S., Marquardt, K. L. and Reuter, O. J. (2017) "Is Putin's Popularity Real?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33(1): 1–15.

invaded Crimea and annexed the peninsula from Ukraine.[5] Russian support for Putin jumped again in February 2022, when he invaded Ukraine for the second time in a decade.[6] Since then, Putin's anti-Western, pro-imperial rhetoric has become even more vitriolic, compelling many to speculate about Russian society's commitment to these same ideas. Putin blamed the West for supporting the "Nazi" regime in Ukraine and justified his invasion and annexation of Ukrainian territory as an effort to reunify the single Slavic nation and reclaim land that was once part of the Russian Empire. At a meeting with young entrepreneurs, engineers, and scholars in Moscow in June 2022, he even compared himself to Peter the Great, pledging to take back all lands previously taken away from Russia.[7] Propagandists on state-controlled television now deliver even more imperial, illiberal, anti-Western screeds.[8]

What happened? How did Russian society apparently shift so dramatically regarding support for democracy and the West over the past three decades? Did we not properly understand Russians' preferences thirty years ago? Was that moment just a temporary aberration and what we see today is the "true" Russian orientation: anti-democratic, anti-Western, pro-imperial? After all, imperial autocrats have ruled Russians for hundreds of years. Or were Russians once genuinely supportive of pro-democratic, pro-liberal, pro-Western ideas and might therefore embrace them once again?

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5 Levada Center (2015) *Obshchestvennoe mnenie – 2014. Ezhegodnik*, https://www.levada.ru/sites/default/files/om14.pdf; Hale, H. (2018) "How Crimea Pays: Media, Rallying Round the Flag, and Authoritarian Support," *Comparative Politics* 50(3): 369–391.

6 Volkov, D. and Kolesnikov, A. (2022) "My Country, Right or Wrong: Russian Publican Opinion on Ukraine," *Carnegie Working Papers*, https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/09/07/my-country-right-or-wrong-russian-public-opinion-on-ukraine-pub-87803; Sharafutdinova, G. (2022) "Russians' Support of Putin Isn't That Strange," *The New York Times*, October 28: A25.

7 Putin, V. (2022) *Vstrecha s molodymi predprinimateli͡ami, inzhenerami i uchenymi*, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68606.

8 Solovyev, V. (2022) "Top Russian Propagandist Claims that Russia Is Embroiled in a Holy War against Ukraine and the West," *Russian Media Monitor*, https://youtu.be/xhY4-IhUkkI.

I do not know. For decades, whether writing in academic journals or penning opinion essays or providing advice to U.S. government officials, I have stressed the distinction between Putin and the Russian people. Russia's barbaric invasion of Ukraine, however, has compelled me to reinterrogate that hypothesis. Putin made the decision to invade Ukraine. Russian society did not pressure him to do so. But since the invasion was launched, large chunks of Russian society have supported this war, including exhibiting support for or indifference to the atrocities being committed by Russian soldiers against Ukrainian civilians. Putin personally is not killing Ukrainian grandmothers or kidnapping Ukrainian children, Russians are—and, as we now know from intercepting phone calls, they sometimes do so with the vocal support of their fathers, mothers, and girlfriends back home (or, even more grotesquely, while vacationing in Europe).[9] Similar to other ruthless and imperialist regimes in the past, maybe we can no longer give Russian society a pass for the atrocities Russians are committing in Ukraine? It's not just Putin's war. It's Russia's war.

Without question, there is a fragment of Russian society deeply committed to Putin's dictatorship at home and firmly supportive of his imperial missions abroad. This segment of Russian society is probably comprised of the same people who lamented the collapse of the Soviet empire. Throughout the 1990s, these people most likely voted for the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and Vladimir Zhirinovskii's ultra-nationalist and misnamed Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia. They are also likely to be tied economically to the state and probably watch Putin's state-controlled television channels.[10] The preferences of this segment of Russian society have not changed much throughout the three decades of post-Soviet Russia. But for a much larger portion of Russian society, attitudes have not been fixed, but have rather changed over time. We need to understand what factors have caused them to

9 Author's conversations with senior Ukrainian government officials who have heard these intercepts.

10 Rosenfeld, B. (2021) *The Autocratic Middle Class: How State Dependency Reduces the Demand for Democracy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

change prior to speculating whether—and, if so, how—they might change in the future.

Institutions Shape Attitudes

In all countries, multiple factors shape public attitudes about domestic politics and foreign policy. Russia is no different.[11] Slowly changing cultural variables matter. Economic interests matter. Identities matter. Electoral rules matter. Untangling the causal mechanisms at play on this subject is extremely difficult. Ask any politician running for election. If our theories were robust, they would know better how to win campaigns!

