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AN IDEOLOGICAL TOOL OF THE KREMLIN

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KEY POINTS

1. The conservative ideology which has predominated in official discourse in Russia since 2011 has become the ideological foundation of the Kremlin's new political strategy that may be described as 'the conservative project.' Its main objective is to stabilise the regime, which felt challenged by the demands for liberalisation coming from the new middle class and part of the business and administrative elite. These demands, which are incompatible with Putin's political regime, have been rejected by the Kremlin, and their supporters have been subjected to repression. The ruling establishment has thus demonstrated that it expressly rules out any attempt to carry out a modernisation based on Western models. The Kremlin has indicated the existence of a fundamental discrepancy between Russia and contemporary Western civilisation, in order to create an ideological counterweight to liberalism and to rule out the transplantation of Western political models into Russia. The Kremlin has also used this argument to justify Russian great power aspirations, implying the right to shape the world order, to legitimise its confrontation with the 'degenerate' West, and to facilitate its search for allies.

2. Apart from the rhetoric, the Kremlin's 'conservative project' includes a number of political and legislative measures aimed at strengthening the president's position, subordinating business and administrative elites, and at mobilising public support. An important element of this 'project' is the so-called 'nationalisation of the elite', which entails disciplining members of the state administration and business and increasing their economic burdens. In foreign policy, the project envisages the reintegration of the post-Soviet space under the aegis of Moscow, as evidenced by the annexation of Crimea and the attempt to establish a pro-Russian quasi-state of 'Novorossiya' on the territory of Ukraine.

3. The Kremlin is approaching this conservative ideology purely instrumentally, using it to create an ideological counterweight

to its opponents who call for liberal reform of the current system of government. Many of the laws enacted under the banner of 'conservatism' are not intended to create a social order consistent with conservative assumptions; in fact, the Kremlin has not formulated a positive vision for an ultimate social model based on these values. The purpose of these laws is to strike at the government's opponents. Moreover, the actual conduct of the members of the ruling camp contradicts the values they profess, considering their extreme materialism and ostentatious consumerism and their symbiotic economic ties with the West.

4. For the time being, the implementation of the 'conservative project' has brought the authorities some *ad hoc* benefits, neutralising the public's discontent with the Kremlin's policy and redirecting its frustration against the West. But in the longer term, the 'project's effectiveness as a tool for social mobilisation behind the government will be limited. The so-called 'nationalisation of the elite' may prove especially counterproductive because it amplifies their discontent and anxiety, which over time will contribute to the destabilisation of the regime. On the international stage, the effectiveness of the 'conservative project' is limited in the short term, because it antagonises the Western political establishment and mobilises it to resist Russia's aggressive policy. However it may prove more effective in the long run, if the European political scene is significantly reshuffled; a harbinger of this is the ongoing rise in support for populist and Eurosceptic parties in national elections and the European Parliament.

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of his third presidential terms, Vladimir Putin openly declared that he saw 'conservative values' as an ideological signpost for his policies. The Kremlin presented its own interpretation of Russian political traditions and social model as representing 'conservative values'. According to this line of reasoning, the Russian political tradition requires that the state authority be strong, centralised and hierarchic, and vested in a charismatic leader whose rule bears a special, quasi-sacred character, despite the formal maintenance of democratic (electoral) mechanisms of legitimacy. In the Kremlin's interpretation, the Russian social model consists of the traditional family pattern (especially large families), a passive role for society in the political processes, and the presence of organised religion in the public life (with particular emphasis on the role of the Russian Orthodox Church) as a source of moral principles.

However, an analysis of the Kremlin's policy leads to the conclusion that it is treating this conservative ideology in a purely instrumental manner. The resort to conservatism is aimed solely at enhancing the legitimacy of the existing model of power by defining it as being 'traditional' for Russia. While it is the Kremlin's genuine intention to maintain a strong, centralised state power, the conservative social and moral rhetoric is in fact being used as just another 'political technology', i.e. a tool for manipulating public opinion, both domestically and abroad. Using this ideology does not mean that the current ruling camp really adheres to conservative values, or that it has a long-term programme to implement them. We are in fact dealing with another kind of 'Potemkin village', the aim of which is to divert public attention from Russia's real socio-political and economic problems, and to provide the authorities with arguments to implement repressive internal policies and an anti-Western foreign policy.

