

Orthodox church of the Russian Armed Forces in the Patriot military park. (Kadir Cobek/ Shutterstock)

Russia's "Holy War" against the West

By Suzanne Loftus

In a Russian Orthodox Church decree published in March of this year, Russia's war in Ukraine is referred to as a "Holy War" against Western "globalism" and "Satanism." ¹ The choice of words indicates an escalation of rhetoric against the West and provides a glimpse into the characteristics of today's cold war. At the forefront of this conflict is a clash between a civic conception of identity founded upon liberal principles and a more nativist understanding of identity- prioritizing culture, civilization and history that, in Russia's case, includes an imperial aspect. Today's confrontation is more challenging than the first cold war, as appeals

to nationalism are far more primal and therefore more widely relatable than Soviet ideology. The duration and depth of the West's commitment to Ukraine will be a determining factor in how it sees itself and its role in the world today amid its own identity debates. It will reflect whether it fundamentally stands for the core values of liberalism in Europe or whether it acquiesces to increasing imperialism, renewed spheres of influence, reawakened nationalism, and constant confrontation as part of a new world order currently being defined through the outcomes of today's renewed great power competition.

**These views are those of the author and do not represent the views of the US government*

Russian Nationalism and the War in Ukraine

The Russian Orthodox Church decree details the vision for its country's future as a great power promoting Russian civilization and cultural conservatism. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church have long shared the belief that Western liberalism and secularism are a threat to Russian society. In their view, Russia serves as an important counterbalancing force in the world to the influence of Western liberalism as a protector of traditional values, conservatism, and civilization.²

The decree comprises key proposals gathered during the XXV World Russian People's Council last November on the "Present and Future of the Russian World." At this meeting, President Putin declared in his opening speech:

We are now fighting not just for Russia's freedom but for the freedom of the whole world. We can frankly say that the dictatorship of one hegemon is becoming decrepit. We see it, and everyone sees it now.... It is our country that is now at the forefront of building a fairer world order...without a sovereign and strong Russia, no lasting and stable international system is possible.³

In other words, Russia's war in Ukraine represents a struggle against American power and influence, and Russia sees itself as a protector and defender of the "victims" of the US-led international order. The Russian narrative appeals to victims of colonialism in the Global South who have viewed the US-led liberal international order as being unfairly skewed towards powerful nations. For these reasons as well as for pragmatic economic reasons, Russia has not been

completely isolated internationally for its actions in Ukraine and maintains positive and cooperative relationships around the world.

The church decree also explicitly states that Russia's goal in Ukraine is to politically subjugate the entire nation, something for those pushing for a negotiated settlement to consider when assessing possible terms:

After the completion of the Northeast Military District, the entire territory of modern Ukraine should enter the zone of exclusive influence of Russia. The possibility of the existence in this territory of a Russophobic political regime hostile to Russia and its people, as well as a political regime controlled from an external center hostile to Russia, must be completely excluded.⁴

While the "end of history" narrative of the post-cold war years envisioned achieving liberal democratic universalization, post-cold war international policies gave way to economically strengthened nations doubling down on nationalism. Over the course of his presidency, Putin increasingly expressed his disapproval of Western liberal dominance in Europe and around the world and saw these forces as a threat to Russian internal stability. With the advent of the color revolutions in Russia's near abroad and the Arab Spring in the Middle East, Putin clamped down on his power in Russia and turned the country's identity development toward cultural conservatism, nationalism, and authoritarianism. During this internal shift, Russia increased its international soft power by spreading an anti-Western narrative across the world—messages that gained popularity among conservative, anti-globalist factions both within and outside the West. The Russia-China relationship experienced a revival

at this stage, as the two nations found common cause in viewing the West as an obstacle to their global aspirations. Because cultural nationalism and nativism are at odds with the core principles of post-World War II liberalism, these culture clashes have started to lead to internal identity crises as well as international wars, such as in Ukraine.⁵

Putin led the Russian cultural turn to conservatism when he returned to the presidency in 2012, after being met with protests in Russia's major cities by a disappointed constituency hoping for new leadership.⁶ "Eurasianism," a philosophy of Russian cultural conservatism, underpinned Putin's policies at the time and continues to shape Russia's post-Soviet national identity. This conception of identity unites an ethnically and religiously diverse country and provides an imperialist vision for Russia's role in Eurasia. The philosophy was convenient as it provided a cultural explanation for Russia's troubled history in the 1990s and provided an avenue through which Russia could continue embodying the global role of a great power. Its core components, as defined by Marlène Laruelle, comprise a rejection of the Western model of development and governance, a depiction of US-led capitalism as inherently malevolent, an assertion of the cultural unity of Russians and non-Russians of the former Soviet Union, the idea that the Eurasian space requires an imperial form of political organization, and a belief that culture and civilization explain contemporary political events.⁷

In this respect, Eurasianism helps justify authoritarianism through culture and pushes the idea that the Western model cannot be applied to post-Soviet states. The popularity of the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Putin's subsequent sustained boost in his approval ratings demonstrate the appeal

of the narrative of returning to greatness, uniting Russian lands, asserting Russian national interests against an overly dominant West, and protecting what is valuable to Russia from encroaching liberal institutions.

