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Elite Political Culture and Illiberalism in Wartime Russia

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Abstract

While a general ideological shift toward illiberalism has been noted in Russia for over a decade, recent developments suggest an increasingly deep, pervasive, and comprehensive use of illiberal rhetoric and framings by Russian elites. Policy discussions, which could once be held in a neutral or technocratic register, are increasingly suffused with illiberal legitimating and justifying language, which suggests the further integration of illiberal ideology into the worldviews of a broader cohort of Russian public figures, intellectuals, and loyalist professionals. The case of a recent public debate surrounding nuclear use policy gives rise to useful observations that underline this development.

Since the early 2010s, scholars have noted a changing ideological dynamic in Russia, characterized by an increasingly severe and notable mix of geopolitical anti-Westernism, social traditionalism, cultural conservatism, and national-civilizationism (Laruelle, 2020; Shcherbak, 2023). This change, pioneered first by regime elites, has often been referred to as a Russian version of “illiberalism,” which has grown as a form of reaction to perceptions of an aggressive, left-progressive ideological agenda emanating from the West that is believed to seek the undermining of the Russian regime, the division of its population, and the maintenance of global military, cultural, and economic hegemony by elites in the United States and the European Union (Petro, 2018; Schiek and Isabaev, 2019).

This ideological shift is often framed as largely instrumental, insofar as Russian elites do not actually care about “culture war” issues or seek a traditionalist *revanche* due to their own personal beliefs. Rather, Russian illiberalism is claimed to be a top-down phenomenon designed by Putin and other domestic political managers to outflank domestic opponents and secure the regime’s survival (Laruelle, 2013; Sharafutdinova, 2014). This sets it apart from illiberalism in other contexts, which is often linked to ambitious political oppositions and social movements (Buzogány, 2017; Buzogány and Varga, 2021). Other research suggests that the picture is more complicated, with meso-level institutions such as the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Armed Forces, as well as entrepreneurial lower-tier elites in the media and in politics, working diligently for reasons of ambition, opportunity, and genuine belief to produce illiberal policies, political justifications, and identity frameworks (Adamsky, 2019; Waller, 2021). At the same time, other non-ideological technocratic and securitized discourses existed throughout the 2010s (Fomin, 2022). Still, even if there is a demand-side and voluntarist element to the phenomenon, it is undeniable that illiberal ideological production has been

a conscious policy of the Presidential Administration, (McGlynn, 2023).

Observations since the start of the Russo–Ukrainian War of 2022 suggest that an illiberal worldview—emphasizing the perfidy of Western elites, the importance of cultural traditions and resistance to left-liberal policy agendas, and a civilizationist framing of global affairs—is now quite common within Russian elites’ own rhetoric and argumentative framings. This is an important development: although the Kremlin had favored a change in ideological emphasis for a decade, that period nevertheless featured a plurality of ways of discussing policy issues in the context of the authoritarian system, allowing for plain national-security framings, technocratic fixes, and other non-illiberal points of rhetorical reference (Chebankova, 2020; Gel’man, 2018; Schimpfössl and Yablokov, 2017).

This is increasingly rare. Since the start of the war, discussions in a growing set of policy domains have been packaged with a particular, ideologically illiberal framework—even when a non-ideological framing is possible, or more relevant to the issue at hand. Rhetorical shifts can be observed on issues as diverse as education policy and healthcare. This implies that the need to rely on illiberal worldviews as moral guideposts and legitimating concepts has become more fully integrated into Russia’s changing elite political culture. One evocative example illustrates this trend nicely: the recent public debate over changing Russia’s nuclear-use policy.

Illiberal Rhetoric in Russia’s New Elite Political Culture

The shift is most notable below the top-level of the Russian regime. “Upper-tier” elite actors have long internalized and expressed the ideological change preferred by the Kremlin (Fomin, 2022; Grek, 2023; Waller, 2021). For some time, the statements of Dmitry Medvedev, Vyacheslav Volodin, and other public politicians have been full of aggressive, civilizationist, and traditionalist

language. It is only recently, however, that “lower-tier” elites’ discussions of a range of policy issues have been fully integrated into an illiberal worldview.