This short essay does not allow for a full discussion of every factor that has shaped Russian societal attitudes over the last three decades. Instead, it will focus on one: regime type. Russia's transition from a partial, unconsolidated democracy to a full-blown, deeply entrenched autocracy over the last two decades has influenced the Russian people's preferences about domestic and foreign policy. Though a change in regime type is not the only factor that has influenced societal attitudes, it has been the primary driver.

The tragic story of Russia's transition back to dictatorship under Putin is well-known and will not be rehearsed here.[12] What is important to remember is that the transformation of political institutions under Putin was not driven by societal demand. Putin wants the world to believe that there was a groundswell of popular support for his presidency and his way of ruling Russia in 2000. This is a myth. In 1999, Yeltsin handpicked Putin from obscurity to become first prime minister, then acting president in January 2000, and finally the ruling elite's candidate to succeed Yeltsin in the presidential election in March 2000. Voters ratified Yeltsin's choice, not the other way around.[13] If Putin was pro-imperial and anti-

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11 Colton, T. (2000) *Transitional Citizens: Voters and What Influences Them in the New Russia*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

12 Fish, S. M. (2018) "What Has Russia Become?" *Comparative Politics* 50(3): 327–346.

13 For the details of this election, see Colton, T. and McFaul, M. (2003) *Popular Choice and Managed Democracy: The Russian Elections of 1999 and 2000*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Western when first elected president, he hid it well. At the time, he was not an opposition leader attacking Yeltsin and his pro-Western ways. In the 1990s, Putin had not joined forces with neo-imperialist Vladimir Zhirinovskii or communist leader Gennady Zyuganov.[14] Rather, Putin had spent this decade working as a mid-level bureaucrat for pro-democratic, pro-Western politicians, first Anatoly Sobchak in St Petersburg and later Boris Yeltsin in Moscow.

At the time of his first election, Russian voters (and Western analysts!) knew very little about Putin's policy preferences. Initially, he expressed pro-Western positions. In 2000, when asked if Russia should join NATO, Putin answered, "Why not? Why not … I do not rule out such a possibility… Russia is a part of European culture, and I do not consider my own country in isolation from Europe… Therefore, it is with difficulty that I imagine NATO as an enemy."[15] He was also pro-market, dramatically cutting corporate and individual income taxes in the early years of his presidency. As Anders Åslund wrote in 2004: "In recent years, the Russian economy has experienced an extraordinary reversal. Suddenly, it has been transformed from an apparent basket case, with steadily declining output and chronic macroeconomic instability, to one of the world's most dynamic economies, with solid macroeconomic stability."[16] From the beginning, Putin was also anti-democratic—or, to be more precise, not enthusiastic about checks on his power (I wrote my first article warning about Putin's anti-democratic proclivities in March 2000).[17] In the 2000s, Putin could pursue all of these policies together, as the economic boom, mainly due to the

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14 After Russia's 1993 parliamentary election, I wrote in these pages about parallels between Weimar Germany and post-Soviet Russia and compared Zhirinovsky to Hitler. Tragically, many of these parallels have unfolded, but under a different leader. See McFaul, M. (1993) "Thwarting the Specter of a Russian Dictator: A New Agenda for the Clinton Administration." *Demokratizatsiya* 1(2): 1–19.

15 Hoffman, D. (2000) "Putin Says 'Why Not?' to Russia Joining NATO," *Washington Post*, March 6, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2000/03/06/putin-says-why-not-to-russia-joining-nato/c1973032-c10f-4bff-9174-8cae673790cd/.

16 Åslund, A. (2004) "Russia's Economic Transformation under Putin," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 45(6): 397.

17 McFaul, M. (2000) "Indifferent to Democracy," *Washington Post*, March 3.

soaring of oil and gas prices after a decade-long economic depression, buoyed his popularity.[18] Large portions of Russian society—albeit not all—were willing to give up some political rights for economic development, even if, of course, growing autocracy did not cause prosperity.[19] Putin and his regime also deployed sophisticated media tactics to nurture support for his regime and his ideas.[20] Kremlin control over most television and radio channels weakened Russian democratic institutions, which were already fragile and unconsolidated at the end of the Yeltsin era, allowing Putin to undermine them further with ease.[21]

