

The Gathering of the Russian Cyberspaces: State Sovereignty and Information Control

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Abstract

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Since the start of the Putin era in 2000, Russia has been waging two different political-informational wars that are fundamentally defensive in nature. One is against the penetration of western institutions into Russian society and the other is against its own citizenry. Internally, Russia intends to prevent a subversive, internationally-focused domestic culture from dominating and taking over the leading Putinist culture. By consolidating news and media platforms, curbing and criminalizing the free flow of information, and building a sovereign "information sphere," Russia is realizing a degree of state stability at the cost of increasing international isolation and deepening societal schisms. Disrupting and manipulating information flows is a crucial tool in Russia's arsenal in order to minimize domestic dissent and build consent for the political status quo.

This paper explores how the influence of conservative political thought has established itself in multiple spheres of official state doctrine and sheds light on the greater strategy behind these political-informational wars. Select political developments in the post-Soviet space are also analyzed in order to better understand the evolution of state doctrine in the context of these wars. This paper also identifies critical domestic policy decisions made by the Russian administration to carry out its military and information security doctrines by challenging the penetration of foreign information and communications technology, cracking down on dissent, and mitigating the penetration of western NGOs into Russia's sovereign sphere. The paper concludes with a speculative outlook on Russian politics and society over the next six years.

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1. Introduction

Putin's Russia continues to extol the age-old narrative of the "cornered bear," beleaguered by the global financial system, the "church" of Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and biased media coverage, all of which threaten its unique, yet vulnerable legacy. While there is a legitimate foundation for this narrative and these concerns, ultraconservative ideologues have intensified it by incorporating elements of "civilizational particularity," Russian exceptionalism, and revitalizing the concept of Russia as the last bastion of Eastern Orthodox civilization and a guardian of traditional values.

Russia's Doctrine of Information Security, updated in 2016, identifies the measures the state deems necessary to take in order to guarantee security against perceived internal and external threats. Accordingly, the Kremlin has long viewed internet technology and western media platforms with suspicion. But the Arab Spring and Bolotnaya protests in Moscow confirmed the power of information and communications technologies (ICT), and their ability to challenge authoritarian regimes.

Influenced by the ultra-conservative Neo-Eurasianists housed in various institutions and the factions of the Izborsky Club, the 2016 doctrine urges the transformation of the Russian media landscape into a sovereign sphere, free of western interference. It demonstrates that the state intends to impose stricter control over the internet within Russia, defining it as a potential threat to national security. The state also intends to use the internet as a weapon against the institutions and policies of the western democracies. Russian information warriors will take the battle to social media and information media of western societies.

The doctrine portrays the Russian media sphere as a world under siege. To secure this information space the state must achieve "vertical control and centralization at the federal, interregional, regional, and municipal levels as well as those of computer systems, their operators, and

communication networks."¹ As such, the doctrine presents itself as a nationalist call to arms, noting "protection of the sovereignty of the Russian Federation in the information space" as a primary objective.²

In accordance with the doctrine, the Russian state is wielding data legislation policy in conjunction with harsher criminal penalties to both minimize dissent and weaken non-systemic political opposition. Data localization legislation, (the technology of which will be explained below) which represents a growing trend in nations attempting to reign in information flow for various purposes, in tandem with harsher security laws, aims at minimizing dissent and discourse critical of the state. The effect of data localization will be a further crumbling of civil liberties online in order to support the Putin regime.

Russia is also using internet policy to disrupt and re-structure the corresponding information spheres of the EU, the U.S. and other western states to challenge the world order and increase its influence in international politics. This involves prioritizing development of a controlled "information sphere" to reduce the influence and sway of foreign media outlets on Russian media consumers to maintain the status quo. Through unique, multi-tiered systems of global media platform ownership and control, the state manages to proliferate political narratives to both domestic and foreign audiences, which some Russian analysts term "digital conservatism."³

This thesis will analyze how the Russian state wields internet and data policy in order to maximize political control internally, and to disrupt and destabilize the information spheres of other societies as part of its two-front defensive political-informational war. Russia's information warriors,

¹ *Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoy Federatsii ob utverzhdenii doktriny informatsionnoy bezopasnosti Rossiiskoy Federatsii* [Order from the President of the Russian Federation on the statement of the doctrine of information security in the Russian Federation], *Prezident Rossii*, May 12, 2016, 15. (Author's translation).

² *Ibid*, 12. (Author's translation).

³ Vlad Strukov, "Digital Conservatism," in *Eurasia 2.0: Russian Geopolitics in the Age of New Media* (2016).

armies of "content" providers embedded in its global media system, aim to establish a *Russkii Mir*⁴ (Russian World) online and offline in accordance with the values of ultra-conservative factions.

2. Literature Review and Terminology Used

Over its 25-year history, the Russian Federation (RF) has publicly released and continues to update official state doctrines, detailing national strategy for its armed forces, information security, and foreign policy. The documents outline external and internal threats to the integrity of the Russian state, and provide background on the evolution of Russian thought at the highest echelons of the Putin administration.

Scholars analyzing these doctrines have suggested that these strategic documents serve as a means to contribute to the RF's overarching informational strategy.⁵ Łukasz Dryblak posits that the doctrines themselves are written to be intentionally misleading in order to gain an "informational advantage" against opponents. Dryblak references a paper by Captain Dmitry Chuvatkin, serving at the Perm Military Institute of the Internal Troops of the Ministry for Internal Affairs, entitled "The War Doctrine as Information Impact (Semiotic Approach). According to Chuvatkin, the RF's military doctrine is "a system of ideas, compiled in the framework of a semiotic paradigm... This makes the war doctrine of a modern state a weapon in the information war."⁶ Not unlike Soviet doctrines used in the USSR, which Lawrence Martin argues were "to manipulate the enemy rather than merely subdue him," the doctrines appear to be part of a strategy to exert

⁴ An ideological construction referring to the lands once dominated by the Soviet Union, as well as the broader Russian-speaking and/or Orthodox Christian world.

⁵ Jolanta Darczewska, Rosyjskie siły zbrojne na froncie walki informacyjnej. Dokumenty strategiczne (series: Prace OSW, no. 57), Warszawa, 2016, p. 22, cited in Łukasz Dryblak, "The Role and Significance of Russian Doctrinal Documents, with Particular Focus on Information Security Doctrines from 2000 and 2016," *Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* 52, no. 3, 2017.

⁶ Д.Н. Чубаткин, "Военная доктрина как способ информационного воздействия (семиотический подход)", in: *Современная Россия и мир: альтернативы развития (Информационные войны в международных отношениях)*, ред. Ю.Г. Чернышов, Барнаул, 2012, pp. 136–140, cited in Dryblak, "The Role and Significance of Russian Doctrinal Documents."

"reflexive control." Reflexive control "is defined as a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action."⁷

Russia's most recent military doctrine (updated 2014) classifies the expansion of NATO as a globally destabilizing phenomenon and "in violation of international law," which the Russian state must defend against.⁸ A major threat added to this edition of the doctrine includes the need to defend against "the use of information technologies for military and political purposes and installing regimes opposing Russia in countries it borders."⁹ This highlights the defensive approach the RF describes that it must take in the wake of "increased information confrontation" on the world's stage. The 2016 version of the Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation includes similar rhetoric, emphasizing the need to defend against the Euro-Atlantic bloc, which increasingly threatens Russia's sovereignty militarily and informationally. Tactically, it describes the state's intent and methods to control information flow, influence audiences, minimize dissent, and further the Kremlin's geopolitical agenda. It frequently references an "information sphere," which Russians refer to a space that is not completely military nor civilian in nature. It includes everything: the sum of a government's database infrastructures and methods of gathering, analyzing, and transmitting information, such as telecommunications infrastructures as well as satellite and network terminals. It is, according to Rafael Midkhatovich Yusupov, director of the St. Petersburg Institute for Informatics and Automation of the Russian Academy of Sciences (SPIIRAS), "a single entity and is global," and neither completely military nor civilian in nature.¹⁰ The doctrine itself represents a means of securing this space and preventing its intrusion by external entities, yet also from

⁷ Timothy L. Thomas, "Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17, 237–256, 2004.

