

The Kremlin's Ideological Ecosystems

EQUILIBRIUM AND COMPETITION

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Western pundits tend to use the term “the Kremlin” in an undefined way that may refer to different entities: the Russian government, the presidential administration, a group of particularly influential figures (which Evgeny Minchenko calls [Politburo 2.0](#)), or the circle of President Vladimir Putin’s longtime friends. I argue that an ecosystems metaphor is useful in disentangling the notion of “the Kremlin.” An ecosystem is a living, complex, and interconnected organism. It can evolve, adapt, or disappear. It interacts with other ecosystems and can absorb or be absorbed by them. It has its own boundaries, but they are malleable, with lines of connection to and from other ecosystems. While flexible and interconnected, an ecosystem still preserves its own inner logic, patterns, and mechanisms, which regulate relations within it.

I see the “Kremlin” as bringing together several ideological ecosystems, each of which consists of specific institutions, funders, patrons, identifiable symbolic references, ideological entrepreneurs, and media platforms. There are three primary ecosystems: the presidential administration, the military-industrial complex, and the Orthodox Christian realm. All are in constant motion and make adjustments to maintain their equilibrium, which confirms the Kremlin’s skills in adapting to different contexts. I contend that the military-industrial complex and the Orthodox realm are two conservative “private-public partnerships” that push for a more consistent ideological agenda, while the presidential administration is the one that nurtures the broadest spectrum of ideas.

Rethinking the Ideological Element of the Putin Regime

The many ongoing debates over the “nature” of the Putin regime can be grouped into three main schools. The first one considers Putin’s regime to be, above all, a kleptocracy, with corrupt members of Putin’s inner circle seeking personal enrichment. Karen

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Dawisha's *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* offers the most detailed analysis of this aspect of the regime. Yet massive and well-organized schemes, bribe taking, money laundering, and the offshoring of national wealth are not enough to explain every logic at work in the political realm and in shaping state-society interactions.

Another school sees Putin's regime as a totalitarian, neo-Stalinist institution, motivated by nationalism, revanchism, and imperial aggression, among other principles. In this view, deeply entrenched ideological convictions explain Russia's actions on both the international and domestic stages. Charles Clover's *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism* and Marcel van Herpen's *Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism* provide good insights about this outlook. I disagree with their vision in that they accentuate certain very limited features and interpret them as a "grand design."

A third school advances a more nuanced view that encompasses two levels of analysis. First, the regime's relationship with Russian society is much more complex than to be classified simply as patronal or authoritarian: it is based on an implicit social contract with the population that is continuously renegotiated and that limits the regime's options. To maintain its societal relevance, the government spends millions of dollars every year to track the smallest whims of public opinion, and billions to try to shape opinion in the government's favor. The regime is on a permanent quest to draw inspiration from and co-opt grassroots trends, and there are many bottom-up dynamics than foreign observers typically do not see. Second, the internal configuration of the regime itself is closer to a plural conglomerate of opinions and ad hoc improvisations than it is to a uniform, cohesive group with rigid ideological boundaries. As Bryan Taylor wrote in a PONARS policy memo, [Putinism is a code](#) "both more and less than an ideology; more, because it involves not just ideas but other stimuli for action, and less, because it is not a coherent and encompassing system of thought."

My focus here is not on the political-economic vested interest groups that comprise the "Kremlin," but on the producers of ideologies. I see the regime as a fragmented collection of competing ideologies and identify three main, broad ideological ecosystems. Each ecosystem functions on its own, but remains connected to the others, with people, institutions, and ideas that serve as bridges between different ecosystems. Within each one, some people work as *ideological entrepreneurs*: they have genuine room for maneuver; they can determine their own preferences; and they can cultivate their own patronage networks. Their connections are fragile and must be constantly cultivated and vigilantly maintained to fend off rival groups and to stay connected with the presidential administration itself. Just as oligarchs' empires are not secure but remain dependent on individual loyalty, the ideological empires of these entrepreneurs are also unstable – they can be challenged and dismembered.