As Putin's regime became more autocratic, tensions with the democratic world grew.[22] Democratic breakthroughs in Georgia in 2003 and especially in Ukraine in 2004 threatened the legitimacy of an increasingly authoritarian Russian regime. During Medvedev's four years as president from 2008 to 2012, Russia's political system opened up slightly—especially regarding tolerance for civil society and independent media. *TV Rain* started broadcasting in 2010; opposition leader Alexei Navalny launched his Anti-Corruption Foundation (ACF) in 2011. These organizations and many others operated relatively freely during this period compared to the subsequent Putin years, when entities like *TV Rain, ACF, Meduza, Novaia gazeta, Proekt Media*, and *DOXA* magazine, alongside many independent Russian journalists and activists, were declared foreign agents, extremist organizations, and criminals. Russia today is much more autocratic than it was a decade ago. Several win-win outcomes in U.S.-Russia relations during the Obama-Medvedev pe-

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18 For a sophisticated deep dive into the drivers of Putin's popularity, see Frye, T. (2021) *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

19 Correlation is not causation. See McFaul, M. and Stoner, K. (2007) "The Myth of the Authoritarian Model: How Putin's Crackdown Hurt Russia," *Foreign Affairs* 87(1): 68–84.

20 Guriev, S. and Treisman, D. (2022) *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

21 McFaul, M. (2001) *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, Chapter 10.

22 Lucas, E. (2014) *The New Cold War: Putin's Russia and the Threat to the West*, New York: St. Martin's Press.

riod—the New START Treaty; sanctions on Iran; multi-year, multiple-entry visas; Russia's membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO), etc.—fueled positive Russian attitudes toward the United States. In 2011, nearly 60% of Russians had a favorable view of the United States.[23] Russians back then did not seem to embrace imperialism to the same extent they do now.

This era of partial political liberalization also created permissive conditions for massive demonstrations against the regime in response to voter fraud in the December 2011 parliamentary election, precisely when Putin was running for his third presidential term in March 2012.[24] In response, Putin cracked down hard, arresting protestors and opposition figures, declaring non-governmental actors and organizations to be foreign agents, limiting independent media, and restoring the image of the United States as Russia's main enemy.[25] This reframing of the West and NATO in particular took a harder turn after Putin annexed Crimea and began supporting separatist movements in eastern Ukraine in 2014. Putin's regime became even more repressive and autocratic in the run-up to the second Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when Putin needed opposition leaders like Navalny—effective at mobilizing the public—either dead or in jail. After the war began, the space for independent political activity closed even further. According to *OVD-Info*, a Russian human rights NGO, 19,335 Russians were arrested at anti-war protests right after the invasion began.[26] In reality, this number is significantly higher, as *OVD-Info* only lists those who reported their detention. Use of the word "war" became illegal. In

23 Huang, Ch. and Cha, J. (2022) *Russia and Putin Receive Low Ratings Globally*, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/07/russia-and-putin-receive-low-ratings-globally/.

24 On the history of the struggle between regime and opposition, see Smyth, R. (2021) *Elections, Protest and Authoritarian Stability: Russia 2008-2020*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; as well as Greene, S. and Robertson, G. (2019) *Putin v. the People: The Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

25 Human Rights Watch (2018) *Russia: Government vs. Rights Groups: The Battle Chro-nicle*, https://www.hrw.org/russia-government-against-rights-groups-battle-chronicle.

26 OVD-Info (2022) Reports and Data, Independent Human Rights Media Project, https://english.ovdinfo.org/.

December 2022, Russian pro-democratic leader Ilya Yashin was sentenced to 8.5 years in prison for allegedly spreading "fake news" about the war.[27] Meanwhile, independent media were squeezed even harder: *TV Rain, Novaia gazeta, Echo of Moscow*, and many others were closed within Russia, while Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram were banned.

Decades under an increasingly oppressive dictatorship have influenced Russian societal attitudes. Most Russians cannot even imagine a genuine alternative to Putin. Propaganda works. Years of watching state-controlled media outlets have shaped the way Russians think about the outside world. And over time, Putin has articulated a particular set of ideas—illiberal, imperial, populist conservative, Orthodox ideas[28]—that have attracted support within Russia, in part because they face no challengers. Had a democratic system of government been in place over the last two decades, it would have provided Russian society with exposure to more alternative ideas and leaders.[29] Had a more pro-democratic, pro-Western leader been elected in 2000—say, Boris Nemtsov, who was Yeltsin's heir apparent until being forced to resign from the government after the August 2008 financial crash—Russian societal attitudes today would be more supportive of democracy and the West. And a more democratic Russia would not have invaded Ukraine twice. Nemtsov most certainly would not have done so. This is not a dreamy, naïve counterfactual. Remember, Yeltsin picked Putin; the Russian people ratified his selection as successor. In 2000, Yeltsin could easily have picked Nemtsov as his successor. And even had Nemtsov lost, the very act of changing the ruling party by

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27 Hopkins, V. (2022) "Russia Finds a War Critic Guilty of 'Spreading False Information'," *The New York Times*, December 9, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/09/world/europe/russia-ilya-yashin-court.html.