⁸ Военная Доктрина Российской Федерации, December 30, 2014, <https://rg.ru/2014/12/30/doktrina-dok.html>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ R.M. Yusupov, "Information Security is the Foundation of National Security," *Vooruzheniya, Politika, Konversiya*, 3–4, March–April 1997, cited in Daniel Ventre, *Information Warfare* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 225.

within. By securing this information space, Russia can both prevent regime change or overthrow from within, and control forces that threaten it from the outside.

Unable to compete with against the United States and NATO forces due to its technological inferiority, Russia has been forced to rely on asymmetric war, which it has since developed to a degree par excellence. Since then, in accordance with ultra-conservative values, Russia has been fighting a two-front information war for its own prestige, security, and stability: against its own citizenry the Atlantic powers.

The "soft" nature of these two fronts, largely soft power initiatives or "*myagkaya sila*," makes them difficult to separate from one another. Russia's global media systems, federal administrative and executive bodies, and ideological factions aim at both domestic targets, foreign targets, and the various foreign-domestic linkages that unite them.

This is likely what Yusupov had in mind when he argued that information security is now "the basis and foundation of national security for Russia."¹¹ Major changes were made to Russia's 2014 military doctrine to include "information space and the internal sphere" as part of the section focused on "military threats."¹² This highlights a growing need in the Russian General Staff to exert authority over its perceived information sphere, and underlines Yusupov's claim regarding information as a "foundation" of national security. Under the section titled "Main domestic military threats," the addition now includes: "the informational influence over the population, especially on youth, with the intent to undermine historical, spiritual and patriotic traditions."¹³

¹¹ Daniel Ventre, *Information Warfare* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 225–6.

¹² Polina Sinovets and Bettina Renz, "Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine and Beyond: Threat Perceptions, Capabilities and Ambitions," NATO Research Paper no. 117, NATO Defense College, Rome, July 2015; and *Voyennaya Doktrina Rossiskoy Federatsii*, December 26, 2014, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d527556bec8deb3530.pdf>.

¹³ *Voyennaya Doktrina Rossiskoy Federatsii*.

3. Developments in Political Thought

Protecting national sovereignty, as described in the doctrine of information security, necessitates assimilating "information technology for the protection of the culture, historical, and spiritual values of the *multinational nation of the Russian Federation*."¹⁴ Dryblak posits that this latter term is a reference to the ideology of the *Russkiy Mir*, which will be explored in depth below.¹⁵

Other scholars, such as Maria Engström, identify a messianic shift in official state doctrine as of 2013. She writes that the concept of Russia as "Katechon," or the "world's 'shield' against apocalyptic forces," arose as a new basis for Russian state ideology in response to domestic opposition from 2011–2012 and a perceived western-orchestrated campaign to destabilize the Russian state and its interests abroad.¹⁶

This coincides with what the post-communist studies scholar Fabian Linde identifies as a "civilizational turn" in contemporary Russian political discourse.¹⁷ Civilizational terminology has been wielded by nationalist groups in Russia since the 1990s in response to economic, political, and cultural "westernization" of the country. One of the earliest references to this, according to Linde, was in March 2007, when the Russian Foreign Ministry published its "Review of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," which made references to the idea of multiple, competing civilizations. The following year, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated notions of "civilizational differences." To Linde, the following excerpt from Lavrov's essay represents a "milestone" in contemporary Russian political thought:

¹⁴ Доктрина информационной безопасности Российской Федерации, 5 December 2016, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/6/5.html>.

¹⁵ Dryblak, "The Role and Significance of Russian Doctrinal Documents."

¹⁶ Maria Engström, "Contemporary Russian Messianism and New Russian Foreign Policy," *Contemporary Security Policy* 35, no. 3, 2014.

¹⁷ Fabian Linde, "The Civilizational Turn in Russian Political Discourse: From Pan-Europeanism to Civilizational Distinctiveness," *Russian Review* 75 (October 2016): 604–25.

There is already no doubt that the end of the Cold War marked the end of a longer stage in global development, which lasted for 400 to 500 years and when the world was dominated by European civilization. This domination was consistently led by the historical West. As regards the content of the new stage in humankind's development, there are two basic approaches to it among countries. The first one holds that the world must gradually become a Greater West through the adoption of Western values. It is a kind of "the end of history." The other approach – advocated by Russia – holds that competition is becoming truly global and acquiring a civilizational dimension; that is, the subject of competition now includes values and development models.¹⁸

This "milestone" represents the elevation of the "civilizational approach" from political discourse to a status of embeddedness in official doctrine. Indeed, in the "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," released by Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2013, these civilizational elements are codified:

For the first time in modern history, global competition takes place on a civilizational level, whereby various values and models of development based on the universal principles of democracy and market economy start to clash and compete against each other.¹⁹

Here, the idea of competing "values and models of development" communicates a Russian or even Eurasian rejection of the universality of western values. In a 2016 speech titled "Russia's Foreign Policy in a Historical Perspective," Lavrov references the exploits of Alexander Nevsky, a key figure from medieval *Rus'*, to conjure an image of the west threatening Russia's religious legacy:

¹⁸ Sergei Lavrov, "Russia and the World in the 21st Century," *Russia in Global Affairs* 3, 2008, cited by Linde in "The Civilizational Turn."

¹⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Russia), "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," February 18, 2013.

We can recall the policy pursued by Grand Prince Alexander Nevsky who agreed to temporarily submit to the Golden Horde rulers, who were generally tolerant of other religions, in order to defend the right of the Russian people to have their own faith and decide their own destiny despite the European West's attempts to subjugate Russian lands and deprive them of their own identity.²⁰

The Russian system of cultural and spiritual values, conceptualized as the "Russian World" (Русский Мир), is a geopolitical driver of conservative values. The scholar Marlene Laruelle notes the frequency of the terms "morality" (нравственность) and "spiritual" (духовный) in Putin's speeches, especially since his return to the presidency in 2012.²¹ These two terms are employed numerous in recent Russian political-military doctrine, namely in the Doctrines of Information Security (2016), the Military Doctrine (2014), and the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (2013)²². Laruelle highlights that the Orthodox Church is also a major contributing force in the Kremlin, and that its agenda frequently overlaps with the pro-Russian European rightist parties that call on the "periphery" to resist the "system" of "economic and political liberalism and the destruction of so-called traditional values."²³ This conservative movement has produced the so-called gay propaganda law, the Russian Internet Restriction Bill to allegedly protect children from extremist content online, the anti-blasphemy law following the Pussy Riot trial, and a ban on obscene language in books, movies, and music. Laruelle's research alongside other scholars' contributions make clear that Russian nationalist sentiment, whether in televised talking points or enshrined in official doctrine, is not simply promulgated from above by domineering elites. In their research on what they term "civilizational

²⁰ Sergei Lavrov, "Russia's Foreign Policy in a Historical Perspective," *Russia in Global Affairs*, March 30, 2016, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Russias-Foreign-Policy-in-a-Historical-Perspective-18067>.

²¹ Marlene Laruelle, "The 'Russian World': Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination," Center on Global Interests, Washington D.C., May 2015.

²² The terms are used three times in the Doctrine of Information Security (2016), twice in the Military Doctrine (2014), and twice in the Concept of Foreign Policy (2013).

²³ *Ibid*, 22.

nationalism," Aleksandr Verkhovskii and Emil Pan, argue that it is a "conglomerate of rather diverse bureaucratic clans, which de facto offer different versions" of this ideology.²⁴ Indeed, these various clans, according to Verkhovskii and Pan, range from right-wing Orthodox Christian nationalist organizations and Orthodox fundamentalists to Neo-Nazi groups and the neo-Eurasianists.