Locating Ideological Production Inside the “System”

To avoid overly simplistic notions about the coherence or incoherence of the “Kremlin’s” ideological production, it is useful to locate the production of ideologies within the system and observe the diversity of this production.

One locus of production is the military-industrial ecosystem, which encompasses all power agencies: the Ministry of Defense; the Ministry of the Interior; the security services; and big military industry, both public and semi-private. These groups have conflicting interests and numerous internal divisions since all are competing for state subsidies and political attention. However, they share a broader agenda of maintaining a certain level of ideological control over Russian society. The majority of them believe in a Soviet-inspired system in which individuals are molded to express a “healthy patriotism” and youth are raised with a patriotic-military education. Some more radical groups such as Alexander Prokhanov’s Izborsky Club and Dmitri Rogozin’s Rodina Party push for the revival of a “red” ideology combining Soviet nostalgia with Slavophile and Orthodox themes. This last approach is inspired in part by the “red-brown coalition” that collapsed after the events of October 1993.

A second locus of production is the Orthodox realm, which encompasses the Moscow Patriarchate; Orthodox businessmen such as Vladimir Yakunin and Konstantin Malofeev; ideological entrepreneurs such as film director Mikhail Mikhalkov and former Prosecutor of the Republic of Crimea and now Duma MP Natalia Poklonskaya; and an array of Orthodox civil society organizations. Though the Church has failed to penetrate the state system—particularly the educational realm—to the degree it had hoped, it has partly succeeded in promoting its conservative agenda by influencing legislation on social and family affairs and is becoming progressively more ingrained in society. Revived support for Orthodoxy, nostalgia for the Tsarist era, and the rehabilitation of White émigrés have—while in a largely decentralized way—helped produce a fertile climate for those who push a more radically reactionary narrative. The street demonstrations of August 2017 against the film *Matilda*, which depicts a love story between the tsarevich Nicholas II and a ballerina, showcased the existence of a contemporary Orthodox fundamentalism realm prepared to engage in street violence.

These two ecosystems have their roots in the Soviet system. The military-industrial complex shows the most continuity with the Soviet period for obvious structural reasons: it defends geopolitical and industrial interests that have not dramatically evolved, except insofar as they have had to adapt to a market economy and, in some cases, adjust their strategic calculus. At the human level, its main figures are predominantly aging Soviet civil servants. The Orthodox realm is more complex. It has roots in the “Russian Party” active in some Soviet state structures between the 1960s and 1980s, and this continuity is sometimes embodied by family trajectories. Sergey Mikhalkov, a famous children’s book author who wrote the lyrics of both the Soviet and

Russian national anthems, was one of the main patrons of the “Russian Party.” His son, the famous film director Nikita Mikhalkov, is one of the main representatives of this Orthodox realm today. This group has also experienced deep renewal: many of its representatives are so-called Orthodox businessmen, a new generation born of the violent path to a market economy in the 1990s, and some, like Konstantin Malofeev, are only in their early 40s. In addition, this Orthodox realm is obviously now better connected to émigré circles than it was in the Soviet era.

The presidential administration is the most eclectic of the three ecosystems, and its cadres are the youngest. The ideational borrowings of Vladislav Surkov, who served for more than a decade as first deputy chief of the presidential administration and then as personal advisor to the president, encapsulated perfectly this catchall dynamic. He played a critical role in managing a permanent collage of ideologies while simultaneously taming groups that might pose a threat to the regime. The broad ideological palette that the presidential administration has settled on includes three main components:

1. A *Soviet-lite nostalgia* made to fit post-Soviet conditions and Russian consumerism, and inflected in diverse modalities. This nostalgia is primarily for the Brezhnev decades; the Stalin era receives comparatively little play;
2. A *classic, state-centric vision of Russia* that stresses the country’s continuity over time and its geographic scope, represented, for instance, by the revival of the Russian Geographic Society and the Military-Historical Society; and
3. A *globalized, multicultural, and multilateral Russia* that combines elements of great power status with liberal economic values. This strand takes its inspiration from a wide range of domains such as U.S. political campaigning and marketing, Western post-modernism, U.S. neo-conservatism, consumerism, globalization narratives, and China’s transformations.

