

ANU Centre for European Studies
30 March 2022
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Today I'd like to talk about the relationship between Russia's domestic politics and its conduct on the international stage. In particular, I'll examine the consequences of the transformation of the Russian state in the aftermath of Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004, a transformation that I have called Putin's 'preventive counter-revolution.' At home, this transformation change marked the end of Russia's democratic experiment and the consolidation of a new kind of kleptocratic authoritarianism. On the international stage, it marked Russia's emergence as an autocracy promoter, a state actively engaged in the undermining of democracy, supporting authoritarian regimes, and facilitating autocratisation, in the post-Soviet space and around the world.

What I would like to argue today is that these developments were closely connected. The construction of a dictatorship at home was bound up with the development of an autocracy promotion apparatus to act on the international stage. In this paper, I will show how actors, structures, techniques and ideas that were central to Russia's domestic autocratisation were employed by the Kremlin to undermine democracy, to counteract democratic revolution, and to promote autocracy on the international stage. I will trace the evolution of these processes, from the 'preventive counter-revolution' of 2005, through the conflicts with Estonia and Georgia, to the post-Bolotnaya crackdown, the first war against Ukraine, the rise of Wagner Corps and the current war against Ukraine.

This interpretation challenges what was, for many years, almost an academic consensus that the Putin regime, for all of its faults did not engage in autocracy promotion. Unlike many Western democracies, the Putin regime was not trying to convert other states to its own model of governance. This position was based on two assumptions held by different groups of scholars.

On the one hand, realists claimed that the Putin regime was guided by Russia's national interest, by pure power considerations. Political or economic advantage, not ideological preferences for a particular system, was the key to understanding Russia's conduct on the world stage.

On the other hand, constructivists, those who stress the primacy of ideology, pointed to the regime's illiberalism and its obsession with sovereignty. Its illiberalism meant a commitment to cultural particularism, to the notion that every nation adopted political systems that accorded with its traditions. The Kremlin's obsession with sovereignty meant a commitment to political diversity, to a multipolar world.

This consensus was reinforced by the framework that Western scholars used to interpret autocracy promotion. In 2016, Oisín Hansey set out what became a widely accepted criteria for autocracy promotion. According to Hansey:

Autocracy promotion... requires a clear intent on the part of an external actor to bolster autocracy as a form of political regime as well as an underlying motivation that rests in significant part on an ideological commitment to autocracy itself.

The effect of this definition was to make it almost impossible to classify Putin's Russia as an autocracy promoter.

First, the Putin regime is opaque. It has never advertised its intentions for the convenience of Western academics. On the contrary, it obscures those intentions behind a smokescreen of rhetorical misdirection and by the cacophony of pro-regime voices on Kremlin political talk shows. Indeed, the Putin regime claimed to be democratic and it claimed to be promoting democracy. The slogan of the first phase of Russia's autocratisation was 'sovereign democracy'; and the name of one of its first major ideological platforms in the West, Nataliya Narochitskaya's GONGO in Paris, was the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation.

The second problem is the unexamined assumption that autocracy promotion happens because of the same kind of ideological commitments, the same kind of idealism, that shapes democracy promotion; that autocracy promoters have a sincerely held belief in the virtues of dictatorship.

What I will argue today is that Russia's autocracy promotion needs to be approached differently. It is driven by three things. The first is the needs of an authoritarian kleptocracy. To stay in power, Putin needed to destroy alternative developmental models in the former Soviet space; in particular, he needed to show that democratic revolution is a path to disaster, not to freedom and prosperity. In short, he needed to subvert democracy and bolster autocracy.

The second thing that drives Russia's autocracy promotion is a kind of institutional inertia. Structures, actors, processes and technologies that were created to defeat democratic revolution and defend authoritarianism at home did not rest of their laurels; they found new opportunities by exporting their expertise.