28 For a recent rearticulation of these values, see Putin, V. (2022) Valdai International Discussion Club Meeting, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69695.

29 When I used to brief President Obama about Putin's approval ratings, he would reply that he would easily have had higher numbers than Putin if he similarly controlled every major American television and radio network; had the absolute loyalty of nearly every member of Congress, governor, NGO and church leader, and billionaire; and got to select his electoral opponents.

means of a free and fair election would have given a positive boost to Russian democratic consolidation. But alas, that path was not taken.

Guessing About Russian Societal Attitudes Today and in the Future

After two decades of Putin's dictatorship at home and imperialism abroad, Russian society will not bounce back quickly or pivot easily to supporting democracy or engagement with the West. The damage is deep. And perhaps Russian society will never go back to embracing pro-democracy and pro-Western attitudes as it did in the 1990s. But never is a long time.

Moreover, there are some signs that Russian society is not monolithic in its thinking about dictatorship and imperialism and is only shallowly committed to these ideas. Even relying on highly flawed polling data—sometimes with only 5–7% response rates—there are hints of soft support for Putin and his imperial war.[30] And the longer the war goes on, the more likely it is that these preferences will shift. A total Russian defeat in Ukraine, like Hitler's in Europe in 1945 or the Soviet Union's in Afghanistan in 1990, might create the most propitious conditions for radical shifts in societal attitudes.

In Russian society today, there is (1) a solid plurality, if not slight majority, in support of Putin and his autocratic ways at home and imperial ambitions abroad; (2) a small but militant minority firmly against Putin and his domestic and foreign policies; and (3) a harder-to-measure plurality—maybe even a majority—in the middle, without firm preferences. Roughly speaking, a solid third of society are loyal followers of Putin and his regime. This group of people are older, less educated, more rural, and less well-off. They watch Russian state-controlled television and listen to government radio. A second segment of the population—much smaller

30 Yudin, G. (2022) "Non-Respondent Rates to Russian Polling Firms Have Jumped to Over 90%," https://twitter.com/YudinGreg/status/1576960900812062721.

than the pro-Putin zealots but still significant (say 20%)—does not support Putin, his regime, or his policies. This group of people are younger, more educated, more urban, and wealthier. They watch very little television news, and especially not government-controlled media, instead getting their news from social media and the internet. The third, median segment—the largest by far—is generally apolitical, composed of those who just want stability and economic opportunity, leading them to support Putin but not with vigor. Over the past decades, they have learned that their voice in political decision-making does not matter, so they just want to get on with their lives without being involved in politics. Like populations in most countries when they go to war, this segment of Russian society supported Putin's war because he is their leader at a time of crisis. But they expressed little passion for a war with Ukraine before Putin invaded[31]—and they support the war today with less enthusiasm today than at the beginning of the war. As summarized by Vladimir Milov, data collected in December 2022 from the Foundation for Public Opinion (FOM), a firm closely associated with the Kremlin, showed that:

> Russians were more likely to be in an "anxious mood" than "calm" (54% vs. 38% by the end of December). When asked about their emotions regarding the war, only 42% (a number consistent with the measurement of solid unconditional support for the war) say that they feel "pride for Russia". That is followed by 34% who say that they feel "anxiety, fear, horror"; 11% feel "anger, outrage, shock"; 7% feel "depression, numbness"; and 6% feel "shock." "Satisfaction, joy, excitement" about the war are felt by 5% of respondents.[32]

Most Russians would also support Putin if he ended the war.[33]

The outcome of the war will influence the preferences of these three groups, especially those in the middle. The percentage of those firmly supporting Putin, dictatorship, and imperialism will

31 Levada Center (2022) *Ukraina i Donbass*], https://www.levada.ru/2022/02/24/ukraina-i-donbass-2/.

32 Milov, V. (2022) *Public Opinion in Russia and War in Ukraine: End of the Year Recap*, https://www.4freerussia.org/public-opinion-in-russia-and-war-in-ukraine-end-of-the-year-recap/: 1.

33 Yudin, G. (2022) "75% Would Support Putin If He Stopped the War Right Now," https://twitter.com/YudinGreg/status/1576960898538668032.

remain stable but not grow if Russia's army continues to lose. At the beginning of his invasion, Putin articulated clear war aims: unity of the Slavic nation, denazification, demilitarization, capturing Kyiv and Kharkiv, and stopping NATO expansion. He has failed to achieve any of these. It is hard to imagine circumstances under which Putin could reverse course and begin to make new gains on this original agenda. Any future "wins" from this war will be much more limited, inspiring fewer and fewer.