I. THE ROOTS OF THE KREMLIN'S 'CONSERVATISM'

Although conservative ideology has predominated in the Kremlin's rhetoric for several years, it has not been yet presented as a formal and comprehensive concept. Its contents can be reconstructed only on the basis of Vladimir Putin's policy statements. References to conservative ideology appeared in Putin's speeches and texts during his campaign before the 2012 presidential elections. Therein he emphasised the importance of 'traditional values,' which according to him include: a strong state power, political stability, a hierarchical social order, patriotism and a traditional family model. This has spurred Kremlin experts and officials to declare themselves supporters of the conservative line, and to develop conservative themes in their publications and speeches[1]. As a result, conservatism has come to dominate the ruling camp's ideological discourse, and begun to shape the official vision of Russia's domestic governance and international order.

The conservative threads emerged for the first time in January 2012, in Putin's pre-election article 'Russia is concentrating[2]. In this article, Putin highlights the need to maintain political stability, and argues that radical changes are detrimental to the successful development of countries and societies. He also emphasises

[1] In May 2014 the ISEPI Foundation, headed by Dmitriy Badovskiy, a former employee of the Presidential Administration, organised the 'Berdiayev Readings', a conference on conservative ideas (to be held regularly); and in June 2014 the foundation started issuing a serial almanac called 'Conservative Notebooks' (http://www.isepr.ru/almanah), which includes articles by Natalia Narochnitskaya, Sergei Glazyev, Dmitriy Kisielov, Sergei Markov and others. In 2014 a training programme dedicated to the 'conservative idea' was organised for the staff of the Presidential Administration and the inner core of the All-Russian National Front; and Vyacheslav Nikonov, one of the Kremlin's ideologues and the head of the *Russkiy Mir* foundation, led a seminar for the deputies of the State Duma on 'Russian conservatism. The ideology of conservatism and conservative politics'.

[2] http://putin2012.ru/#article-1

that respect for a strong state is encoded in Russian culture, and that fidelity to traditional values and religions is a prerequisite for the consolidation of society.

Conservative themes appeared clearly and unambiguously in Putin's addresses to parliament in 2012 and 2013, as well as in his speech at a meeting of the Valdai Club in 2013. The main theme of his December 2012 address was the need to return to 'traditional values' – the President declared that at the beginning of the twenty-first century Russia had faced a "crisis of values", and that Russian society lacked "spiritual ties" (*духовные скрепы*)[3].

Putin presented himself explicitly as a conservative for the first time in his 2013 address to parliament. Citing the philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, he stated that "the point of conservatism is not that it prevents movement forward and upward, but that it prevents movement backward and downward, into chaotic darkness and a return to a primitive state"[4]. Putin stressed that Russia has assumed the position of a defender of traditional values which for thousands of years have formed the spiritual and moral underpinnings of civilisations and nations: the traditional family, human life, religious and spiritual life, the values of humanism and global diversity. According to Putin, these values have been rejected by the West, which he accused of not just revising moral standards and blurring national and cultural identities, but even of an equating of good with evil. Such practices, Putin argued, undermine the democratic nature of the Western countries because they are imposed against the will of the majority of their peoples. Moreover, in his opinion, the Western elites are trying to impose these liberal values on both Western and non-Western societies. In his opinion, such "attempts to impose a supposedly progressive

[3] Speech by the President to the Federal Assembly, 12 December 2012; http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/4739

[4] Speech by the President to the Federal Assembly, 12 December 2013; http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6402

model of development will lead to regression, barbarism and bloodshed." Putin stressed that Russia is not alone in defending traditional values: "We know that the number of people who support us around the world is growing."

Putin enlarged on themes of national identity and Christian values in a speech to the Valdai Club forum in 2013. He argued that in the modern world, success depends not only on military capabilities, but primarily on the intellectual, spiritual and moral accomplishments of the nation. Putin declared that Russia's mission is to defend the values derived from Christianity and other world religions, and from the moral standards which have been developed over millennia, which are indispensable for the preservation of human dignity. He called for the moral, intellectual and physical development of the human being to be recognised as the chief aim of the Russian government's philosophy. Putin highlighted patriotism, civic responsibility, solidarity, and identification with Russian national interests as defined by the Kremlin as the foundations for the formation of civic identity among Russians. He described Russia as a state-civilisation, the core of which is the ethnic Russian nation, and whose bonds are the Russian language and culture, the Orthodox religion and the other traditional religions of Russia (Islam, Judaism, Buddhism).