A recent public discussion of potential changes to Russia’s nuclear doctrine suggests this integration is in full swing among figures that are far lower on the elite totem-pole, including the tertiary field of mainstream intellectuals and think-tank analysts. In June, the noted Russian historian Sergei Karaganov wrote a strident piece in the academic journal *Russia in Global Affairs* in which he claimed that the use of nuclear weapons might be necessary in the fight against the “new fascism” being promoted in Ukraine by the United States and its European allies (Karaganov, 2023). A series of public responses in the same journal quickly followed. Dmitry Trenin (2023), another major Russian academician, wrote a sympathetic piece arguing that a “restraining fear” of nuclear use needed to be made clearer by the Russian state in order for the latter to survive on the international stage. Other responses were more nuanced and negative; the political scientist Ivan Timofeev (2023) argued forcefully against a change in nuclear doctrine, for example. None of these figures are in a position to actually change policy, but their statements provide evidence of an ongoing, comprehensive ideological rhetorical shift among lower-tier Russian elites and associated professional-class figures.

Indeed, common to every contribution in this debate was the highly emotive and ideological language that the authors used to frame their arguments. Karaganov’s piece made clear that nuclear use needed to be rethought not only for pure power-balancing purposes, but also to beat back the ideological and cultural threat to Russia. He depicted the West as uniquely depraved, “liberal-totalitarian,” and an “enemy of civilization,” arguing that its elites embraced “anti-human ideologies: denial of the family, homeland, history, love between a man and a woman, faith, service to higher ideals, everything that makes up the essence of a person...” Their goal, he went on, “is to mankurtize [to make into unthinking slaves—JW] people in order to reduce their ability to resist the increasingly obviously unjust and harmful to man and humanity, modern ‘globalist’ capitalism.” He described the use of nuclear weapons viscerally, explaining that “this is a morally terrible choice—we use the weapons of God, dooming ourselves to severe spiritual losses. But if this is not done, not only may Russia perish, but most likely the entire human civilization will end.”

This represents a new evolution in public elite rhetoric, in which major policy questions are filtered through a cultural-civilizational lens and the legitimacy of a given policy is directly tied to ideological concerns about civilization, moral degeneracy, and cultural challenges—that is, framed in illiberal ideological terms.

Karaganov wrote, for example, that there is “an unprecedented rapid change in the balance of power in the world in favor of the Global Majority, which not only infuriates the imperial-cosmopolitan elites (Biden and co.), but also frightens imperial-national ones (Trump). The West is losing the ability it had for five centuries to suck wealth out of the whole world, imposing, first of all, by brute force, political, economic orders, and establishing its cultural dominance.” While illiberal rhetoric in nuclear discussions is not new, the fact that all participants engaged in the same discourse is a notable shift (Adamsky, 2019).

Even Timofeev’s negative response took Karaganov’s claims about the West at face value, although he argued that they led to different conclusions. Timofeev noted that internal cultural fights in the United States would not alter U.S. full-scale opposition to Russia; as such, any escalation by Russia would not intensify divisions in the U.S., but rather increase the danger of nuclear annihilation. He further stated that neither conservative Poland nor traditionalists in the United States were allies of Russia, framing them instead as implacable enemies: “various forces are opposing Russia, including quite traditional ones, and are far from breaking away from their historical roots and their identity.” Thus, his discussion of Western political-military opposition to Russia was framed using ideology as an important argumentative point, positioning even those who might be aligned with Russia’s illiberalism as antagonistic to Russia.

Discussion

That Russian policy discussions, even in areas—such as nuclear doctrine—that are unlikely to change, are increasingly dominated by an illiberal rhetorical framework is relevant for future research. Rhetorical frames ultimately filter into observable strategies and techniques in Russia’s approach to international relations, among other issue areas, by contouring and shaping the premises, outlooks, and approaches that input into policy discussions. If civilization, moral decay, and traditional values are indeed the primary legitimating boundary conditions between friend and adversary, and otherwise suffuses internal discussions about agreed-upon goals for state and society, this is an important development.