Conversely, the share of Russians against the war is likely to grow. None of those already firmly against the war will reverse course and support Putin's imperial escapades. Over time, they will be joined by those less militantly against the imperial adventure, but increasingly tired of physical and economic losses. The more Russians die and the greater the economic hardship that the Russian population must endure because of sanctions, the less support Putin will enjoy.

Already, we see hints of fading elite support, which could be the precursor of dwindling popular support for this imperial war. Most economic elites detest the war.[34] Regional elites, including the mayor of Moscow, are also sending signals of discomfort with a prolonged war. Cultural icon Alla Pugacheva—particularly respected among older Russians—left Russia at the onset of the war in February, came back in August, and left again in September, this time most likely permanently.[35] Even Putin's generals appear divided, and pro-Putin television propagandists increasingly admit that their side is losing.[36] At the end of 2022, for instance, one of Putin's most loyal supporters on state-controlled media, Sergey

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34 Belton, C. (2022) "Putin, Unaccustomed to Losing, Is Increasingly Isolated as War Falters," *The Washington Post*, December 30, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/12/30/putin-isolated-russia-ukraine-war/.

35 Izvestiia͡ (2022) "Ot"ezd Ally Pugachevoi iz Rossii," October 10, https://iz.ru/1408003/2022-10-10/otezd-ally-pugachevoi-iz-rossii-glavnoe; and Pugacheva, A. (2022) "Obrashchenie v Ministerstvo iustitsii RF," *Arbat.media*, https://arbat.media/evraziya/cto-dumaet-rossiiskaya-elita-pro-post-ally-pugacevoi-o-voine-v-ukraine-2949.

36 Bershidsky, L. (2022) "Putin's War Hawks Are No Longer in Step," *The Washington Post*, October 5, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/putins-war-hawks-are-no-longer-in-step/2022/10/05/6371bb58-446b-11ed-be17-89cbe6b8c0a5_story.html.

Markov, wrote on his Telegram channel that "the USA is the biggest winner of 2022."[37] Most importantly, the support of those in the middle, who have historically been apolitical and tepidly supported Putin, will fade as they lose more and more of their sons to a senseless war.

Polls and elite commentary are not the only proxies for judging Russian public sentiment. Most tellingly, viewership of YouTube channels operated by opposition groups, especially *NavalnyLive* and *TV Rain*, as well as the readership and viewership of independent media outlets—*Meduza, Doxa, Novaia gazeta, Proekt*, and various Telegram channels—have skyrocketed, surging after the war began and especially since Putin announced mass conscription in September 2022.[38] Since Putin invaded Ukraine, almost 20,000 people have been arrested for protesting the war, even though Russians who speak the truth about Russia's atrocities in Ukraine face up to 15 years in prison under the newly adopted article 207.3 of the Criminal Code.[39] Small acts of non-violent civic resistance, such as replacing supermarket price tags with anti-war leaflets and posting anti-war statements on restaurant reviews, continue.[40] Anti-war mobilization has vastly outpaced pro-imperial mobilization. Finally, the fact that as many Russians chose to flee the country as joined the army in response to Putin's call for military mobilization speaks volumes about the attitudes of this segment of the Russian population. They were fine with the war when it did not impact them personally. But not anymore. The longer Putin fights, the less societal support he will enjoy.

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37 Markov, S. (2022) "Logika Markova," https://t.me/logikamarkova/4769.

38 Milov, V. (2022).

39 Human Rights Watch (2022) *Russia Criminalizes Independent War Reporting, Anti-War Protests*, https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/07/russia-criminalizes-independent-war-reporting-anti-war-protests.

40 Pnin, T. (2022) "Plata za Voinu. Tsenniki v rossiiskikh magazinakh meniaiut na antivoennye listovki—v Peterburge sud arestoval za eto muzykantu po delu o 'feikakh' pro armiiu," *Mediazona*, April 13, https://zona.media/article/2022/04/13/price.

Conclusion

Giant shifts in Russian societal attitudes concerning autocracy and imperialism are unlikely to occur until after the Putin era is over. But Putin's reign in Russia will end. When it does, the autocratic political institutions he erected will be no more consolidated than the democratic institutions he inherited two decades ago. Unlike Xi in the People's Republic of China, Putin has neither inherited nor built a strong political party.[41] Putin's regime is not generating solid economic growth. Many of the best and brightest have already emigrated; tens of thousands more want to do so. Putinism as an orthodox, illiberal, imperial ideology has won only shallow affinity within Russia. And there is no obvious heir apparent of Putin's stature. Some analysts suggest that former KGB generals like Nikolai Patrushev could take over. That could happen immediately once Putin is no longer in power, but how long could it last? After Stalin came (eventually) Khrushchev and de-Stalinization and the Thaw. After Brezhnev came (eventually) Gorbachev and perestroika and rapprochement with the West. After Putin, then, another course correction toward greater political polarization at home and engagement with the West has at least the possibility of happening. There is nothing inevitable about continued dictatorship and prolonged imperialism once Putin is no longer in power. In an interview with David Letterman filmed in October 2022, President Zelensky made the same prediction: that the imperial invasion of his country would end overnight if Putin were no longer in power.[42] If Russia's regime becomes more democratic, then Russian societal attitudes may change as well. It has happened before; it can happen again.