At the same time, Putin delivered a sharp criticism of Western civilisation, which is

> "actually rejecting its roots. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan. And people are aggressively trying to export this model all over the world. Without the values embedded in Christianity and other world religions, without the standards of morality that have taken shape over millennia,

people will inevitably lose their human dignity. We consider it natural and right to defend these values"[5].

Putin also rejected what he described as 'the so-called tolerance, neutered and barren', being enforced by the West not only upon Russia but upon the whole world. In his opinion such actions, together with attempts to resuscitate the unipolar model of the world, will reduce sovereign states to the role of vassals.

[5] Speech by President Putin at a meeting of the Valdai Club, 19 September 2013, http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6007

II. THE GENESIS OF THE KREMLIN'S 'CONSERVATIVE PROJECT'

Conservative themes are not entirely new in the Kremlin's ideological arsenal. They were first expressed when Putin came to power at the turn of 2000; and then after 2003, in response to the wave of 'colour revolutions' in the post-Soviet area. At that time, however, they did not dominate the Kremlin's ideological message, but rather coexisted alongside other ideological currents. It was only after Putin's return to the presidency in May 2012 that the references to conservative, traditional values came to dominate the Kremlin's official narrative, and became the main ideological foundation of government policy.

When deciding on the use of conservatism for political purposes, Putin invoked a radical version of the concept which had previously existed on the margins of Russian political and intellectual life. This version was extremely anti-Western and anti-liberal, and called for the revival of the empire. These ideas have been developed and promoted since the early 1990s by writers and journalists like Aleksandr Dugin, Aleksandr Prokhanov, Mikhail Leontyev, Nikolai Starikov, Natalia Narochnitskaya, and also by the Russian Orthodox Archimandrite Tikhon (lay name Georgy Shevkunov), who is believed to be Putin's personal confessor. The Kremlin began to attract and consolidate these hitherto dispersed and fragmented conservative circles, thus granting them greater political weight. As a result, the nationalist-conservative discourse – which until now had been peripheral in public debate in Russia – became dominant.

The Kremlin chose to use conservative ideology in reaction to the changing socio-political situation in Russia. In the last decade, as a result of economic growth and the spread of information technologies (especially the Internet), Russian society has developed an urban middle class, which is characterised not only by higher living standards, but also by a political culture different from that

of the post-Soviet period. In this group, demands have arisen for systemic reforms, including economic liberalisation and political pluralism, as well as the reduction of state interference in social life and space for grassroots civic initiatives. Putin's return to the Kremlin shattered these groups' hopes of fulfilling their aspirations. This resulted in a build-up of discontent within this class, which took the form of street protests and a number of grassroots initiatives that represented mechanisms for holding the government accountable to the public (including the independent observation of elections). In response, the ruling camp used force to suppress the protests, growing civic aspirations and activities. This meant that it has definitely abandoned any attempts to implement modernisation based on the Western model.

Another reason why Putin raised the banner of conservatism was his belief that the susceptibility of part of the population to liberal ideas stems from an ideological void which arose in the aftermath of the discrediting and collapse of communism. Therefore, the authorities believed it necessary to present society with an attractive ideological alternative that could fill this void, and thus prevent the spread of liberal attitudes and beliefs. This offer was aimed primarily at Putin's traditional social base – the poor inhabitants of the provinces, employed in the public sector, industry and agriculture.

III. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE KREMLIN'S 'CONSERVATISM'

A characteristic feature of the Kremlin's 'conservatism' is the predominance of negative over positive assumptions. In this ideology, the phenomena and values that Russia should be tackling are more distinctly and sharply defined, while its positive agenda remains vague and inchoate. This ideology is primarily opposed to the political, social and cultural models of the modern West. Its positive layer draws upon Russia's traditional political and social model, which according to the authorities is not merely desirable, but simply immanent for Russia.