And the third thing that drives Russia's autocracy promotion is greed. The Putin regime is ruled by a predatory elite that exploited public office for personal gain; and that elite preside over systemic corruption. The autocracy promoters, from its propagandists and trolling factories to its phoney election monitors and Wagner mercenaries, are part of this system. Unlike democracy promotion, autocracy promotion is not a philanthropic activity; it is both a lucrative enterprise, and a corrupt one.

The sources of Putin's autocracy promotion can be traced to the 'coloured revolutions' of the mid-2000s. Georgia's Rose Revolution of 2003 was clearly an irritation for the Kremlin, but the real turning point was Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004. This was a political earthquake that shook the Putin regime on multiple levels.

First, it was a spectacular humiliation. The Kremlin had clumsily intervened in the election that triggered the uprising; it had become an actor in that campaign. Not only had

it dispatched a large team of political technologists, headed by Gleb Pavlovskii, to assist the Kremlin's preferred candidate, Viktor Yanukovich; it had also used Putin himself as a kind of surrogate running mate. During the lead-up to the first round of voting, Putin staged a visit to Kiev that received such saturation coverage in the state media that one commentator suggested would have been more appropriate to the landing of the first extraterrestrial in Kiev than a visit of a neighbouring head of state. This intervention spectacularly backfired; it weakened Yanukovich's patriotic credentials and strengthened his opponent.

The second reason why the Orange Revolution was a shock was that it was an inspiration to the Russian opposition. Liberals like Boris Nemtsov travelled to Kiev, addressed the crowds on the Maidan, and returned to tell their compatriots that Ukraine had shown the way; and it was time for Russians to follow that path. Even Dmitrii Rogozin, then the leader of the nationalist Rodina party, began to jockey for position as a potential leader of a 'coloured' uprising in Russia. No less serious was the emergence of pro-democracy youth groups modelled on those whose theatrical protests had helped to foment the 'coloured revolutions.'

And the third reason was that the democratic revolution in Kiev was growing evidence of popular discontent in Russia. The Orange Revolution was followed by the first serious wave of street protest against the Putin regime. In January 2005, the authorities struggled to control demonstrations against the monetarisation of social benefits, which brought together crowds of pensioners and anti-Putin youth militants.

The Putin regime responded to this threat by unleashing what I have called 'a preventive counter-revolution,' a term coined by Gleb Pavlovskii to describe a programme of measures that were at once conservative and revolutionary, at once repressive and mobilisational.

On a repressive level, the Kremlin destroyed political parties that posed a threat to the ascendancy of the ruling party; it put opposition leaders and opposition militants on Stop Lists that prevented their appearance on state television; it curbed the constitutionally guaranteed right to demonstrate; and it imposed controls on civil society.

On a mobilisational level, the regime began to fabricate and mobilise counter-revolutionary agents. It promoted a phalanx of loyalist NGOs; it selected a group of trusted commentators who came to dominate political talk shows on Kremlin-aligned television; and it created Nashi ('Ours'), an anti-Western youth movement that was the prototype for a constellation of Kremlin-backed counter-revolutionary structures.

The justification for both the repression and the mobilisation of loyalists was a counter-revolutionary ideology that remains the foundation of the Putin regime today. This ideology can be described as a thin ideology; it had no philosophical or programmatic depth. In fact, it was built upon two related claims.

The first claim is that Putin regime is engaged in a struggle against modern Nazism.

Consequently, Putin and his supporters become a reincarnation of the heroic generation of Soviet soldiers that defeated Hitler on the battlegrounds of the Great Patriotic War.

The second claim is that the West, sometimes the United States, sometimes the European Union, sometimes the 'collective West,' is using these fascists as a weapon against Russia. The ultimate aim is the dismemberment of the Russian state; the imposition of external rule on Russian territory and the genocidal destruction of the Russian people.