41 On the durability of personalistic versus one-party dictatorships, see Geddes, B., Wright, J. and Frantz, F. (2018) *How Dictatorships Work: Power, Personalization, and Collapse*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

42 Netflix (2022) "Exclusive Clip of David Letterman Interviewing President Zelenskyy," https://www.netflix.com/tudum/articles/david-letterman-zelenskyy-interview.

Reviving the Native Faith
Nationalism in Contemporary Slavic Paganism of the Rodnoverie Movement[1]

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Rodnoverie is a religious movement to revive pre-Christian Slavic spirituality. It is occasionally referred to as Slavic Neopaganism, but given that many believers find this term insulting, I use their own word: Rodnoverie. Rodnoverie comes from the words *rodnaia vera*—native faith.[2] The term also captures the idea that the Rodnovers want to convey to their possible adherents, namely, that this is the indigenous Russian religion that corresponds to Russian mentality, and manifests its values and cultural traditions.[3] Virtually all Rodnovers agree that instead of foreign values, Russians should turn to their own traditions and revive the national heritage. Consequently, while liberal values have traditionally been dominant among Western Pagans,[4] East European Paganism has often been affiliated with nationalism and conservatism. The purpose of

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1 This chapter was first published in 2013 in *Forum für osteuropäische Ideen -und Zeitgeschichte* 15(2): 167–184.

2 Some who accept the term "Paganism" claim that the word Pagan (*iazychnik*) originally meant people talking the same language (*iazyk*) and was used by ancient Slavs as a term of identification. Those who reject the word explain that yazychnik referred to people who spoke "other languages," that is, foreigners. Nevertheless, it is obvious that Rodnoverie belongs to a group of religions or a form of religiosity that has been called "contemporary Paganisms" in the West. Some believers call their religion Vedizm. The word reveals the importance of the connection to Eastern tradition in the early phase of the religion, but within Rodnoverie it is usually explained as deriving from the Russian verb vedat', to know. Some groups call themselves Pravoslavs (Orthodox Christian in Russian), but maintain that the word is older than Christianity and originally referred to Russians who honored (*slavit'*) the truth (*pravda*).

3 The term "Rodnoverie" indeed refers to the Russian followers of the ancient Slavic faith: Ukrainian Pagans, for example, use the phrase *Ridna Vira*; the Poles use *Rodzima Wiara* and so on.

4 E.g. Berger, H., Leach, E. A., Shaffer, L. S. (2003) *Voices from the Pagan Census: A National Survey of Witches and Neo-Pagans in the United States*, Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.

this paper is to analyze Rodnoverie nationalism in the framework of theoretical discussions of various nationalisms and to examine the alternative nationalistic religious identity that Rodnovers are constructing.

The Red Factory

The majority of the small, transient Rodnoverie organizations are not registered in any way; consequently, the movement is extremely heterogeneous and difficult to demarcate. Thus estimating the number of adherents proves difficult. On the basis of the information available, there seem to be at least 10,000 Rodnovers in Russia,[5] but this number is probably an underestimation. Although there are no extensive demographic statistics on Rodnovers, most studies agree that there are more men than women involved in the movement and that the majority of adherents are relatively young and have above average education.[6]

Although the Rodnoverie movement became public only at the beginning of the 1990s, some communities and individual writers were practicing or advocating Pagan ideas already in the last years of the Soviet Union. One of the most famous of these individuals was undoubtedly Valerii Emelyanov, a professor of Semitic languages, who in 1979 published a flagrantly anti-Semitic pamphlet, *Desionizatsiia*. The book claims that the world is dominated by a dangerous, Zionist conspiracy and that Christianity is an inef-

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5 This estimation is based on the number of adherents, provided by the largest Rodnoverie organizations as well as on the number of communities found in a recent survey of Russian religiosity by Burdo, M., Filatov, S. (2005–2006) *Atlas sovremennoi religioznoi zhizni Rossii*, vol. 3, Moscow and Saint Petersburg: Letnii Sad. Inevitably, this information is incomplete, because it is impossible to reach all the small, informal, and often quite transient communities. In spite of its thoroughness, the survey by Burdo and Filatov omits some smaller Rodnoverie communities.