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and even more since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russian society has undergone fundamental changes. The church decree includes the country's plans to re-educate Russian society in an anti-Western direction. It states:

Domestic educational programs must be cleared of destructive ideological concepts and attitudes, especially Western ones, that are alien to the Russian people and destructive for Russian society. A new socio-humanitarian paradigm, based on Russian civilizational identity and traditional Russian spiritual and moral values, must be developed and introduced into the domestic teaching of social and humanitarian disciplines.⁸

Of further importance and much like the Eurasianist paradigm depicts, the church decree highlights the significance of the "Russian World" for the regime and the church, which is defined as extending beyond the borders of modern-day Russia. It states that the only way for Russia to remain a vital state is to restore "the unity of the Russian people, as well as their spiritual and life potential."⁹ This last statement spells out Russia's plans to reunite Russian people either physically, spiritually, politically, or all of the above where it can. The church decree stipulates that foreign policy goals should include reuniting the "trinity" of Russian people to ensure that Russia acts as a bulwark of stability and security in a more fair, multipolar world order: "Russia should return to the doctrine of the

trinity of the Russian people, which has existed for more than three centuries, according to which the Russian people consist of Great Russians, Little Russians and Belarusians...the descendants of historical Rus.”¹⁰ This ideological view denies Belarusian and Ukrainian identity, portraying them as subservient to “Great Russia,” a concept with all-too-familiar historical undertones.

As part of these reunification goals, Russia may include “Russia-friendly” territories such as the breakaway provinces of Georgia and Moldova and justify its right to absorb or control territory based on ethnicity and language. There are significant Russian ethnic minority populations in border countries such as Kazakhstan, Latvia, and Estonia. Instigating political polarization between these populations and the majority ethnic groups of those countries through information campaigns has been a typical Kremlin tactic. The West should expect the Kremlin to continue its pursuit of these tactics, be prepared for the possibility of further attempts by the Kremlin to instigate civil strife in these areas such as it did in the Donbas in 2014 as well as for Kremlin attempts at invoking “spiritual” or religious appeals to ethnic Russians or Russian Orthodox believers in its near abroad. The West should also be prepared for a worst-case scenario of the Kremlin possibly using direct military action beyond Ukraine to achieve its aims. Russia’s urgent demographic crisis may also be a strong motivating factor for these reintegration goals.

In Russia’s near abroad, the Kremlin employs tactics to gain influence and political leverage to minimize liberalism’s influence. In the case of neighboring Georgia, Russia’s hybrid operations include influencing its existing network of policy makers to impose pro-Russian political aims. The billionaire chairman of the Georgian Dream party, Irakli

Garibashvili, accumulated his wealth while living and working in Russia as part of Putin’s circle. He was the main orchestrator of the “foreign agents” bill which he and his party successfully pushed through the Georgian parliament last May. This bill gives the government more control over the media and human rights organizations and is modeled on laws Putin has used in Russia to tighten his grip and control Western influence inside the country. Large groups of demonstrators protested this law as they saw their country move away from their EU aspirations, a big win for Russian influence in Eurasia.¹¹

Politicians with ties to the Kremlin and shared views on authoritarian ideology grounded in nationalism can be found all over the Balkans, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe. Retaining influence through political ties is one of the Kremlin’s ways of maintaining a say in the political affairs of neighboring countries, usually to promote a pro-Russian agenda. Many of these politicians are happy to go along with this, as they can gain significant personal power at the expense of their countries’ progress. Through a variety of means, the Kremlin aims to exert some form of neo-imperial control over the Eurasian land mass as part of its civilizational aspirations. Controlling the spread of Russian power and influence is therefore vital on multiple levels and in the interest of the United States and its Western partners.

Russian Information Campaigns and Domestic Politics in the West

In Russia’s contest with the West—its “Holy War” against US-led globalism—the Kremlin employs hybrid tactics to destabilize societies, weaken resolve, and strengthen populist movements. Lately, evidence also points to the use of increasing sabotage operations in Western countries aimed

at destroying infrastructure involved in supplying weapons to Ukraine.¹² Insights into Russian secret foreign policy documents were provided to the *Washington Post* by a European intelligence service in April of this year, revealing Russia's plans for covert operations in the West.¹³ The documents serve as a classified addendum to the public *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*. These documents call for offensive information campaigns and other measures across the military, political, economic, and information domains of the West to subvert Western support for Ukraine and disrupt domestic politics by fanning polarization.¹⁴

Because there are growing numbers of "susceptible" audiences in the West inclined towards anti-liberal, anti-immigration, and nativist messaging, Kremlin information campaigns have been quite successful. In this ongoing campaign led by the Kremlin's military intelligence unit, political strategists and trolls have fabricated thousands of news articles and social media posts targeting American people, promoting ideas about American isolationism, fear over border security, and racially and economically divisive content.¹⁵ The long-drawn-out congressional battles that took place in Washington over Ukraine aid may signify that Kremlin efforts to undermine support for Ukraine has started to see success in the United States more than anywhere else. The United States Department of Justice revealed in July that it had seized two internet domains and nearly 1,000 social media accounts that Russian operatives used to pose as US residents in order to spread disinformation in America and abroad, mostly about the war in Ukraine.¹⁶