The first important platform for the dissemination of this ideology was the pro-Kremlin youth movement Nashi, whose full name was the 'Youth Democratic Anti-Fascist Movement Nashi.' The central event of Nashi's first rally, held in May 2005 in central Moscow, was a 'passing of the baton' from veterans of the Great Patriotic War to the pro-Putin militants of Nashi. In other words, the warriors who had defeated the might of the Wehrmacht were being equated with a bunch of kids from provincial universities who had been cajoled to wave pro-Putin banners at authorised rallies.

And of course, Nashi's crowds were being prepared to confront a very different kind of fascist. Nashi's first major programmatic statement was a brochure titled Extraordinary Fascism, which divided the anti-Putin opposition into two groups. The first were the fascists, mainly members of Eduard Limonov's National Bolshevik Party, a youth subculture which had once outraged liberal opinion by its totalitarian symbolism, both fascist and Stalinist, but which had largely liberalised by the time that it was targeted by Nashi. The second were fascist sympathisers, which included a representative sample of anti-Putin liberals.

This it also applied to Russia's adversaries on the international stage. One of the most important ideological platforms of the 'preventive counter-revolution' was the website Regnum, edited by the historian Modest Korelov. In March 2005, Regnum published an editorial, reputedly written by Kolerov, titled 'The Front against Russia: the Sanitary Cordon and External Rule.' Its central argument was that the West planned to incite a 'coloured revolution' in Moscow to destroy the Russian state and plunder its resources. This provided the impulse for a series of articles about the West's plans to overthrow the Putin regime. Perhaps the most inflammatory was by Dmitrii Kondrashov, a Russian nationalist intellectual in Estonia, who argued that the EU had been fatally transformed into a Russophobic, 'fascist' force by the admission of new member states from Eastern Europe, above all the Baltic states. The result was a 'new Munich' pact between Anglo-Saxon elites and the neo-fascist forces of Europe aimed at the destruction of Russia, which was to be partitioned between 'Kievan Rus' and 'Greater Finno-Ugriya,' two colonial provinces of the USA's emerging 'national-democratic' East European empire.

Now one might dismiss these essays as the paranoid ravings of marginal intellectuals. Except for two things. First, they were collected and published in a volume produced by Evropa, the publishing house of Gleb Pavlovskii, the Kremlin's most important political consultant and the intellectual architect of the 'preventive counter-revolution.' And second, Kolerov was soon appointed to head a Kremlin department, the Department for Interregional and Cultural Links with Foreign Countries. It was an open secret that

KoleroV's task was to combat 'coloured revolution' in the former Soviet space.

His department oversaw the creation of a mass of pro-Kremlin proxies, both within Russia and within the former Soviet space. This fact is important. From the outset, the struggle against democratic protest within Russia was institutionally connected to the Putin regime's efforts to exert influence in the former Soviet space.

These two campaigns were also ideologically connected. The justification for the dismantling of democratic institutions, for the exclusion of opposition politicians from systemic politics, and for the regimentation of civil society, was that the Russian people needed to be protected from fascism promoted by foreign enemies. As Gleb Pavlovskii told Nashi commissars at their first summer camp at Lake Seliger, the US was planning to organise a coup in Russia, and the commissars' task was to 'disperse fascist demonstrations and to oppose physically an attempted anti-constitutional coup.'

The consolidation of a regime that was mobilising loyalists to disperse a US-instigated fascist coup had obvious implications for Russia's relations with its neighbours. And it helped to pave the way for the Putin regime's first act of aggression outside Russia's borders, its conflict with Estonia in 2007. As is well known, the trigger was the Estonian government's announcement of plans to move the bronze soldier, the monument to a Soviet soldier from central Tallinn to a military cemetery. For the architects of the 'preventive counter-revolution,' this was a perfect opportunity. Here was an affront to a symbol of the Great Patriotic War, and here was a pretext to smear both Estonia and the European Union as supporters of Nazism.