6 Gaidukov, A. (2000) *Ideologii͡a i praktika slavi͡anskogo neoi͡azychestva*, doctoral dissertation, St. Petersburg: Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia; Prokof'ev, A., Filatov, S., Koskello, A. (2006) "Slavi͡anskoe i skandinavskoe i͡azychestva. Vikkanstvo," in: Burdo M., Filatov S. B. (eds.) *Sovremennai͡a religioznai͡a zhizn' Rossii: opyt sistematicheskogo opisanii͡a*, vol. 4, Moscow: Logos: 155—207.

ficient ideology in the combat against this international Zionism because Christianity is based on Judaism. The pamphlet thus urges Russians to turn to their own religion.[7] Emelyanov was a prominent figure in the nationalistic opposition and one of the founding members of the notorious "Pamyat," but owing to his controversial personality and beliefs, he eventually lost his position in this organization.[8]

Given that from the outset Rodnoverie contained strong nationalistic elements and had links with ultra-nationalistic politics, studies on the phenomenon often focus on the movement's political aspects and especially on nationalism. Since the 1970s, there have been several nationalistic leaders who have attached Paganism to their political outlook.[9] Occasionally, pagan-inspired ideas have been rather latent or transient. For example, at the beginning of the 1990s, Aleksandr Dugin published his translation of Julius Evola's *Pagan Empire*, but he has since adopted a more Christian outlook. Aleksandr Barkashov has occasionally been labelled a Pagan, but he has, nevertheless, kept a certain distance from the Rodnoverie movement.[10]

Pagans were rather marginalized in the nationalistic movement, especially at the beginning of the 1990s, and often Christians excluded them. Rodnoverie has even been condemned by some Christian authors on nationalistic grounds, for being an unpatriotic, cosmopolitan foreign religiosity, which alienates Russians from their natural Orthodox heritage, undermines national unity and directs healthy nationalistic feelings toward the wrong ends.[11]

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7 Emelianov, V. N. (2005) *Desionizat͡siia͡*, Moscow: Russkaia Pravda.

8 Laqueur, W. (1993) *Black Hundred: The Rise of the Extreme Right in Russia*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers: 211.

9 E.g. Pribylovskii, V. (2002) "Neoi͡azycheskoe krylo v russkom nat͡sionalizme," *Panorama* 49, http://www.religare.ru/2_490.html.

10 E.g. Barkashov (1995) interview for *Russkai͡a Pravda* 3(6), a Rodnoverie newspaper. In this interview, Barkashov is asked about his statement: "Within 'pagans' there are no Russians." In answer, Barkashov questions the validity of the contemporary Pagan movement while admitting that Orthodox Christianity as he, a believer, sees it, is based on pre-Christian Russian tradition.

11 E.g. Kuraev, A. (2001) *Trudno byt' russkim,* Moskva: Svi͡ato-Bogoslovskiĭ monastyr': 69–71. Kulikov, for example, even insinuates that Paganism may be a for-

Nevertheless, some Pagans were actively reaching for the nationalistic, anti-Western Orthodoxy. A prominent example was the organization called the Union of Veneds (*Soiuz venedov*), which in their newspaper *Rodnye prostory* condemned those Pagans who took a hostile attitude toward the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and highlighted the compatibility of the "Vedic worldview" with Orthodox tradition. Such expressions of solidarity evoked little response in Christian nationalists and since the beginning of the Nineties, the Union of Veneds (which currently is two distinct organizations) have more unambiguously stated their religious identity as Pagans. Many Rodnovers still see conservative Orthodox Christians as their allies in the campaign against Westernization. A well-known nationalistic author and editor, Roman Perin, for example, relates how he and some of his friends commemorated the birthday of the late Metropolitan Ioann of St. Petersburg and Ladoga, a man known for his fierce ultra-nationalist and anti-ecumenical stand, although Perin dryly noted that there were no Orthodox priests present in the graveyard.[12]

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Pagans have established a more prominent position in the contemporary ultra-nationalistic movement. On the webpages of such organizations as the "Movement Against Illegal Immigration" or the "Slavic Union," Rodnoverie is often regarded as legitimate second Russian religion. A revealing example is the way in which the official webpage of the "Russian Mode" (*Russkii obraz*) presents the symbol of the organization. The figure is first named as the "cross of Konstantin" and given a Christian history. Thereafter, a slightly different version of the same symbol is explained as a rune of victory and a symbol of Perun, the ancient god of thunder.[13] It seems reasonable to suggest that even though Orthodox Christianity still has an uncontested,

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eign plot against Russia. Kulikov, I. (2000) *Neoi͡azychestvo: novye religioznye organizat͡sii Rossii destruktivnogo, okkul'tnogo i neoi͡azychnogo kharaktera*, vol. 3(I), Moscow: n.p.: 16–17.