4. *The Nationalist Factions Influencing Russian Politics*

Scholars identify the beginning of Vladimir Putin's third term as President of the Russian Federation in 2012 as a turning point in conservative discourse, during which new hardline think-tanks and government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) were established or merged together.²⁵ The Valdai International Discussion Group is one of the oldest post-Soviet Russian think-tanks (founded by RIA Novosti in 2004), at which leading western and Russian academicians, scientists, and intellectuals, including the President of Russia, gather annually.²⁶ Daniel W. Drezner notes that Valdai is recognized as the Russia's equivalent to the Davos World Economic Forum, and Marcus H. Van Herpen describes it as a "testing ground for the Kremlin's foreign policy initiatives."²⁷ Despite being fervently opposed to Valdai's global focus, the high-level Soviet writer and hardliner Aleksandr Prokhanov is an active member. In 2012, Prokhanov created the Izborsk Club as an anti-Valdai parallel, based on the somewhat older ultra-nationalist think-tank, the Institute of Dynamic

²⁴ Aleksandr Verkhovskii and Emil Pan, "Civilizational Nationalism: The Russian Version of the 'Special Path,'" *Russian Social Science Review* 56, no. 4, July–August 2015: 2–36.

²⁵ Katharina Bluhm, "Modernization, Geopolitics, and the New Russian Conservatives," *Leviathan* 44, no. 1, 36–64.

²⁶ Carolina Vendil Pallin and Susanne Oxenstierna, "Russian Think Tanks and Soft Power," Swedish Defence Research Agency, August 2017.

²⁷ Daniel W. Drezner, "Is There Value in Valdai?" *Washington Post*, October 26, 2016; and Marcel H. Van Herpen, *Putin's Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 59.

Conservatism.²⁸ In order to understand the Izborsky Club's underlying doctrine, it is necessary to examine the historical context behind its inception.

In the late 1980s, Prokhanov emerged as one of the leading voices in the statist movement, a conservative counterattack against Gorbachev's reform policy. During a speech to the Eight Congress of the USSR Writers' Union, Prokhanov accused proponents of the *perestroika* movement of attempting to naively emulate western political liberalization, noting that "[s]uch a copying deprives us of a sovereign path and gives birth to an inferiority complex."²⁹

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Prokhanov continued to explore the concept of a national identity, palatable to the nascent Russian Federation. During the late Yeltsin period, the Russian General Staff Academy became a bastion of reactionary thought, where the parties behind the failed coup in 1993 explored new thinking influenced by the European extreme right. The Academy served as the premier establishment for training officers for the Soviet (now Russian) army.³⁰ It was here, Clover writes, where ideological experimentation between the "right-wing fanatics and the Russian establishment" began to take place.³¹

The Neo-Eurasianists, who seek to restore Russia's great-power status by extending its borders and invoking an apocalyptic skepticism toward the West, bear significant influence on the Kremlin as well as the Russian military service.³² Their chief ideologue, Aleksandr Dugin, has amassed a large international audience sowing postmodernist doubt and rejecting western culture as a "local and

²⁸ Andreas Umland, "Alexander Dugin and Moscow's New Right Radical Intellectual Circles at the Start of Putin's Third Presidential Term 2012–2013: The Anti-Orange Committee, the Izborsk Club, and the Florian Geyer Club in Their Political Context," *Europolity* 10, no. 2, 2016.

²⁹ John B. Dunlop, *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, cited in Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow*, 183.

³⁰ Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2016), 201.

³¹ Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow*, 201–207.

³² However, scholars argue as to what *degree* of influence Dugin's ideas have on the Russian political and military establishment.

temporary phenomenon.”³³ Dugin vows to save Europe from Anglo-Saxon influence, admits that fascism, communism, and Atlanticist capitalism are failures in their own ways, and argues that Russia needs a fourth political theory to guide it. He envisions a united Eurasian front with the glory and prestige of the Soviet Union but more in line with the realities of the global economy. According to Dugin, “Atlanticist values” such as personal liberty, multiculturalism, and free trade should be done away with and replaced by a sort of all-encompassing Orwellian submission to a civilization-state.³⁴

A fringe, dissident beatnik for most of his life, Dugin eventually attained a remarkable level of status and influence within the former USSR's security establishment. With the help of a certain General Igor Rodionov at the General Staff Academy, Dugin was offered the position of adjunct professor within the Academy.³⁵ Dugin's conversations with right-wing thinkers as well as his biweekly lectures at the General Staff Academy led to the publication of his seminal work, *The Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Eurasia*. Published in 1997, the book continues to be assigned as required reading at the General Staff Academy as well as at other Russian military universities.³⁶ According to John Dunlop, a Hoover Institution academic focused on Russian conservative movements, "there has probably not been another book published in Russia during the post-communist period which has exerted a comparable influence on Russian military, police, and statist foreign policy elites."³⁷

Uniting Dugin with other Russian ultraconservatives is Prokhanov's Izborsky Club, financed by the Kremlin.³⁸ Founded in 2012, the group recognizes Russia as the sole heir to the Byzantine Empire, a “Third Rome,” and the last bastion of Eastern Orthodox civilization. Adherents to this philosophy

³³ Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow*. (Add original source)

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow*, 232–235.

³⁶ John B. Dunlop, "Russia's New – and Frightening – 'Ism,'" *Hoover Digest* 3, 2004.

³⁷ Charles Clover, "The Unlikely Origins of Russia's Manifest Destiny," *Foreign Policy*, July 27, 2016; and Dunlop, "Russia's New – and Frightening – 'Ism.'"

³⁸ Maria Engström, "Contemporary Russian Messianism and New Russian Foreign Policy."

believe that Russia is traversing a unique historical path, and its spiritual and moral values must be protected at all costs. Achieving this aim, however, is impossible without a strong leader. For this reason, the conservative elite members of the Izborsky Club venerate Vladimir Putin, whom they see as a natural successor to the legacy of medieval and imperial Russia.³⁹ Prokhanov notes that Russia's political acts in recent years, such as defeating Georgia in a short war in 2008, annexing Crimea in 2014, and founding the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015 indicate Russia's path to "recovery" by rejecting liberal western values and embracing a blend of social conservatism and Russian exceptionalism.⁴⁰ The concept of "sovereignty" regularly appears in the Club's narrative and in official publications.⁴¹

Both Prokhanov and Dugin have had numerous ties to the national security bureaucracy and collaborated in constructing a hybrid ideology from the "two losing ideologies," nationalism and communism. Political events spurred and signaled these developments; in 1996, Andrey Kozyrev, Yeltsin's foreign minister who favored bolstering ties with the West was sacked. General Rodionov, Dugin's patron and colleague at the academy, was hailed in as defense minister the same year.⁴³

Marlene Laruelle is one of the first scholars to conduct a systematic analysis on the connection between the Izborsky Club and the political establishment. The Club describes itself as an "intellectual circle" of 47 various political philosophers, journalists, businessmen, and even Orthodox bishops, pushing a notion of Russian civilizational superiority on the world's stage. It draws significant support from players in the military-industrial complex, the Russian Orthodox church, and Eurasianist thinkers

³⁹ Areg Galstyan, "Third Rome Rising: The Ideologues Calling for a New Russian Empire," *National Interest*, June 27, 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/third-rome-rising-the-ideologues-calling-new-russian-empire-16748>

⁴⁰ Robert Zubrin, "Moscow's Mad Philosophers," *National Review*, February 18, 2015, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/398811/moscows-mad-philosophers-robert-zubrin>.

⁴¹ Marlene Laruelle, "The Izborsky Club, or the New Conservative Avant-Garde in Russia," *Russian Review* 75 (October 2016): 626–44.

⁴³ Clover, "The Unlikely Origins."

such as Dugin.⁴⁴ Several its members have had direct ties to the Kremlin, which strengthens the hypothesis that the Club has had de facto influence on Russian policy.