The Kremlin's ideology preaches that Russia and the modern West represent fundamentally discrepant civilisations. These discrepancies are a consequence of the West's abandonment of the values of Christian civilisation and its rejection of traditionally understood identities – of nation, culture, religion, gender, and even of the distinction between good and evil. The Kremlin positions Russia as a defender and mainstay of European civilisation. At the same time, by highlighting the divergence between Russia and contemporary Western civilisation, the Kremlin intends to rule out any chance of Western political models being adopted in Russia. Moreover, this ideology assumes that the way to solve the problems plaguing Russia lies not in systemic reforms, but in the moral and spiritual healing of society.

On the positive side, the Kremlin's ideology advocates maintaining political and social stability, the revival of national identity and the cultivation of patriotism, a return to the traditional model of the family, state paternalism and social corporatism. In particular this ideology, drawing on its own interpretation of the Russian political tradition, proclaims the need to maintain a strong, hierarchical and centralised state power in Russia. The epitome of this should be a charismatic leader, whose authority has a special, quasi-sacred character, despite

the formal maintenance of democratic (electoral) mechanisms of its legitimacy.

This ideology presents society (the people) as being rooted in Russian tradition and naturally wedded to conservative values. It calls for the cultivation of the traditional model of a large family with many children, as well as the reinstatement of the Orthodox Church (and other traditional religions) as a source of moral principles in social and public life. The Kremlin's 'conservatism' contrasts the Russian people with the elites; the latter – due to their involvement in international economic relations in a globalised world, and their interests related to this – are presented as vulnerable to external geopolitical pressures and to Western ideological influence. The government thus appeals to genuine social sentiments which combine anti-elitism, anti-Americanism and xenophobia. At the same time, in the Kremlin's vision of the model of the state, the role of society (the people) is that of a subject, limited to passive participation in the processes initiated by the authorities.

IV. THE 'CONSERVATIVE PROJECT' IN DOMESTIC POLITICS

The Kremlin's reaction to the political and social challenges facing it has not been limited to the ideological sphere. Invoking conservative values, the Kremlin has taken a number of steps aimed at consolidating the regime. These steps have followed a consistent pattern suggesting that the Kremlin has devised and is implementing an overarching political strategy that can be described as 'the conservative project'. It should be noted, however, that the authorities have never presented a comprehensive concept of this 'project', for example in the form of a formal programme or a publicly announced strategy.

As part of this project, the Kremlin has taken comprehensive counter-reforming measures, leading to the further centralisation of power; restricting political activity and curbing civil rights; it intensified harassment of the opposition; taken steps to discipline the administrative and business elites; reinforced the repressive apparatus and expanded its prerogatives[6]. Although the Kremlin had resorted to repression against the opposition before, under the banner of the 'conservative project' it has extended them beyond the political sphere, and applied to people who are not direct political opponents of the regime. The regime has now penalised any behaviours and attitudes that go beyond the traditional (as the Kremlin defines it) canon of lifestyle and worldview (as exemplified, among others, by the prison sentences handed down to the members of Pussy Riot). The broadly defined opposition has also been subjected to a propaganda campaign invoking conservative values; this has equated any criticism of the authoritarian system of government with opposition to Russia as such, or even with treason. It has also strove to discredit

[6] For more information, see Jadwiga Rogoża, 'Putin's correction of the state: under the banner of conservatism', *OSW Analyses*, 18 December 2013, http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analisy/2013-12-18/korekta-panstwa-putina-pod-szyldem-konserwatyzmu

the opposition by arguing that liberal democratic ideology that it proclaims will lead naturally and inevitably to the spread of non-traditional lifestyles in society, as allegedly evidenced by the transformation of everyday customs in the West. As part of the 'conservative project', the Kremlin has also used institutions of the Russian Orthodox Church to wage its propaganda against the liberal opposition. Finally, one of the government's most effective tactics has been to brand the opposition of a large part of liberal circles to the annexation of Crimea as being anti-Russian and unpatriotic (Putin has described opponents of the annexation as "national traitors") – which puts liberals beyond the pale of official political competition.