Much has been written about the international dimensions of Russia's conflict with Estonia, and what it meant for Russia's relations with the EU. What has attracted less attention is its importance for Russia's autocratisation. The conflict took place six months before the beginning of Russia's cycle of parliamentary and presidential elections, a transitional moment that was widely seen as a trigger for a coloured revolution, a Moscow Maidan. The conflict with Estonia offered an opportunity to test both the technologies and the structures that the Kremlin had created to protect the regime against pro-democracy protest.

Russia's attack on Estonia's internet has been described as the world's first cyberwar, but it was only part of a larger process. It was preceded by the increasing use of Distributed Denial of Service attacks to disable the websites of opposition activists and independent media within Russia, and it prepared the ground for the massive use of cyberattacks to paralyse opposition communications during the election cycle later that year.

Within Russia, the central event of the Estonian crisis was the mobilisation of pro-Kremlin youth organisations - Nashi, Molodaya Gvardiya, Rossiya Molodaya and others, in a protracted siege of the Estonian embassy and a series of rallies outside the office of the EU delegation. This was an important test of the capacity of the Kremlin's youth auxiliaries to maintain control over public space in a revolutionary crisis. It also provided material for television news coverage that pitted the Putin regime, inheritor of the

Soviet Victory, against Estonian neo-nazis and their European backers.

No less important was the role of Kolerov's Estonian proxy, the organization Nochnoi Dozor, headed by Dmitrii Linter, today a prominent pro-Kremlin propagandist and a leader of the GONGO World without Nazism. Its message amplified by Russian state television, Linter's group that was able to mobilise enough Russians to stage three nights of rioting in Tallinn that became Estonia's most serious crisis since independence. By comparison with the devastation inflicted on Georgia and Ukraine, these riots were a minor affair, but they set an important precedent; they demonstrated how diasporas could be mobilized as an instrument of disruption.

A similar pattern was employed in Russia's more serious conflict with Georgia in 2008. Georgia was an obvious target: its post-revolutionary anti-corruption reforms were widely regarded as a model for Russia's post-Putin future; and its leader, Mikheil Saakashvili, was a loud supporter of democratic revolution in the former Soviet space.

As with Estonia, Kolerov's structures prepared the way for war, both working to stabilize the unrecognized separatist enclaves of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and producing a stream of propaganda stigmatizing the Georgian government as a manifestation of Nazism.

As in Estonia, the Kremlin claimed to be defending a diaspora population, in this case south Ossetians. As in Estonia, Russia waged a high intensity cyberwar, and disabled Georgian government websites with the same kind of hacker and denial of service attacks

And as with Estonia, Russian propagandists smeared the Georgian government as the heirs of the Third Reich and President Saakashvili as a new Hitler. They also took this to a new level by claiming that Georgia was committing genocide. This accusation was first levelled by Aleksandr Dugin, the neo-fascist philosopher. A few days later, this baseless claim was repeated by President Dmitrii Medvedev.

The connection of the Georgia war to the Kremlin's domestic needs was underlined by the mobilisation of loyalist youth organisations against domestic opposition. This was a time when the Kremlin was struggling to contain Aleksei Naval'nyi's efforts to create a broad anti-Putin alliance of liberals and radical nationalists. War with Georgia became an instrument for rallying ethnonationalists behind the regime.

So while Nashi demonstrated outside the US embassy calling for Saakashvili to face a Nuremberg tribunal, a very different kind of rally took place the following day in Pushkin Square. It was officially organized by two Kremlin proxies, Rossiya Molodaya and Dugin's Eurasian Youth Union. They were joined by militants from Russkii Obraz, a hardcore neo-nazi organization that was getting Kremlin support to attack those Russian nationalists who were deradicalizing, who were abandoning the skinhead underground for Naval'nyi's coalition.