Sergei Glazyev, is likely the most politically influential member of the Club. He serves as Putin's official Advisor (*Sovetnik Prezidenta RF*) and spearheaded the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) project, which established a free-trade regime between Russia and four of its post-Soviet neighbors.⁴⁵ He has also been a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences since 2008, which, according to Katharina Bluhm, "confers on him... a particular academic consecration."⁴⁶ Glazyev also played a central role in organizing separatist unrest in Ukrainian provinces in 2014, as well as initiating the annexation of Crimea that same year.⁴⁷ Leaked phone calls revealed Glazyev's (and Moscow's) furtive support for anti-government protests in Ukraine's Russian-speaking regions, which underlines his degree of political sway in the Kremlin.⁴⁸

According to Andreas Umland, the Izborsk Club's close proximity to the Russian government was also illustrated by the presence of Vladimir Medinsky, head of the Russian Ministry of Culture, at the Club's 2012 founding meeting.⁴⁹ Bishop Tikhon (Shevkunov), who is often known as Putin's personal confessor, is also a leading ideologist of the Club.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Laruelle, "The Izborsky Club."

⁴⁵ Bluhm, "Modernization, Geopolitics, and the New Russian Conservatives;" and Umland, "Alexander Dugin and Moscow's New Right Radical Intellectual Circles."

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Andreas Umland, "Post-Soviet Neo-Eurasianism, the Putin System, and the Contemporary European Extreme Right," *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 2, 2017.

⁴⁸ Andreas Umland, "Glazyev Tapes: What Moscow's Interference in Ukraine Means for the Minsk Agreement," Raamop Rusland, November 25, 2016, <https://www.raamoprusland.nl/dossiers/oukraine/359-glazyev-tapeswhat-moscow-s-interference-in-ukraine-means-for-theminsk-agreements>. The leaked phone call can be found at <https://youtu.be/0w78QuxBUe0>.

⁴⁹ Umland, "Alexander Dugin and Moscow's New Right Radical Intellectual Circles."

⁵⁰ Natasha Bluth, "Fringe Benefits: How a Russian Ultranationalist Think Tank is Laying the "Intellectual" Foundations for a Far-Right Movement," *World Policy Journal* 34, no. 4, (Winter 2017/2018); Maria Engström, "Contemporary Russian Messianism and New Russian Foreign Policy."

Dmitrii Rogozin, who served as Deputy Prime Minister for the defense industry from 2011–2018, is alleged to be an unofficial member of the Club.⁵¹ He currently leads the Rodina (motherland) party, which, according to Laruelle, operates as a "launch platform for some radical nationalist themes that the presidential administration does not want to address directly."⁵² Because political parties are strictly controlled in Russia, scholars argue that the reemergence of right-wing and xenophobic platforms are part of the Kremlin's plan to restructure public discourse.⁵³ Umland suggests that "increased incorporation of ultra-nationalists into mainstream political debates is designed to cause a comprehensive right-wing shift within Russia's ideological spectrum."⁵⁴ This shift allows Putin's nationalism to come across as moderate and centrist by comparison, which allows the ultranationalist groups to further their agenda from the sidelines.

Other scholars have found that the Izborsky Club directly influenced the 2013 version of the Foreign Policy Concept, just 10 months preceding the beginning of the war with Ukraine. The document, aforementioned above, outlines Russia as a *destabilizing* force in international affairs, and one that needs to "defending...in various international formats Russia's approach to human rights issues." It was under the auspices of "protecting the human rights" of ethnic Russians in Ukraine which Russia used to justify its February 2014 offensive into the country.⁵⁵ The war strongly coincided with Dugin's Eurasianist plan to "demolish the Ukrainian state."⁵⁶

Laruelle identifies that the Club presents itself as ready to engage in a struggle against western liberalism. The Club critically analyzes subsections of Russian society (i.e. the "bohemian," "office,"

⁵¹Bluhm, "Modernization, Geopolitics, and the New Russian Conservatives."

⁵²Marlene Laruelle, "Is Nationalism a Force for Change in Russia?" *Daedalus* 146, no. 2, Spring 2017.

⁵³Umland, "Alexander Dugin and Moscow's New Right Radical Intellectual Circles."

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. First ed. New York, NY: Tim Duggan Books, 2018.

⁵⁶Ibid, 141.

and creative classes) and their relationship with the state and national identity, while lamenting the loss of "traditional values" among them.

One jointly-written passage in a 2014 edition of the journal expounds the core of this thesis:

Society expects from the government the setting of high tasks facing the future and involving all strata and vocations, and an individual person, brought up by Russian culture, is involved in a common cause. The vacuum of such tasks, of coherent and developing strategies of creative (spatial and economic) development, predisposes to divergence of society according to property, ethnoreligious, regional and cultural-aesthetic characteristics, to self-closure in a subpopulation and tension between them. **As a result, society, increasingly alienating from power, which does not satisfy its basic value-semantic demand, is alienated from the national tradition.**⁵⁷

Here, the Club describes a sense of severance in Russian society that threatens to increase the social schism between citizens and their state. This schism is perceived as inherently hostile to the moral and structural fabric of Russian society.

The greater the extent to which the above-mentioned schisms attain in society, the more a nation is susceptible to assimilation of strangers, introduced meanings, cultural and everyday stereotypes. This vulnerability rises qualitatively in that phase of the post-industrial period, when communication technologies, firstly, become generally available, and secondly, they plunge the masses of the population into a parallel reality. (...) Meanwhile, in the real world, a *fundamental* overestimation of the paradigm of global development and the structure of the world order is emerging. **In these conditions, the rivalry of civilizations will give an**

⁵⁷ *Izborskii Klub: Russkie strategii* 6, vol. 18, 2014, 77 (author's translation).

advantage to those who are committed to leadership and concentration of will, to fulfill a mission. The creation of an independent pole of world influence is impossible without the high value-meaning unification of the nation.⁵⁸

In this passage, the Club begins weaving a connection between the power of communicative technologies and the idea of competing value systems and models of development in a multipolar world, not unlike that described by Foreign Minister Lavrov in "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," published the previous year.

Laruelle notes that the group stresses the need for Russia "to become competitive in terms of information and network warfare," warranting massive investment in advanced technologies, but fails to explain how the state could realize this ambition.⁵⁹ Indeed, in the aforementioned essay, the Club describes the primacy of western IT companies with civilizational terminology, and underlines how it represents a "moral ideal" worldwide.

The IT sphere as "the most creative sphere" has been granted a halo not only out of its being the driving force of the economy ("post-industrial world", "innovations", etc.), but also of the moral ideal. Millions of young people around the world sincerely believe that the mission of companies such as Google, Apple, etc. is not just about technical progress, but also the creation of a new, just world. In Russia, this trend is growing, overlapping also with "orientation toward Western civilization."⁶⁰

Alongside meditations on Russia's civilizational particularity, the Club calls for "a return to Orthodox Christian spirituality and the universality of traditional Russia."⁶¹ This unifying sense of

⁵⁸ Ibid, 77 (author's translation).

⁵⁹ Laruelle, "The Izborsky Club."

⁶⁰ *Izborskii Klub: Russkie strategii*, 71, (author's translation).

⁶¹ *Izborskii Klub: Russkie strategii*, 3, no. 11–12, 2013, 119.

spirituality or regard for traditional culture is a key element for both the Club and the political establishment, and it has manifested itself alongside the "civilizational approach" in Russian political discourse. During Putin's presidential campaign in 2012, his administration disseminated articles referring to a "cultural 'genome.'" In Russian society, he writes, this is the lynchpin that holds together Russia's "rich diversity of languages, traditions, ethnicities, and cultures." Putin himself writes that this "cultural code" has undergone serious trials in recent years, and it needs to be "nourished, strengthened, and protected," presumably, from maladaptive external and/or internal influences.⁶²

Altogether, elements of Aleksandr Dugin's Eurasianist doctrine and the Izborsky Club's political philosophy appear to have leaked into recent Russian political-military doctrine, namely in the Doctrines on Information Security (2016), the Military Doctrine (2014), and the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (2013), in which elements of "civilizational particularity" and the need to protect "traditional values" manifest themselves.

5. Challenging the "Church" of Western NGOs

Maria Engström highlights the defensive nature of the Foreign Policy Concept, "as a *response* to 'ideological aggression' of the West."⁶³ According to the text of the Concept, Russia views itself as a "unique restraining factor" in an increasingly multipolar world.⁶⁴ She notes that this updated version of the Concept has many similarities with another of Putin's pre-2012 election essays, "Russia and the Changing World":

⁶² Vladimir Putin, "Vladimir Putin. Rossiya: Natsional'nyi vopros," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, January 23, 2012, http://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html?insidedoc.

