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## ANALYSIS

## The Russian “Old Left,” Conspiracies around the USSR’s Demise, and the Russo–Ukrainian War

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### Abstract

Through the lens of online conspiracies around the USSR’s dissolution, this text discusses the “old left” segment of the Russian Internet. It claims that while nostalgia for the Soviet Union remains outside state memory politics, there is a certain alignment between state propaganda about the Russo–Ukrainian war and the “old left” worldview. Moreover, it shows the misuse of decolonial language that is prominent in these narratives.

### Introduction

As the Russo–Ukrainian war rages on, the initial astonishment with the Russian public’s reaction has worn off. Various opinion polls and studies have revealed the limits of general support for the war and the difficulties in determining what this support (or lack thereof) consists of. However, there continues to be a fundamental lack of understanding of the Russian population. I must be clear here: understanding does not and should not imply justification, shifting blame, or sympathy. However, understanding is crucial in creating roadmaps for the future. To understand Russian public opinion on the war, it is critical to disaggregate Russian society into its various dimensions and segments (regional, ethnic, ideological, social, economic, etc.).

With a single unintentional mouse click, a computer screen can display an entirely distinct Runet (Russian-language segment of the Internet) bubble: the “old left.” The self-identification of these social media users varies: communists, socialists, leftists, and even Soviet citizens. As Galina Nikiporets-Takigawa and her col-

leagues (Nikiporets-Takigawa et al. 2016) mapped out ideological streams on the Russian Internet (including nationalists, liberals, and conformists), they coined the term “old left” to describe an online ideology rooted in nostalgia for the good old Soviet times, misrepresenting the Soviet Union as a true socialist state, and, often, taking a critical stance toward the current Russian regime. The latter is portrayed as a capitalist and oligarchic government that robs people of social welfare and pensions and is engulfed in corruption and greed. Messages, comments, social media groups, and websites making these claims combine to create a web of nostalgic narratives, intertwined with often-unfounded historical claims. Yet the people behind these online narratives remain largely understudied.

### Putin’s USSR

Putin could never be considered a champion of the Soviet Union’s revival. While he famously claimed that the Union’s dissolution was a geopolitical catastrophe, he has never bought into Soviet nostalgia wholesale. Instead,

he focuses on themes relevant to his current policies and excludes events he does not want people to remember. Furthermore, he is equally enthusiastic about Tsarist history, weaving a bricolage of national memories where everything good has always come from within Russia (however big it was at the time and whatever name it bore) while everything bad has been imported from abroad. Although the Russo–Ukrainian war could be seen as a distorted attempt to re-establish a quasi-USSR 2.0 comprised of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, this narrative is not visible in Russian state-controlled and/or loyal media. In fact, the “reinstatement of the USSR” is only ever mentioned in response to Ukrainian calls for a return to the 1991 Ukrainian borders.

Instead, since the Euromaidan began, Putin’s propaganda machine has been pumping out references to the Great Patriotic War (the part of the Second World War celebrated in Russia; it starts with the Nazi invasion of the USSR in June 1941, thereby excluding uncomfortable events like the Winter War that predated the invasion). The Great Patriotic War has long been the backbone of Putin’s memory politics. Still, in the nine years since the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in the Donbas, the scope, variety, and intensity of its use have surpassed everyone’s expectations. Again, this is the extent to which Putin is willing to rehash Soviet history. The word “revolution” is off-limits; Soviet terror is acknowledged but attempts to confront and deal with it are suppressed. State propaganda offers little to those who yearn for the Soviet Union. The cult of the Great Patriotic War is simply used to wage a new war.

### Who Are the “Old Left”?

Those who preach and follow the “old left” are on the fringe: they are the opposition that neither the state nor the liberal opposition really recognizes. The “old left” has very little in common with the “new left,” which is oriented toward European left values such as minority rights. The “old left” enjoys little, if any, political influence. Their few public projects, such as reinventing the parade commemorating Lenin’s revolution, were never permitted by the state and gradually faded away. The most marginal group among them, “Soviet citizens” who believe that the USSR’s dissolution was illegal and that Russian passports are therefore invalid, has been outlawed. This makes it a challenge to study the culture of the “old left,” even online. Looking at conspiracies provides a useful way to scratch the surface and uncover some of the most prominent ideas.

Why conspiracies? Conspiracies do not have a good reputation, for many valid reasons. Nonetheless, their nature makes them valuable for studying complex non-mainstream ideologies. Conspiracies incorporate key ideas from countercultures and indicate power shifts

and lacunae in mainstream ideologies. They help communities rationalize their positions, cope with them, and form new identities. In other words, conspiracies are distilled versions of a subcultural ideology.