An important element of the 'conservative project' is the disciplining measures taken by the authorities against the Russian elite, a process which has become known as 'nationalisation of the elites'. These measures were a reaction to the scepticism Putin had faced from part of the elite upon his return to the Kremlin in 2012. In response, the presidential administration has moved to strengthen the mechanisms which render the elite dependent on the Kremlin and enforce obedience to the president. Kremlin propaganda pictured the elites' contacts and business ties with the West as an instrument of their subordination to foreign political centres, which undermined their loyalty to Moscow. At the Kremlin's initiative, parliament has adopted a series of laws which have tightened the presidential administration's supervision of the foreign assets and business activities of Russian officials and employees of state corporations. They have been banned from owning foreign bank accounts and obligated to disclose the sources of funds for purchase of properties abroad. They were also obliged to declare any second (and subsequent) citizenships. The Kremlin has created a special register of these two groups' assets, including data on financial transactions.

One of the 'project's goals is to demonstrate that Putin's policies enjoy the support of the majority of the general public, and that the

people are opposed to the idea of liberal reforms. Drawing on the conservative ideology, the project contrasts the 'corrupt' elites and 'demoralised' middle class with the 'ordinary people', who allegedly remain faithful to traditional values, and are therefore not susceptible to anti-Putin slogans. According to the Kremlin, the group of the 'ordinary people' includes the inhabitants of provincial towns and rural areas, with lower standards of living, as well as employees of the public sector and industrial plants. On the basis of this group, in 2011 the Kremlin created the All-Russia Popular Front, which simulates a genuine social movement, although in reality it is a centrally-controlled structure managed by Kremlin officials. This Front, professing a conservative ideology, was intended to serve as a counterweight to both the liberal protest movement and to Putin's own political base, the United Russia party, which was losing public support and undergoing internal erosion at the time.

V. 'CONSERVATISM' AS AN INSTRUMENT OF FOREIGN POLICY

Putin's 'conservatism' was devised not only with a Russian audience in mind, but also with the intention of using it as a tool of foreign policy. Both Putin and the Russian ruling elite believe that the current international situation is characterised by growing competition between the great powers. In their view, this is increasingly acquiring a civilisational dimension, involving a choice between alternative paths of development and different socio-political models. The regime's leading representatives have openly declared that the West, particularly the United States, is seeking to impose Western values on Russia in order to create favourable conditions for the anti-system opposition, which they will subsequently use to overthrow the current government in Russia (as part of a policy of 'colour revolutions'). So in the eyes of the Kremlin, the ideological sphere has become an important part of international competition. The Kremlin considers it essential to formulate an attractive ideological message in order to legitimise Russia's aspirations to the role of a great power which influences the shape of the global international order. This message is also meant to increase Russia's attractiveness as the patron of those political forces that are opposed to Western liberalism (especially in its post-modern form) as well as to the hegemony of the US and the EU.

This offer is a conservative ideology which proclaims the need to observe traditional values, based on the teachings of the world's great religions, and to preserve national identities, as well as political and social stability. At the same time, Russian diplomacy and propaganda has been systematically building and promoting a narrative in which the world is threatened on one hand by religious and political radicalism (Islamists, fascists, nationalists), and on the other by the postmodern liberalism of the West, behind which lies the American pursuit of world hegemony. In this narrative, Russia is presented as the main defender of a stable

international order, traditional state sovereignty, and civilisational and political pluralism throughout the world.

This conservative ideological (and political) offer is aimed at those sections of the European elite which are Eurosceptic, anti-American and hostile to globalisation, and which defend traditional conservative Christian values. Such tendencies can be found both on the right (the French National Front and the conservative Gaullists, Hungarian Jobbik, the German AfD) as well as on the left (post-communist and communist parties in Europe, including the German Die Linke and the Greek Syriza). The Kremlin's 'conservative' ideology is also intended to appeal to the so-called 'silent majority', that is, 'average' EU citizens, who (in the opinion of the Kremlin's experts) are disillusioned with the European project, and are becoming increasingly critical of their own elites and the postmodern values and patterns of behaviour which these elites propagate. In the United States, meanwhile, the Kremlin is trying to reach conservative Christian circles with its ideological message, especially those that defend the traditional family model and oppose abortion. In the United States the Kremlin is also addressing supporters of isolationism, and those who urge Washington to respect the interests of other great powers and to seek agreement with Russia in the face of the rising power of China. Russian propaganda also draws on the economic crisis in Europe, and the growing disillusionment with both the European Union and the political forces that have so far dominated the political scene in Europe. The Kremlin's conservative ideology draws indirectly on Putin's idea of a 'Great Europe' which is to be based on a double pillar of the European Union and the Eurasian Union, which together should form a 'common economic and cultural space' extending "from Lisbon to Vladivostok"[7].