Furthermore, elite acceptance of illiberalism as a constitutive component of the Russian state and its position in the global system makes efforts to appeal to China and the broader “Global South” easier and more legible for domestic consumption, and will influence how the internal Russian debate is shaped, argued, and justified. Illiberalism’s status as a moral guidepost and legitimating language for policy discussions will inform the way in which Russia approaches potential allies and frames its place as an anti-Western illiberal-civilizational

pole for other states and actors, especially for those in non-Western states for whom such a worldview is perfectly coherent and understandable. It will also create new frictions with the West, whose leadership in important ways adheres to a set of ideological doctrines broadly incompatible with Russian illiberalism.

None of this is to suggest that ideology is the sole—or even primary—driver of Russian policy motivations. Depending on one's school of thought in the International Relations subfield, one might expect power considerations, economic dynamics, or even personal decision-making motivations to also be core explanatory factors. And in domestic policy areas, other factors will be at play in any policy change. Yet in order to understand Russian political discussions, we must factor in the development of illiberalism as a worldview that increasingly dominates and contours much of the public discussion. Grasping how Russian elites are thinking (and the

ways in which they must justify their arguments) is necessary for a full analytical picture of the country's politics.

Although Russia may be a closed authoritarian regime in a wartime state of emergency, its domestic political and policy debates cannot be dismissed as so much fluff (Waller, 2023). In fact, if we wish to prepare ourselves for how relations with Russia may evolve in the coming years, we need to take Russian illiberalism seriously. It is no longer just a political ploy from the top, but part of the country's new political culture. Even after Putin is gone, we cannot assume that ideological changes developed within the Kremlin and supported by other illiberal institutions in society will fall away quickly, if at all. Indeed, the inculcation and dominance of these frames of reference and an overall comprehensive illiberal worldview may survive well into the medium- or long-term, even when thinking about a future, post-Putin Russian regime.

About the Author

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ANALYSIS

Conspiracy Theories and Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

The Russian government, which has promoted conspiracy theories for years, has done so with special intensity since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This article explains the role conspiratorial propaganda has played in the war, highlighting the Kremlin's aims of persuasion, signaling, and confusion. It also discusses how the authorities seek to target varying audiences inside Russia, internationally, and in Ukraine. Although conspiracy theories are unlikely to be decisive in the outcome of the war, they provide insight into the Kremlin's worldview and indicate how it aims to shape public opinion.

The Kremlin publicly espoused conspiracy theories long before its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Since the mid-2000s, when President Putin reoriented Russia's foreign policy away from the West, official rhetoric has promoted several persistent, overarching conspiratorial narratives. In the context of the invasion, it has reiterated some of these ideas: that the West/NATO seeks to destroy or dismember Russia; that Europe seeks to weaken Russia by imposing liberal values such as LGBT rights and "gender ideology;" and that there is a fifth column, backed by the West, that aims to undermine Russia from within. These mainstays of Kremlin rhetoric, along with other conspiracy theories with distinct origins, have been evident in both the justification for the initial invasion in February 2022 and efforts to achieve short-term political goals as the war has dragged on. Although not as important to the course of the war as military strategy or fighting prowess, conspiracy theories matter when it comes to maintaining domestic support for the regime and cultivating international opinion.

A conspiracy theory—or the belief that powerful actors with malign intentions carry out secretive plots to achieve political or financial benefit, and for which sufficient credible evidence is absent—can be wielded as propaganda by those in power, circulate among politi-

cal subjects and citizens, or operate on both levels. They were pervasive in the Soviet Union, especially in the context of the superpower rivalry of the Cold War, and they persisted in pre-Putin Russia. During the 1990s, however, they mostly proliferated among the political opposition: Communist and nationalist journalists, sundry intellectuals, and critics of the Yeltsin government (Oushakine 2016). NATO's bombing campaign in Serbia over Russian resistance provided fuel for detractors of the West and would later figure in narratives about the West's hypocrisy and disregard for Russian interests.

The Evolution of Conspiracy Theories in Service of Russian Politics and Policy

When it came to the rhetoric of conspiracy, officials in Putin's government initially did not exhibit a drastic break from their predecessors, as Putin portrayed himself as a competent reformer and sought to cooperate with the West. In the years that followed, however, as Russia faced terror attacks in Moscow and the North Caucasus and "color revolutions" ushered in pro-Western governments in Georgia and Ukraine, the Kremlin's rhetoric shifted. Appropriating the tropes of nationalist detractors of the West, by 2005 government officials and sometimes Putin himself alleged that Russia's chal-