Targeted messaging campaigns in France and Germany have also been uncovered by these secret

foreign policy documents. These messages attempt to stir fears about direct confrontation with Russia and about World War III, arguing that sanctions against Russia have damaged the German and French economies, asserting that the supply of arms to Ukraine is leaving Europe without the weapons to defend itself, stirring feelings of reluctance to "pay for another country's war," and boosting the idea of dialogue with Russia on the construction of a common European security architecture.¹⁷ In these messaging campaigns, the United States is also described as using Ukraine as an instrument to weaken Russia's position in Europe. The documents detail Kremlin plans to interfere in German politics by seeking to forge a coalition between the German far-right and far-left, the Wagenknecht and Alternatif für Deutschland (AfD) parties, and support protests by extremists on both sides against the German government. Kremlin political strategists are told to focus on Germany as their main target and discredit the EU, the United States, Britain, and NATO.¹⁸ In the latest EU parliamentary elections, the far-right performed well and saw an increase in total seats, particularly in France, Germany, Italy, and Austria, which was a big win for the Kremlin.¹⁹

While one cannot generalize across far-right parties in Europe, they are historically more prone to nationalist and nativist sentiment, want to curb immigration, and are often skeptical of the EU and NATO. Many of the far-right groups, such as the AfD and the National Rally in France, are also vocal about stopping weapon supplies to Ukraine and are friendlier to Russia. Russia has historically provided campaign financing for Marine Le Pen's National Rally; the AfD is currently being investigated for its involvement in a Russian influence operation. Russian narratives on excessive globalism resonate particularly well with these groups, which have seen

a rise in popularity due to cultural and economic grievances. Segments of the population blame the rise of the “other” for their economic troubles or blame the “globalist elite” for the continent’s shift away from cultural nationalism. The focus on questions such as immigration, multiculturalism and attitudes towards European integration tends to benefit the far right. The more European countries focus inward, the less cohesion they will have between each other and their partner across the Atlantic, which weakens the coalition of Western nations united under common values—something Putin would relish.

Recommendations and Conclusion

While freedom of thought and speech are critical components of a functioning democracy, the advent of social media has allowed for the proliferation of misinformation and political polarization, a perfect breeding ground for Russian information operations. Amid the West’s identity crisis, Moscow is easily able to fuel identity clashes and political polarization. To combat these growing challenges, Western societies should:

- Bolster societal resilience to information campaigns.
- Design appropriate responses to cyber and infrastructure attacks.
- Increase defense spending.
- Break down boundaries between elites and the general population to increase trust.
- Improve communication with the public on foreign policy priorities to improve the average person’s understanding and support for the government.

- Address grievances that lead constituencies to support populist parties, such as economic inequality and uncontrolled immigration.
- Generate a successful narrative on a collective Western identity based on civics and liberal values.

Although today’s political confrontation is not a battle between communism and capitalism, it does entail an ideological struggle between cultural nationalism and post-World War II liberalism as the defining characteristics for national identity. On a global scale, Russia’s narrative rejects the universalization of liberalism as a framework for modern national identity, which resonates with many nations in the Global South due to their feelings of colonial resentment. But while liberal universalization has not worked in practice, liberalism has mostly prevailed in the West despite its identity crisis and should be protected as a way of life. Modern Western societies operate on the principles of democracy, free market economies, human rights, civil rights, political liberties, collective security, and multilateral institutional cooperation and have believed in enlarging collective institutions to welcome other aspiring nations in Europe.

If the West wants to diminish Russian influence in Europe, which is linked to corruption, coercion, illiberalism, and an imperial vision over former Soviet states (all opposing values to liberal normativity), then stopping Russian power from increasing makes strategic sense. It can do this through persevering in Ukraine, rearming Europe, and uniting under a common set of values. Should the West decide that the war in Ukraine is not really its fight and cut its support for Ukraine’s defense, that would represent an acceptance of not just Russian civilizational nationalism, but Russian aggression as a fact of life on the European continent. It would signal to

states that were historically under the Russian yoke that they have no real future in Western liberal institutions—that their membership is prohibited on the basis of Russia’s imperialist Eurasian ideology.

For Russia, this fight is essentially framed as a “Holy War.” The West needs to realize what is at stake and take long-term, concerted action to ensure the best possible outcome for Ukraine. A cold war defined by primal terms such as *culture*, *nationalism*, and *religion* will lead to unending conflict and increase the odds of direct confrontation between the West and Russia. Constraining Russia’s ability to exert malign influence or launch wars of aggression on its neighbors is essential to mitigate this threat. Through the choices it makes in Ukraine, the West will define its role in the world amid today’s renewed great power competition.

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Endnotes






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