[7] For more information, see Marek Menkiszak, 'United Europe. Putin's vision of European (dis)integration', *OSW Studies*, October 2013, http://www.osw.waw.pl/node/21241

Another part of the Kremlin's 'conservative project' is the concept of the so-called Russian World (*Русский Мир*),[8] which has been promoted by the Russian state since 2006. The 'Russian World' is defined as a community of people who identify themselves not merely with Russian language and culture, but also with the traditions and achievements of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. This concept postulates the existence of a separate, multiethnic and multireligious Russian civilisation, which has the status of one of the world's great civilisations. The primary aim of cultivating a sense of community thus defined is to weaken national identities of the citizens of post-Soviet states; to build up their ties with, and loyalty to, the Russian state; and to promote the idea that Russia alone can be their natural civilisational and political centre. Thus, the concept of the Russian World is an important tool in the Kremlin's policy for reintegrating the post-Soviet space under the leadership and the domination of Russia. The Kremlin has also invoked this idea in its propaganda to legitimise the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the 'hybrid war' against Ukraine, pointing to the religious, historical and ethnic ties which these territories have with Russia. Crimea was portrayed as 'the Temple Mount in Jerusalem,' and eastern and southern Ukraine as 'Novorossiya'[9].

[8] Marek Menkiszak, 'The Putin Doctrine: Creating the conceptual foundations for Russian dominance in the post-Soviet area', *OSW Commentary*, 27 March 2014, http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/komentarze-osw/2014-03-27/doktryna-putina-tworzenie-koncepcyjnych-podstaw-rosyjskiej

[9] Speech by Vladimir Putin to the Federal Assembly, 4 December 2014, http://news.kremlin.ru/news/47173; Putin's speech at a meeting of the Valdai Club participants, 24 October 2014, http://www.kremlin.ru/news/46860, and in an interview on 17 April 2014, http://www.kremlin.ru/news/20796

VI. THE 'CONSERVATIVE PROJECT': AN EFFECTIVE TOOL OR A SELF-DELUSIONAL MIRAGE?

The Kremlin's adoption of the new 'conservative' ideology, and the implementation of the political project based on it, seems in the short term to have brought the Kremlin the desired results. In contrast, however, the long-term consequences may be unfavourable for the authorities.

For the time being the implementation of the 'conservative project' has inhibited the erosion of legitimacy of the regime. It has consolidated most of the elite around President Putin, suppressing the burgeoning symptoms of dissatisfaction with the direction in which the regime has been developing. The project has also expanded the Kremlin's mechanisms for monitoring the elites, whose fear of reprisals means that they only occasionally dare to take the risk of publicly protesting against the policy line currently pursued by the authorities. Moreover, Putin's policies delegitimise and hinder any action which the opposition takes against him.

By appealing to conservative ideology, the authorities have managed to increase public support for Putin and justify the repressive measures taken against members of the elite and the middle class. The Kremlin's actions, aimed both at the oligarchs and at various minorities (sexual, religious, ethnic), together with slogans against 'American imperialism' and Western interference in the post-Soviet states, have met with an enthusiastic reception among broad sections of society. Equally effective means of mobilising public support for the Kremlin has been the aggressive, anti-Western foreign policy. The annexation of Crimea proved particularly efficacious, raising President Putin's approval ratings from 60% to over 80%[10] and consolidating both the Russian public and the elites around the Kremlin.

[10] According to a survey by WCIOM of 15 May 2014, support for Putin rose from 60.9% in January 2014 to a record 85.9%. The Levada Centre poll of 30 April 2014 recorded an increase from 65% in January to 82% in April 2014.