The authoritarian order inaugurated by the first Preventive Counter-Revolution survived

for five years. It withstood the election cycle of 2007-08, and it withstood the pressures of the GFC. But it collapsed in December 2011, under the impact of mass protests against election fraud. Nashi and the regime's other counter-revolutionary auxiliaries were overwhelmed by the massive crowds that filled Moscow streets.

The Putin regime responded to this challenge with temporary concessions and a new 'preventive counter-revolution.' Like the first, there was a repression that ranged from draconian legislation on foreign agents to a series of political trials. Like the first, there was a mobilization of loyalists.

But the second 'preventive counter-revolution' was not merely a copy of the first; it was both more polarizing and more aggressive. This shift is evident in four changes:

First, the radicalisation of the regime's counter-revolutionary ideology. Instead of anodyne rhetoric about 'sovereign democracy' and modernisation, it embraced traditional values, it positioned itself as a defender of the feelings of religious believers and as an enemy of LGBT rights. The trigger for this shift was the protest, the punk prayer by members of the band Pussy Riot in Christ the Saviour Cathedral. The ensuing trial became the defining event of the regime's conservative turn, which took the form both of legislation against gay propaganda and public support for European far-right populists.

Second, instead of spending exorbitant sums to reward popular bloggers for pro-Putin posts, the Kremlin launched a much more ambitious project: Evgenii Prigozhin's Internet Research Agency, the first of the trolling factories that would undermine the opposition's sway over political discussion on social media, and ultimately become a potent weapon of Russia's influence operations around the world.

Third, the regime replaced Surkov's system of loyalist youth groups with a more aggressive set of proxies. Instead of enlisting students from provincial universities, it turned to two groups of adults. On the one hand, anti-Western radicals like Sergei Kurginyan's Essence of Time movement and Evgenii Fedorov's National Liberation Movement; and second, groups of violent men, like SERB, the Cossacks and the Night Wolves motorcycle gang.

And fourth, counter-revolution was securitized. In January 2013, Valerii Gerasimov, the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, gave the speech in which he argued that 'coloured revolution' was a military threat. According to him, the uprisings of the Arab Spring had demonstrated how a prosperous state could be transformed in months to a site of foreign intervention, humanitarian catastrophe and civil war. It was necessary, he argued, for military planners to confront this new form of warfare.

What this meant in practice became clear in 2014, when the Putin regime was once again shaken by a revolution in Ukraine, this time the Euromaidan, the months of demonstrations in Kiev that culminated in the ouster of Viktor Yanukovich. As in 2004, a wide spectrum of Russian activists looked to Kiev for a demonstration of how to oust a kleptocratic dictatorship, this time one that was prepared to use force, that was

prepared to kill protesters, to retain power.

The Putin regime's response was to employ the tools of the 2nd Preventive Counter-Revolution both to a neighboring state and to the home front.

Once again, the Kremlin waged a massive disinformation campaign focused on two contradictory ideas; first that the uprising in Kyiv was the work of neo-nazis; and second, that traditional values were under threat from LGBT activists and 'Gayropa.' This campaign was spearheaded by the same state propaganda platforms, but it was amplified by the new trolling factories.

At the same time, counter-revolutionary proxies were deployed both on the home front and against Ukraine. The Night Wolves, which had demonstrated their potential during the 2012 protests, played a major role in Russia's hybrid warfare, first in Crimea and then in southeast Ukraine. This is not surprising; the Night Wolves are much more than a bikie gang; they are a neo-fascist movement; they are a paramilitary organization that is closely connected to the Russian intelligence services; and they are an important bridge between the Russian state and the Western far-right.

They were also the most visible participants in Antimaidan, a counter-revolutionary movement that united an array of violent proxies. Antimaidan's founding march in March 2015, which I attended and found genuinely terrifying, was dominated by Night Wolves, by Cossacks, by members of martial arts clubs, by neo-nazi skinheads, by militia fighters from Donbass, and by a large contingent of Kadyrovites. No less menacing was the movement's rhetoric, which promised terror. One week after the march, Boris Nemtsov was assassinated by Kadyrovites in central Moscow.