The only ideological red line is that an individual should not be identified as a liberal in the political sense of the term, since this implies—wittingly or otherwise—being in the service of Western interests and contributing to the geopolitical, political, economic, or moral collapse of Russia. (Economic liberals, by contrast, can still be part of the establishment.)

The presidential administration is therefore the least ideologically rigid of the three ecosystems and the most adaptable to new contexts, as evidenced by the appointment of Sergey Kiriyenko as its first deputy chief of staff in 2016. With his arrival, the pendulum shifted somewhat away from the most conservative/reactionary positions toward more centrist positions. For example, in 2017, the presidential administration [gave grants](#) to associations registered as foreign agents, halted direct funding to Putin’s Night Wolves

patriotic motorcycle club, and repressed Orthodox fundamentalists who crossed the line with their anti-*Matilda* demonstrations.

Both the military-industrial and the Orthodox ecosystems push for the presidential administration to develop an agenda of societal re-ideologization. They also try to infuse the country's broadly conservative atmosphere with more doctrinal content. Yet the presidential administration resists this push. Its conservative ideology remains vague, with its predominant features being anti-Westernism and anti-liberalism, the promotion of traditional moral values, and a classical, state-centric vision of Russia. Beyond these points, blurriness prevails. Overall, the administration seeks to cultivate the population's disengagement from politics and street activism in hopes of a laconic acceptance of the world as it is and a passive support for the current regime.

Conclusions

In practice, the presidential administration's promotion of "conservatism" has two aims: one defensive, one offensive. The defensive aim is to present the status quo of the Putin regime as the best possible choice for the country, and thus to delegitimize the liberal opposition and Western influences. This objective has largely been attained: the regime enjoys broad public support and Putin continues to be seen as the symbol of the nation and of the state, despite criticisms of the administration's corruption and concerns about economic stagnation. The second, offensive, objective is to remodel Russian society so that it is depoliticized and passive in its interactions with the regime, but engaged and active in the public space. The Russian state is no longer a welfare state but a neoliberal state that seeks to limit public expenditure; it requires a society able to take responsibility without expecting too much from the state. This second goal has largely failed as the presidential administration does not exert behavioral power over the population. Russian society is resisting the regime's desired remodeling, only selectively believes what the authorities announce, and will not allow itself to be facilely roped in.

Approaches that try to seize, define, and then typologize the regime's doctrinal content largely miss the point because they stress doctrine over worldview and content over style, without taking into consideration the toolkit of behaviors, habits, and ruling technologies. They also miss the co-creational aspect of this shared meaning-making process, and the cultural resonance of the Putin regime. Far more important than debating the status of Alexander Dugin or Ivan Ilyin within the establishment is the "reverberance" aspect of the regime. The latter takes inspiration from many popular subcultures: gang and prison culture, martial arts, the tradition of *stiob* (parody) and carnivalization, neoliberal consumerist practices, and late Soviet culture. It captures them for its own benefit, trying to stay in tune with society by promoting a broad cultural hegemony that favors the regime. This equilibrium has been largely successful so far, even if the erosion of the regime's symbolic legitimacy is confirmed by both the impossibility of reconquering the middle and upper classes of Moscow, St. Petersburg,

and other big cities, and the difficulties of finding a common language with the younger generation that has been raised entirely under Putin. Nonetheless, it seems that the presidential administration will be able to continue to reinvent itself for some time, benefiting both from its adaptation and improvisation skills and from a certain systemic inertia that prevents the emergence of attractive alternative futures.

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