### Conspiracies of the “Old Left”

In general, vernacular online conspiracies about the USSR’s demise revolve around the usual pillars of Russian conspiratorial narratives, combined with typical “old left” tropes. In “old left” discourse, the liberals, capitalists, and oligarchs sold off the country for their own benefit. Instead of pursuing good for all, they chose excessive wealth for a few. Of course, Gorbachev and Yeltsin are the main conspirators who betrayed the people’s trust and sacrificed the country’s greatness for personal gain, including the Nobel prize. Yet they did not always act alone or of their own accord. Behind them were the Jews (including the alleged Jewish brides’ institute, which purportedly produced wives for both presidents) and the West. The latter trope is reminiscent of state propaganda (the relationship between the two is unclear, although, as Ilya Yablokov (2018) demonstrates, the Western countries are the central protagonists in the majority of state-sponsored conspiracies).

The “old left” operates from the vantage point of the lost Cold War: the war was a zero-sum game in which the losing side lost everything, including its independence. This idea is not foreign to some on the Western left. The language they use contains many colonial tropes. The general idea is that the West, primarily the US and the European Union, is steadily, if secretly, attempting to enslave the peoples of the former USSR and colonize their territories. From this perspective, the dissolution of the USSR was one of the first steps of a complex plot. One post reads:

Now it is clear that the creation of the republics of the USSR and their phony “independence” were only transitional stages, parts of a single plan to include these territories in the global kingdom. (URL: <http://www.facebook.com/100029279147027/posts/728610784791553>)

The language is in many ways reminiscent of Soviet anti-Western propaganda, which featured terms like “world imperialism.” However, it has been updated and upgraded to reflect new realities. These narratives tie real facts with fakes, mention real entities known to a lay person from the news but interpret everything in a conspiratorial manner.

The Central Bank (CB) is completely independent from our state, and is not subject to either the President or the Government of the Russian Federation (Article 75, Part 2 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation), but is

obliged to comply with the instructions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and has essentially become a branch of the US Federal Reserve System (FRS). Such a norm is prescribed only in four countries: Afghanistan, Iraq (after the murder of Saddam Hussein), Kosovo, and the Russian Federation—a company of completely sovereign and equal states, isn't it? (URL: <http://www.facebook.com/100003837485113/posts/224586445551449>)

Here, Russia is placed in an unusual category. This only makes sense if one understands that in the “old left” worldview, post-Soviet states—and particularly Russia—are global victims. The disintegration of the Soviet Union (often described among the “old left” as “the world’s strongest power”), the betrayal of Soviet and Russian leadership (“the colonial administration”), and the cunning of the Western countries all contributed to the “enslavement” of “the Slavs” (by which the authors of these posts usually mean ethnic Russians, of course). The rhetoric aids in making sense of the subpar living conditions and limited opportunities that many Russians faced even before the war. It is also reminiscent of populist declarations from various countries, including Western ones. While these narratives portray the current Russian regime in a negative light, they have not been threatening enough for the regime to actively persecute their adherents (except the most radical among them, such as the “Soviet citizens”).

### Conclusion

Generally speaking, “old left” representations of the past differ from those presented by the state. However, the Russian state’s framing of the Russo–Ukrainian war meshes perfectly with the overall ideology of “world imperialism” (it is difficult to say whether this is

a case of cooptation). Ukraine is interpreted as a pawn in a larger world war (one post refers to it as the war between “human” and “un-human” regimes) in which the world imperialism is unconcerned about either side of the conflict and seeks to colonize everyone. While the social media posts I cite here were published prior to the full-scale invasion, the war in Ukraine’s east had already been going on for eight years.

Two points are important. First, all calls for Russia’s decolonization and Russian acknowledgment of their country’s imperialism are perfectly valid, but they miss and will continue to miss the mark with larger audiences. As Nikiporets-Takigawa et al.’s investigation of Russian ideologies showed, the “old left” is one of three non-conformist ideologies. While it is unclear how prevalent it is, it is obvious that it is one of the worldviews that needs to be acknowledged by those who seek to change Russian society. The concepts of imperialism and colonization are not unfamiliar to this worldview, but they refer to very different entities. Misunderstanding this would pave the way for yet another “democratization” reminiscent of the post-Soviet reforms that would fail to accomplish real change—just as the 1990s reforms ended up in creating an illusion of democracy instead of institutional changes. Second, the existence of such a popular ideology is not unique to Russia. The description of the “old left” given above might well have sounded quite familiar to those who follow European right-wing populism or the neo-Confederates in the US. Indeed, these groups share with their Russian counterparts similar feelings of resentment, their portrayal of “the common folk,” and their longing for the good old days. And just as in Europe or the US, there is in Russia no simple answer to the question of how to deal with these growing social movements.

### About the Author

Dr. *Daria Khlevnyuk* is a postdoctoral fellow with the ERC-funded project “Conspiratorial Memory.” She has been working on memory of the USSR in contemporary Russia, including memories of the Soviet terror in museum exhibitions and public opinion and pro-Soviet views expressed online.

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