Perhaps because of the political crisis triggered by that crime, the Antimaidan was never allowed to become a force in its own right, but it exemplifies the connection between domestic autocratisation and the Putin regime's struggle against democratic revolution.

More successful was another product of Russia's attempt to destroy Ukraine's democratic revolution. This was the Wagner Corps, the mercenary outfit that was formally bankrolled by the structures of Putin's cook, Evgenii Prigozhin, and headed by the GRU officer Dmitrii Utkin. Although it is sometimes described as a private military company, the Wagner Corps is much more than that. It is a Kremlin proxy that has used the tools of the preventive counter-revolution to promote autocracy around the world. It works hand-in-hand with local versions of the trolling factories that Prigozhin originally created to undermine the protest movement in Russia itself.

Whether fighting in Syria for the Assad regime, or intervening in the Libyan civil war, or serving as guards for Venezuela's president Maduro, or killing investigative journalists in the Central African Republic, or aiding coup leaders in Sudan and Mali, the Wagner Corps has not merely served Russian diplomacy by supporting autocracy or undermining democracy; it has exported the technologies of the preventive counter-revolution to autocrats on three continents.

The expansion of the Wagner Corps is not the only manifestation of the securitization of counter-revolution. Increasing aggression on the international stage went hand in hand with increasing violence against Putin's domestic adversaries. First, there was the daily physical harassment of NGOs that had been designated 'foreign agents'; then there were the physical attacks, the cleaning chemicals sprayed in the faces of opposition figures. And there were the poisonings by the FSB, the use of banned chemical weapons against Vladimir Kara-Murza, against Dmitrii Bykov, and finally against Aleksei Naval'nyi.

The poisoning of Naval'nyi produced a crisis that was both personal and systemic; personal for Putin, and systemic for the legitimacy of his regime. Instead of silencing Navalny, the poisoners exposed the criminality of Putin's rule; they also magnified the impact of Naval'nyi's expose of Putin's kleptocracy, his personal corruption and his grotesque, dictator-kitsch palace at Gelendzhik. 'A Palace for Putin' has now been watched 121 million times, which makes it the most viewed Russian language video on Youtube.

It is impossible to overestimate the impact of this public exposure on a dictator living in increasing isolation because of his fear of covid, cut off from critical advisors, and increasingly despised on the world stage as a pariah. Unlike his predecessors, Biden began his presidency by calling Putin a 'killer.' This, and not some fantasy about NATO expansion, was the trigger for Russia's first massive military build up around Ukraine.

That act of aggression, and the war that is now devastating Ukraine, constitute the culmination, the end point, of the evolution of Putin's regime from the preventive counter-revolution seventeen years ago.

The aggression of Russian propaganda - the fixation on nazism, the warnings about imminent genocide, the anti-Westernism, the pseudo-history and conspiracy theories - is a constant; so is the principal target, Ukraine's democratic revolutions and the dangerous example that they set for Putin's opponents and for ordinary Russians.

Another constant, which is ironic for a regime that claims to be denazifying Ukraine, is the Putin regime's cultivation of neo-fascists as counter-revolutionary agents, from the skinheads who worked as enforcers for Nashi, through to Dugin's Eurasian Youth Union and the neo-nazis of Russkii Obraz, and culminating in the Wagner Corps, which is named after the call sign of its leader, Dmitrii Utkin, who has nazi tattoos and who apparently identifies with Hitler's favourite composer.

What changed during the 17 years since the original preventive counter-revolution was the level of violence that the Putin regime was prepared to unleash to maintain his personal rule, both at home and on the international stage. What we see, year after year, as Putin concentrated power, is a steady escalation of aggression towards those within Russia who stood for a democratic future, and towards those outside Russia who had shown the way. In the process, the Putin regime became not only a promoter of autocracy; it became a threat to life on this planet.

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