⁶³ Maria Engström, "Contemporary Russian Messianism and New Russian Foreign Policy."

⁶⁴ Ibid.

"...activities of "pseudo-NGOs" and other agencies that try to destabilize other countries with outside support are unacceptable. I'm referring to those cases where the activities of NGOs are not based on the interests (and resources) of local social groups but are funded and supported by outside forces."⁶⁵

Russia's 2016 Doctrine of Information Security also re-establishes Russia's aversion to the potential democratizing influence of western NGOs. It states that "[i]ntelligence services of certain States are increasingly using information and psychological tools with a view to destabilizing the internal, political, and social situation in various regions around the world."⁶⁶ The document goes on to note that "human rights organizations and other organizations" are involved in these activities and that ICTs are "extensively used towards this end."⁶⁷

As such, the Doctrine urges defensive measures to protect against the influence of these perceived threats to maintain the status quo. This builds off previous claims by Russian authorities that western intelligence services caused or at least influenced the numerous so-called color revolutions during the early 2000s in the former Soviet world. These revolutions brought the prospect of democratic regime change uncomfortably close to Russia's doorstep. Across Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, territories long considered to be part of Russia's historic sphere of influence, popular support for pro-western candidates, in conjunction with funding from pro-democracy NGOs, disposed traditional Soviet or authoritarian leadership.⁶⁸

Assistance provided by these NGOs during these three color revolutions included funding activists, support for public relations and training, and conducting exit polling during elections.⁶⁹ Due

⁶⁵ Vladimir Putin, "Russia and the Changing World," Global Research, September 22, 2015, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/vladimir-putin-russia-and-the-changing-world/5477500>.

⁶⁶ http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2563163

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ These NGOs include the Open Society Institute, Freedom House, USAID, and the National Democratic Institute.

⁶⁹ Mohammad Soltanifar, "US-Russian Rivalry in the Caucasus: Towards a New Cold War?" *Global Dialogue* 7, no. 3/4, Summer 2005, 8–13, cited in Katherine T. Hinkle, "Russia's Reactions to the Color Revolutions," Naval Postgraduate School Thesis, March 2017.

to the "soft" nature of this support, it is difficult to define the exact degree of western influence in these elections. Nonetheless, Moscow formulated a number of political countermeasures in response.

Following Ukraine's Orange Revolution, in which the pro-Kremlin candidate was replaced with EU-leaning Viktor Yushchenko, Moscow began acting to curtail the domestic activities of foreign NGOs, and even denounce them as foreign agents.⁷⁰ The scholar Alexander Cooley noted that during this time, Russian state television and radio channels introduced commentators and analysts to warn about the risk of U.S. democracy-promotion activity throughout the region. NGOs began to be registered and monitored by the Ministry of the Interior rather than that of Culture and Information, which indicated their new "securitized" status in the Russian state.⁷¹

Later, in 2011, the Kremlin issued an order that forced employees of western NGOs to register as "foreign agents" in Russia. And, in 2015, Russian lawmakers introduced a "patriotic stop list" of foreign organizations – including the National Endowment for Democracy, George Soros' Open Society Foundations, The MacArthur Foundation – which banned their outside funding and forced these organizations to disband operations in Russia.⁷² Indeed, Moscow regards U.S. support for democracy in Russia as subversive, and it blames American media not just for its anti-Russia bias, but for allegedly launching information warfare campaigns against it.⁷³

These political countermeasures represent a defensive crackdown against what the state perceives as destabilizing information threats. Restricting the influence of the "church" of proselytizing NGOs, which preach the value of accountable and transparent institutions, human rights, and the free flow of information may just be a rational political move against the perceived western influence in

⁷⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/may/13/russia.nickpatonwalsh>

⁷¹ Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, 109.

⁷² "Laws of Attrition: Crackdown on Russia's Civil Society after Putin's Return to the Presidency," Human Rights Watch, April 24, 2013; and Alec Luhn, "American NGO to Withdraw from Russia After Being Put On 'Patriotic Stop List,'" *Guardian*, July 22, 2015.

⁷³ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Threat Perception and Strategic Posture," *Russian Security Strategy under Putin: U.S. and Russian Perspectives*, November 2007.

post-Soviet color revolutions. But it may be more about Russia protecting its sovereign information sphere and expressing its civilizational identity on the battleground of values and development models, a la Lavrov and the Izborsky Club.

6. "Digital Patriotism" and the Domestic Culture War

Since roughly 2011, most major branches of Russian media found themselves under the control of the Putin administration, either directly or indirectly.⁷⁴ The ownership structures of television networks, leading news sites, and periodicals allow government influence on nearly every level of media consumption, with few exceptions. Meanwhile, the perilous climate for journalists severely complicates efforts to promote freedom of the press. Indeed, it is important to note that 82 journalists have been killed in Russia since 1992, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.⁷⁵

In modern Russia, which has been referred to as “a competitive autocracy” by the political scientist Daniel Treisman, Putin’s high approval ratings in polls are closely linked to public perceptions of economic performance.⁷⁶ Accordingly the state utilizes a tiered system of media production to produce a patriotic skew in media narratives and keep dissent to a minimum. On one level, according to digital media scholar and professor at the University of Leeds, Vlad Strukov, global media (television broadcasts, state-owned or –influenced internet channels and blogs, as well as newspapers and periodicals) are required to express and support geopolitical interests. On another, individuals' social media activity is used to “aggregate and redirect information flows.”⁷⁷ The result is a series of discussions and viewpoints in the media that revolve around varying degrees of patriotic and

⁷⁴ Meduza, "12 Newsrooms in 5 Years: How the Russian Authorities Decimated a News Industry," Meduza, May 18, 2016, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2016/05/18/12-newsrooms-in-5-years>.

⁷⁵ Committee to Protect Journalists, "Journalists Killed in Russia," 2018.

⁷⁶ Daniel Treisman, "Presidential Popularity in a Hybrid Regime: Russia Under Yelstin and Putin," *American Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 3 (2011): 590–609.

⁷⁷ Strukov, "Digital Conservatism," 201.

nationalistic debate. This framed debate creates the semblance of meaningful political discussion, but ends up developing and reinforcing “Russia” as a state brand and disseminating the image of Putin as a geopolitical hero.

Via the consolidation and control of media systems, Russia has been gaining ground in its culture war against its own citizenry to minimize dissent and manufacture consent for the current administration. Russia's 2000 version of its Doctrine of Information Security identifies the "depreciation of spiritual values, the propaganda of specimens of mass culture based on the cult of violence or on spiritual and moral values contrary to the values adopted in Russian society" as major threats to the country's information security, which may explain why the state has taken such means to control information flows.⁷⁸ The updated 2016 version of the doctrine lists "protection of the sovereignty of the Russian Federation in the information space" as a primary objective.⁷⁹ By steering political discourse in a nationalist/patriotic direction that praises the status quo, Russia may indeed be fulfilling this aspect of the doctrine.

Along this first tier of media production, Strukov identifies that multiple actors in Russia's global media system, employing various political beliefs, “compete for the recognition of their particular type of government-endorsed relationship to the state presented as patriotism.”⁸⁰ These political beliefs expressed by journalists and talk-show hosts in the media range from moderately patriotic to hardline nationalist.⁸¹ The degree of patriotism in global media can be moderate, whereby the country is depicted in media as an object of loyalty for its citizens, and citizens' degree of loyalty is subject to scrutiny. Or patriotism can be extreme, nationalistic, and advance the brand of “Russia” as a

⁷⁸ Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation (2000), https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Cybersecurity/Documents/National_Strategies_Repository/Russia_2000.pdf.

⁷⁹ *Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoy Federatsii ob utverzhdenii doktriny informatsionnoy bezopasnosti Rossiiskoy Federatsii* [Order from the President of the Russian Federation on the statement of the doctrine of information security in the Russian Federation], *Prezident Rossii*, May 12, 2016, 12. (Author's translation).