Making a foreign policy tool out of the conservative ideology has also allowed Russia to expand the camp of its supporters in Europe by attracting the radical, populist and Eurosceptic right, which over the past few years, thanks to its electoral success, has moved from the fringes into the centre of European politics. The invocation of conservative ideology has also reinforced the Kremlin's attempts to establish a tactical alliance with conservative Christian circles (also within the Roman Catholic Church), both in Europe and the United States. The 'conservatism' proclaimed by the Kremlin also seems to have been quite an effective tool against the 'soft power' of the European Union in the morally conservative post-Soviet societies, as is particularly evident in Georgia and Moldova, and was also observed in Ukraine before the Russian aggression.

On the other hand, among the mainstream of Western public opinion and in the Western political establishment, the donning of the conservative mask by the Kremlin has contributed significantly to a loss of sympathy, or even to an increase in hostility towards Russia, and in particular to its current authorities. Meanwhile within Russia, this conservative ideology will not solve the fundamental problem of the fragile legitimacy of the Kremlin's authority in the eyes of that part of the Russian elite which had been expecting a gradual liberalisation of the system – primarily of private business, of a large part of the state administration (including the so-called 'establishment liberals'), and also of the more affluent social groups (i.e. the middle class). So far, these groups have been the main beneficiaries of Russia's economic and technological cooperation with the West, the modalities of which allowed them to have a share in revenues from Russian raw material exports and to deposit, invest and spend their funds in the West. The Kremlin's sharp anti-Western policy shift and the annexation of Crimea are definitely not in their interest. The sanctions imposed by the West have already caused significant financial losses, and they fear that there will be yet more such. The concerns of these groups have been further heightened by the Kremlin's efforts to redistribute

the largest assets (the Bashneft case), triggered by the worsening economic situation[11]. Therefore in the long run, forcing through the 'conservative project' carries the risk of destabilising the regime, because it is antagonising many groups within the elite and the affluent social strata, worsening their economic condition, and undermining their sense of security.

In addition, the Kremlin can hardly count on active public support for its ideological project. The deeply rooted passivity of Russian society means that even those initiatives it supports rarely mobilise them to undertake grassroots activity in accordance with the instructions of the Kremlin ideologues. One such example was the anti-Kremlin street protests in 2011-2012, when the authorities were forced to put a great deal of effort into organising rallies supporting Putin and to bring entire factory crews to those rallies. Many of the conservative demands put forward by the Kremlin diverge from the real needs and aspirations of broader social groups. The proposed 'traditional family values' are in conflict with contemporary Russian mores, and the Orthodox values being propagated contrast with the Russian people's minimal level of real involvement in religious practice and the life of the Church[12].

The impact of the Kremlin's conservative ideology may also be weakened by the fact that the ruling clan itself sees this ideology

[11] The nationalisation of the Bashneft oil company, which belonged to Vladimir Yevtushenkov, one of Russia's richest men, was a negative sign for business. Russian companies now fear that this may be just the beginning of another wave of redistribution of assets, caused by the deterioration of the economic situation and the contraction of the resources available to the state and the oligarchs closest to the Kremlin.

[12] Although around 73% of the Russian population declare themselves to be Orthodox, only around 3% regularly attend church and receive the sacraments (Levada Centre study, 2009). According to data from the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs from 2013, the Easter celebrations (the highest holiday of the Orthodox year) were attended by less than 4% of the population. In addition, Russia has the world's highest divorce rate (UN demographic data for 2012). Russia is also a world leader in terms of abortions (which are legally permitted and subsidised by the state); it ranks first in the world in proportion to the population, and second place in absolute terms (after China).

in purely instrumental terms. Many of the 'conservative' declarations are in fact feigned and used for propaganda purposes; the Kremlin's actions do not affect the oligarchic nature of Putin's system, nor do they translate into an increase in the influence of 'the people' on the mechanisms governing the state. The extreme materialism and ostentatious consumerism of the ruling elite stand in stark contrast to the values proclaimed, something which has not escaped public attention. There is a glaring discrepancy between the government's patriotic and anti-Western phraseology and the spectacular consumption of Western goods by its representatives. Due to its instrumental nature, the Kremlin's ideology cannot build a lasting and genuine relationship between the government and society which would protect the government against a loss of support caused by the deterioration of economic conditions in Russia.

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