12 Perin, R. (1999) *Psikhologii͡a nat͡sionalizma*, St. Petersburg: LIO-redaktor. Perin has published such newspapers as *Za Russkoe Delo* and *Potaennoe*.

13 See http://www.rus-obraz.net/symbols.

hegemonic position in Russian ultra-nationalism, the Pagans form a group that has become too significant to be ignored.

It would, however, be a gross misrepresentation to identify the Rodnoverie movement with the politically oriented, nationalist Pagan groupings. In a study of Paganism on the Internet, Douglas Cowan characterizes contemporary Paganism as an "open source" religion.[14] There are no generally acknowledged sacred texts or authorities that could claim the status of gatekeeper. The freedom of individual thinking is a feature of which Pagans are very proud, but at the same time, such freedom engenders endless debates on the definition of the religion and on who has the right to use the designation, Paganism. Within Rodnoverie, such controversies often concern radical ultra-nationalists and skinheads. Many Rodnovers argue that such extremist groups misunderstand and misuse the religion.[15] From their point of view, the issue can be serious indeed. For example, at the beginning of the year 2009, the police exposed a youth gang that was responsible for several bomb attacks and twelve racist murders. In public, the gang identified themselves as "Pagan-Rodnovers," even though it apparently had no connections to any mainstream organizations within the Rodnoverie movement.[16] Such incidents reveal that in the way Paganism is presented in contemporary Russia, it leaves room for the most extreme xenophobic and aggressive interpretations. At the same time, this particular case exemplifies how difficult it is for

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14 Cowan, D. E. (2005) *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet*, New York: Routledge: 30–35.

15 Skinheads were introduced to Rodnoverie, especially through the martial art, *Slavyano-Goritskaya bor´ba*. The founder, Aleksandr Belov, suggested rather plainly that in order to advance in this martial art, one should appropriate pre-Christian spi-rituality. Although not all those practicing the art were Rodnovers (in its heyday, there were some 40,000), it was an effective means of spreading the spirituality beyond the intellectual circles of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Meranvil'd, V. B. (2004) *Slavi͡ano-Gorit͡skoe dvizhenie kak odna iz form vozrozhdenii͡a russkoĭ nat͡sional'noĭ kul'tury*, Ioshkar-Ola: Mariiskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet. On skinheads being rather marginalized within the movement, see Prokof'ev et al. (2006: 170–171).

16 Movsesyan, L. (2009) "Skinkhedam-i͡azychnikam Pred"i͡avleny Obvinenii͡a v Ubiistvakh," *Newsland*, 18 June, http://www.newsland.ru/News/Detail/id/387615/.

those Rodnovers who wish to advocate Paganism as a tolerant religion to protect the reputation of their religion.

Ultra-nationalist dissident circles certainly played an important role in the advent of the Rodnoverie movement, but the roots of the movement can also be traced to the "cultic milieu" of alternative spirituality, which thrived within the urban intelligentsia in the last decades of the Soviet Union.[17] This side of the movement has occasionally been neglected in the study of the topic because the activity of small, intimate, spiritual groups is virtually invisible in comparison with high-profile political organizations. Furthermore, much of the earlier study of Rodnoverie is based on published source material, and it seems to be easier to find a publisher to bring out nationalistic pamphlets than to produce strictly spiritual Pagan books.[18]

Within contemporary Rodnovers, several groups have decisively dissociated themselves from national-chauvinism. This urge was one of the main motives in the founding of an umbrella organization, the Circle of Pagan Tradition (CPT) in 2001. In the organization's founding document, almost half of its pages are dedicated to a discussion of nationalism and explanations of why exclusive "national-chauvinism" cannot be accommodated within the Pagan spirituality and tradition.[19] For the CPT, Paganism is not only an ethnic tradition, but more importantly a "nature religion" that celebrates natural diversity and thereby subscribes to pluralistic values.

While in recent years, nationalistic tendencies have gathered momentum in Russian society, Rodnoverie seems to be moving further away from extreme nationalism. The "center" of the movement has shifted closer to the group *Rodoliubie*, led by Veleslav (Ilya Cher-

17 Prokof'ev et al. (2006: 159).

18 This suggestion is based on some of the observations I have made in my fieldwork, which consists of participant observation in several Rodnoverie festivals and rituals in St. Petersburg and interviews with Rodnoverie leaders in Moscow, Kaluga and Omsk.

19 Aitamurto, K. (2006) "Russian Paganism and the Issue of Nationalism: A Case Study of Organisation the Circle of Pagan Tradition," *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 8(2): 184–210.