⁸⁰ Strukov, “Digital Conservatism,” 193.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

bastion of conservative values, free from the moral decay and corruption of the West.⁸² Individual reporters almost never contest the views and positions of the authorities and tend to consider themselves as “missionaries of ideas rather than neutral observers.”⁸³

“Stop lists” of unmentionable topics and individuals banned from appearing on television further narrow the ideological spectrum that viewers are exposed to. Because debate is constrained to this narrow spectrum, the framework of state-sanctioned media competition intends to continue to manufacture consent for the current administration, which supports Russia's information war against its own citizenry.

7. Projecting the "Russian Perspective"

After RT's official launch in 2005, 25-year-old Margarita Simonyan was hired as editor-in-chief with a responsibility to recruit western journalists. Due to the pro-government angle of her reporting, particularly her reporting on the war with Georgia in 2008, Simonyan gradually earned favor with Russia's ruling elite. Strukov has produced a vast analysis of Simonyan's tweets, LiveJournal posts (still a very popular platform in Russia), and RT coverage to identify a trend he calls digital conservatism, characterized by fervent patriotism and overt skepticism of western representations of events.⁸⁴ Strukov deduces that media actors like Simonyan, rather than simply report events, “co-opt, reappropriate, and reconfigure existing media flows” to defend geopolitical interests in this second tier of media proliferation.⁸⁵

⁸² Ibid, 191.

⁸³ Hedwig de Smaele, “Mass Media and the Information Climate in Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 59, no. 8, December 2007, 1299–1313, 1304.

⁸⁴ Strukov, “Digital Conservatism,” 197–99.

⁸⁵ Strukov, “Digital Conservatism,” 201.

Strukov argues that the purpose of RT is not to provide clarifying information on events, but to reinforce claims of a western conspiracy against the Russian Federation. RT functions less as a news agency and more as an information aggregator, cultivating content that portrays “the state brand ‘Russia’ as an authority of fairness in the ‘unfair’ western world.”⁸⁷ Dmitry Kiselev, a Russian journalist, was appointed by President Vladimir Putin to head the government-owned international news network Rossiya Segodnya in 2013. At a forum of media experts, he explained that neutrality has disappeared from journalism. Indeed, he says, “today it is much more expensive to kill an enemy soldier than during World War II, World War I, or in the Middle Ages.” While, he says, the business of “persuasion” has become costlier, “if you can persuade a person, then you don’t need to kill him.”⁸⁸

Looking abroad, the Russian state utilizes RT, which broadcasts in English, French, Arabic, German, and Spanish, to compete with international channels. Via RT, the Russian state provides a platform to politically-marginalized (or compromised) actors such as Julian Assange, former CNN and MSNBC commentators Larry King and Ed Schultz, as well as Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Chris Hedges – all of whom have expressed frustration with the American mainstream media. King himself noted the degree of freedom he has over his two RT shows: “to my knowledge, they’ve never edited a show. It would be bad if they tried to edit out things— I wouldn’t put up with it.”⁸⁹ And when asked whether Russia’s funding of the channel would slant his coverage, Ed Schultz replied, “nobody’s going to tell Ed Schultz what to say or how to say it or what stories to pick.”⁹⁰

While RT America does bear a nationalistic slant, describing RT America cannot be reduced to saying it is pure propaganda; its broadcasting is far more sophisticated than simple flag-waving.

⁸⁷ Strukov, “Digital Conservatism,” 199.

⁸⁸ Neil McFarquar, “A Powerful Russian Weapon”; and Dmitry Kiselev, “Ya nye pol’zuyus’ slovom ‘propaganda,’” Youtube, *Rossia 24*, June 7, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQErhwknhp4>.

⁸⁹ Catherine Taibi, “Larry King Won’t Be Parting Ways with RT,” Huffington Post, March 7, 2014.

⁹⁰ Dylan Byers and Brian Stelter, “Former MSNBC Host Ed Schultz Lands at Russia Today’s American Channel,” CNN, January 14, 2016.

Nonetheless, two trends in RT America's reporting are clear: disruptionist and revisionist. The coverage of disasters in the West, such as forest fires and shooting incidents, are exceptionally disproportionate; the network seems to capitalize on any opportunity to reveal chaos in democracies and to portray the U.S. and Europe as flawed countries with ineffective political systems. Second, their coverage of Russian politics, especially concerning Ukraine, is heavy-handed and overtly biased.⁹¹

By peppering their repertoire with established western journalists and commentators, who in turn invite reputable voices onto their shows, RT America is a sleek, postmodern amalgamation of the best and worst of journalism, competing with the likes of Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN. It not only represents Russia's way of challenging mainstream media in America and abroad, it is viewed and wielded by the administration as a tool for soft power and international influence. Accordingly, one of the general provisions codified in Russia's "Foreign Policy Concept" (2016) is to "bolster the standing of Russian mass media and communication tools in the global information space and convey Russia's perspective on international processes to a wider international community."⁹²

Unlike in China, Russia's internet community of roughly 108 million users can access nearly any site it desires.⁹³ As such, instead of blocking content, the Russian government seeks an Internet flooded with conflicting opinions to frustrate the search for verifiable information. Indeed, journalists have discovered that battalions of professional Internet trolls are employed by the Russian government's Internet Research Agency to inundate the comments sections of political articles with assertions of conspiracy theories and criticism of western policies.⁹⁴ The first investigative journalist to highlight the activities of the Internet Research Agency in 2015, Adrian Chen, notes that,

⁹¹ Lincoln Mitchell, "How Kremlin TV Covers America and Why It Matters," *Observer*, February 3, 2015.

⁹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Russia), *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, November 30, 2016.

⁹³ Freedom House: Russia, 2016; and CIA World Factbook: Russia, February 22, 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rs.html>.

⁹⁴ Adrian Chen, "The Agency," *New Yorker*, June 2, 2015.

once the “trolls” have found a suitable story, they split into groups of three “where one plays the villain, criticizing the authorities, while the other two argue with him and support the government.”⁹⁵ This mission is highly similar to RT’s global media campaign to undermine trust in traditional media and institutions, distort political discussion, and ultimately support the state in its political-informational war against the West. Whereas today’s citizens visit the Internet to find answers, the Russian state wants to convince users that online content is unreliable, biased, and dangerous – and give up on any hope of finding truth.⁹⁶

8. "Big Data" Lockdown and Information Sovereignty

The main utility of the internet is its ability to connect users across borders, send and receive data instantly, and provide universal connectivity, all of which have led to what scholars call the fourth industrial revolution. Data localization challenges this notion of universal connectivity, and intends to Balkanize and partition the world into separate intranets, which are compliant with the laws of national governments. Data nationalism represents a broad-sweeping trend in which governments, eager to increase control over the World Wide Web, are in fact tearing it apart.

These governments range from more liberal ones, such as Australia and South Korea to more authoritarian ones, such as Russia and China, and countries’ data localization policies can be broader or narrower in their scope.⁹⁷ In Australia, for example, data localization will apply to patient health records to prevent their overseas transfer.⁹⁸ Kazakhstan, on the other hand, is requiring all domestic

⁹⁵ Chen, “The Agency,”; and Levi Winchester, “Vladimir Putin Revealed to Employ ‘Trolls’ to Flood Websites with Pro-Russian Propaganda,” *Express*, March 28, 2015.

⁹⁶ Katherine Ognyanova, “Careful What You Say: Media Control in Putin’s Russia – Implications for Online Content,” *International Journal of E-Politics* 1, no. 2, 1-15.

⁹⁷ Anupam Chander and Uyen P. Le, “Data Nationalism,” *Emory Law Journal* 64, 2015.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

websites that use the ".kz" domain to store users' data within the confines of the country.⁹⁹ While some countries may have their citizens' privacy and cybersecurity in mind when they enact these laws, there is debate in the academic community as to whether data localization actually improves data security. A paper released as part of a joint U.S.-EU project titled "Transatlantic Dialogues on Security and Freedom in the Digital Age" determined that data privacy and security "depend primarily not on where data is physically stored or sent, but on *how* it is stored and transmitted."¹⁰⁰ Given how much information internet users share with internet companies on a daily basis, the scholar and Google Policy Fellow Olga Khrustaleva argues that "the location of the primary database doesn't make much of a difference."¹⁰¹ She posits that governments should explore alternatives to data localization to improve information security, such as developing new and durable encryption methods. More work needs to be done, Chander and Le note, in order to ensure "data protection without data protectionism."¹⁰²

Data localization threatens the future of international commerce, development, communications systems, and, according to legal scholars, even the "ongoing struggle between democracy and authoritarianism."¹⁰³

The global shift toward data localization was largely initiated by evidence of the United States' global surveillance operations as disclosed by whistleblower-turned-activist Edward Snowden in 2013.¹⁰⁴ While governments had already begun expressing interest in diminishing American

⁹⁹ Olga Khrustaleva, "From National Sovereignty to Digital Sovereignty. Russia's Data Localization Law and Its Implications," Working Paper, June 2016.

¹⁰⁰ Tim Maurer, Robert Morgus, Isabel Skierka, Mirko Hohmann, "Technological Sovereignty: Missing the Point?" Transatlantic Dialogues on Security and Freedom in the Digital Age, November 2014, http://www.digitaldebates.org/fileadmin/media/cyber/Maurer-et-al_2014_Tech-Sovereignty-Europe.pdf.

¹⁰¹ Olga Khrustaleva, "From National Sovereignty to Digital Sovereignty."

¹⁰² Chander and Le, "Data Nationalism."

¹⁰³ Chander and Le, "Data Nationalism," 680.

¹⁰⁴ Anupam Chander and Uyen P. Le, "Breaking the Web: Data Localization vs. the Global Internet," *Emory Law Journal*, UC Davis Legal Studies Research Paper no. 378, March 13, 2014.

predominance in the global internet governance regime and seeking alternatives, the Snowden disclosures served as an impetus to project state sovereignty over cyberspace in order to prevent digital spying, meddling, and surveillance measures. The argument that the BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) have cited is that information security and privacy is ultimately jeopardized if the data are physically based in foreign countries, on foreign servers.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, since the disclosures, the BRICS nations announced that they intend to construct a system of undersea cables, separated from other countries, in order to circumvent American eavesdropping and spying.¹⁰⁶

Sergei Zheleznyak, a Russian MP and member of the dominant United Russia party, utilized the outrage in response to the Snowden disclosures to steer the conversation on data security toward nationalization and localization. "We must ensure the digital sovereignty of our country," he proclaimed on the Duma floor in May of 2013. "Today, information is more important than ever...so we must seriously protect both the information of our citizens and the information of our country."¹⁰⁷ On the basis that tens of millions of Russians were being "cynically used" to have their data gathered and stored, Zheleznyak called for the creation of a national server infrastructure. These goals were realized when the Russian Duma passed Federal Law no. 242-FZ on July 21st the following year, which went into effect on September 1st, 2015.¹⁰⁸ Perhaps the most stringent of internet censorship and control legislation from 2013-2015, this piece of legislation requires all domestic and foreign companies operating in Russia to accumulate, store, and process personal information of Russian

¹⁰⁵ Anupam Chander and Uyen P. Le, "Data Nationalism," *Emory Law Journal* 64, 2015: 680.

¹⁰⁶ Robin Emmott, "Brazil, Europe Plan Undersea Cable to Skirt U.S. Spying," Reuters, February 24, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-brazil/brazil-europe-plan-undersea-cable-to-skirt-u-s-spying-idUSBREA1N0PL20140224>; and Stacia Lee, "International Reactions to U.S. Cybersecurity Policy: The BRICS Undersea Cable," Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, International Policy Institute, January 8, 2016, <https://jsis.washington.edu/news/reactions-u-s-cybersecurity-policy-bric-undersea-cable/>.

¹⁰⁷ "Sergei Zheleznyak (ER): My dolzhny obespechit' "tsifrovoy suverenitet" nashei strany," *Ekonomika I zhizn'*, June 16, 2013, <https://www.eg-online.ru/news/214292/>.

¹⁰⁸ "Processing and Storage of Personal Data in the Russian Federation. Changes since September 1, 2015," Ministry of Telecom and Mass Communications of the Russian Federation, February 12, 2016.

citizens on servers located within Russia's borders, or risk harsh penalties.¹⁰⁹ The only exceptions are for data that is processed or collected:

- in accordance with Russian laws or international treaties;
- necessary to the administration of judiciary or law enforcement proceedings
- necessary to the execution of duties performed by the Russian state or related municipal bodies;
- used explicitly or for journalistic, media, scientific, literary or creative purposes.¹¹⁰

Many international companies operating in Russia have been slow to relocate their data onto Russian servers due to the legal interplay between data localization legislation and other security laws. In 2016, the state Duma approved a revision of some of the most draconian anti-terrorist legislation known as "Yarovaya's laws," named after State Duma deputy Irina Yarovaya. This legislation targets "organizers of information distribution on the Internet," forcing any online service provider, social media platform, website, or email client to help the Federal Security Service (FSB) to decrypt any user data it requests, with hefty fees for non-cooperation.¹¹¹ Yarovaya's laws enforce harsher penalties for dissenting activity or domestic criticism, which is often described as "terrorism" in the Russian legal codex.¹¹² Users who incite or express approval of terrorism, as the state chooses to interpret it, have been subject to lengthy prison sentences, and this legislation increases the maximum sentence to seven years.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹Sarkis Darbinyan and Sergei Hovyanov, "WILMAP: Russia," Center for Internet and Society, Stanford Law School. <http://cyberlaw.stanford.edu/page/wilmap-russia>

¹¹⁰ Linklaters, "Technology, Media and Telecommunications News: Russia – New Data Localisation Law: Current State of Play," December 8, 2014, http://www.linklaters.com/pdfs/mkt/london/December_2014_NewsletterPDF.pdf.

¹¹¹ Meduza, "Russia's State Duma Just Approved Some of the Most Repressive Laws in Post-Soviet History," June 24, 2016, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2016/06/24/russia-s-state-duma-just-approved-some-of-the-most-repressive-laws-in-post-soviet-history>.

¹¹² Aleksandr Kuznetsov and Vasili Kuznetsov, "The Legal Definition of Terrorism in the United States and Russia," *World Applied Sciences Journal* 28, 1: 130–34, 2013.

¹¹³ Meduza, "Russia's State Duma;" and "Freedom on the Net 2017: Russia Country Profile," Freedom House, 2017.

What complicates Russia's relationship with international companies and social networking platforms such as Apple, Google, and Facebook is that when these organizations comply with data localization, they are ultimately supporting the FSB. When data are transferred onto Russian servers, it allows the FSB to access users' audio, text, and video data without a court order or due process of law.¹¹⁴ Ultimately, in order to stifle dissent, Russia's data localization laws require international ICT platforms to play by the rules of the FSB.

Compliance with data localization legislation is monitored and enforced by Russia's Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media or by the acronym *Roskomnadzor*. The agency has the authority to issue warnings to companies or websites it deems in violation of Russia's federal laws. If a company receives two warnings within the span of a year, Roskomnadzor is able to request a court order to shut down the offending media outlet outright.¹¹⁵ Recently, activists released a "registry of banned sites," exceeding 100,000 domains, blocked mainly to limit the proliferation of information related to drug abuse, methods detailing drug production, suicide methods, and child pornography.¹¹⁶

But the first authoritarian pushback against an international website for failure to comply with data localization legislation occurred in 2016, when LinkedIn, the popular and international social media platform, was banned from Russian cyberspace. Russian authorities additionally forced app store platforms to remove LinkedIn's mobile applications. Many other international websites and ICT platforms such as eBay, Apple, and Facebook have quietly complied with the law, while the messaging app Viber, seemingly unconcerned with the inevitable PR hit, was the only company to offer an

¹¹⁴ "Freedom on the Net 2017: Russia Country Profile."

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ "Reester zapreshchonnikh saitov" [Registry of banned sites], <http://reestr.rublacklist.net>; and Paul Goble, "FSB Increasingly Involved in Misuse of 'Anti-extremism' Laws, SOVA says," Interpreter Magazine, March 29, 2015.

official press release on the matter.¹¹⁷ And while the Russian judiciary appears to be determined to act harshly in response to data localization noncompliance, Roskomnadzor seems to be selectively patient with the sites it leaves alone. Facebook was left unvetted until after it released a white paper detailing the extent of Russian advertisements purchased with the intent to influence American politics and the last presidential election.¹¹⁸ That same month, Roskomnadzor announced that Facebook would have to comply with data localization mandates or risk being blocked outright in Russia.¹¹⁹ The relatively short gap in time (20 days) between these events may suggest that the Russian government, via Roskomnadzor, intended to punish Facebook with impunity for its act of compliance with U.S. authorities. This is also evidence that Russia is using its data localization laws as part of a broader security strategy. The Russian media reported that Facebook has indeed agreed to comply with these mandates, and that Roskomnadzor is expected to meet with Facebook representatives to verify progress toward compliance. While it is not likely that Russia will actually blacklist the platform, it seems that Facebook takes these threats seriously, and has few qualms about spending hundreds of millions of dollars to ensure it maintains its Russian userbase of approximately 23 million.¹²⁰

Russia's 2016 revision of its information security doctrine is formulated to suggest that there exists an increasing danger from rival states in Russia's information space, noting the threat of their "use of technological advantage for domination in the information sphere."¹²¹ Dryblak posits that the doctrine outlines these threats in such a way to suggest that Russia is lagging behind the west in terms

¹¹⁷ "Viber Moved Its Servers to Russia," Vladimir Zykov, *Izvestiya*, October 19, 2015; and Andrei Soldatov, "All-Encompassing Paranoia: How the Attitude Toward Security Has Changed in Russia," *Russian Social Science Review* 2, vol. 58, January 2, 2017..

¹¹⁸ Alex Stamos, "An Update on Information Operations on Facebook," Facebook Newsroom, September 6, 2017.

¹¹⁹ "Russia Tells Facebook to Localize User Data or Be Blocked," Reuters, September 26, 2017; and Steven T. Dennis, Sarah Frier, and Gerrit De Vynck, "Tech Companies Set to Tell Congress about Russian Election Meddling," Bloomberg, October 31, 2017.

¹²⁰ Statista, "Forecast of Facebook User Numbers in Russia from 2015 to 2022 (in Million Users), 2018, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/568829/forecast-of-facebook-user-numbers-in-the-russia/>.

¹²¹ Доктрина информационной безопасности Российской Федерации, 2016.

of information technology infrastructure, necessitating a structural revamp for Russia's IT industry, which data localization will also require.¹²² While the doctrine itself was published after data localization legislation was enacted, the defensive nature of the doctrine coincides with Russia's goals to store its users' data on domestic servers in order to "neutralize the efforts to weaken the traditional spiritual and moral values" of the Russian state.¹²³ This is consistent with an aforementioned Izborsky publication from 2012, which identifies western data giants as influencing the Russian population by instilling an "orientation toward Western civilization."¹²⁴

While the other BRICS nations have considered data localization measures to protect information security, they have withdrawn these laws to avoid negatively impacting their economies.¹²⁵ A 2015 report by the European Centre for International Political Economy (ECIPE) estimated that data localization laws in Russia would lead to a -0.27% drop in GDP, accounting for approximately \$5.7 billion in USD.¹²⁶ Gains in Russia's IT sector from domestic data processing companies replacing foreign ones would still be offset by these losses, according to the report.¹²⁷

Artem Kozlyuk, head of Roskomsvoboda, a digital rights advocacy group, agrees, suggesting that the laws "do not stimulate business development," by simply obliging companies to comply with the increasing "repressive and regressive" legislation.¹²⁸ Others have suggested the opposite. Natalya Gulyaeva, a Moscow-based lawyer, posits that the new IT market opportunities granted by the legislation outweigh the inconveniences.

¹²² Dryblak, "The Role and Significance of Russian Doctrinal Documents."

¹²³ Доктрина информационной безопасности Российской Федерации, 2016.

¹²⁴ *Izborskii Klub: Russkie strategii*, 71,

¹²⁵ Matthias Bauer, Lee-Makiyama Hosuk, Erik Van der Marel, Bert Vershelde, "Data Localisation in Russia: A Self-imposed Sanction," ECIPE Policy Brief no. 6, 2015.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Olga Khrustaleva, "From National Sovereignty to Digital Sovereignty."

Altogether, these economic realities do not seem to concern the Eurasianist and Izborsky ideologues. Their calls for Eurasian economic autarky and Russian sovereignty, detached from international organizations and norms, are unlikely to spur new foreign investment in Russia, which its economy desperately needs.

Ultimately, Zheleznyak's call for information sovereignty in Russia was completely realized by the Duma. Citing the rationale of user privacy, national security, and protection from foreign surveillance, the Duma passed data localization laws in order to further minimize dissent, eliminate any semblance of civil liberties online, and stage an authoritarian pushback against the mass penetration of Western social media and tech companies into Russia.

9. *Conclusion and Speculation*

Domestically, Russia wants to build a great society, which is multiethnic and multiconfessional, yet unified by common traditional values and adherence to official state dogma. The Izborsky Club wants Russian citizens to respect Russia's unique, cultural legacy, embrace its national myth, and submit to a thousand-year-old civilizational project. One major concern with this ideology is that it risks alienating everyone that does not subscribe to it. The Club needs to consider the private/public social divide; young, educated, and mobile Russians may be nearly as likely to identify with a global cause as with a local one.¹²⁹ This is likely to thwart most efforts by the state to prevent international cultural elements and value systems from taking root in the intellectual development of young Russians today. Especially if most of the internet remains virtually open, and Russians continue to have affordable home and mobile access to it, it will be a challenge for Russian insistence on digital sovereignty to maintain ideological and intellectual distance from the rest of Europe. Indeed, Samuel

¹²⁹ Samuel A. Greene, "Russia: Society, Politics and the Search for Community," *Eurozine*, December 2, 2011.

Greene, Director of the Russia Institute at King's College, notes that "while remaining physically present in Russia...Russians may take themselves socially, politically, and intellectually out of the Russian space."¹³⁰ True, while there is some national consent for patriotic thought and approval of the Putinist system, there is undoubtedly "civilizational diversity" within Russia itself.

In 2009, Mikhail Gorbachev ruminated on the future of Russia. Lamenting the "wild" 1990s, during which the oligarchs rapidly consolidated wealth and power, Gorbachev decried that: "

The current model does not need adjusting; it needs replacing. I have no ready-made prescriptions. But I am convinced that a new model will emerge, one that will emphasize public needs and public goods, such as a cleaner environment, well-functioning infrastructure and public transportation, sound education and health systems and affordable housing.¹³¹

His words ring even truer today. But a new model for Russia has indeed emerged.

Timothy Snyder describes a deep tension between the "politics of inevitability" and the "politics of eternity." The latter model draws a nation into a perpetual cycle of victimhood that "endlessly returns the same threats from the past."¹³² What the neo-Eurasianists and the Izborsk Club want is a continual struggle against a manufactured enemy and its influence; in this case, it is the west and its threatening, omnipresent threat of veering Russia off its historical and patriotic mission. By producing a unifying narrative that both rehabilitates Soviet great-power nostalgia and asserts Tsarist and Orthodox supremacy, the Izborsky Club and the neo-Eurasianists are steering the Russian government in a direction that serves their interests. It seems highly unlikely, at this rate, that Russia will ever transition to a "normal" European state, as many at home and abroad hoped following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹³¹ Mikhail Gorbachev, "Mikhail Gorbachev – Time for a Global Perestroika," *Washington Post*, June 7, 2009.

¹³² Timothy Snyder, "Vladimir Putin's Politics of Eternity," *Guardian*, March 16, 2008.

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