



Elites and Institutions in the Russian Thermidor: Regime Instrumentalism, Entrepreneurial Signaling, and Inherent Illiberalism

JULIAN G. WALLER

Abstract

The modern Russian regime is one of the more prominent states espousing an explicitly illiberal ideological worldview domestically and abroad. Although regime illiberalism is many-sided, including authoritarian governance characteristics, international diffusion practices, and domestic political management, observers have often assumed that illiberalism is at its core an instrumental or cynical approach employed by the Russian leadership to bolster regime security and promote its foreign policy. This article suggests rather that observed illiberalism has additional roots in the dynamics of authoritarian domestic politics and society, rather than being characterized as simply a cynical top-down strategy of the Kremlin. Rather, regime illiberalism is congruent with many domestic drivers of political and societal influence. While decision-making elites certainly play up illiberalism instrumentally for purposes of regime maintenance and positional international influence, large institutional constituencies for substantive illiberalism also exist independent of regime goals. After suggesting two institutional formats—the Russian parliament and national broadcast media—in which observed illiberalism can best be understood as an entrepreneurial behavior by lower-tier elites signaling loyalty and usefulness to the regime center, three further institutional sources are identified to be constituted by inherently illiberal organizational and symbolic forms that would promote illiberalism regardless of the regime's strategic preferences: the Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian Armed Forces, and the symbolic center of the patronal presidency

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Introduction—Complicating the Logic of Illiberal Instrumentalism¹

Depending on who one asks, Russia has been an avowedly “illiberal” regime since 2014, or 2012, or 2007, or 1999, or 1993, or for its entire post-Soviet history. This, of course, says as much about how we understand the concept of illiberalism as it says about Russian political history. Indeed, it is a continuing scholarly challenge to properly delineate the fundamental qualities of illiberalism, yet there is wide agreement on its existence and importance.

Despite this trouble, there is general scholarly consensus that the contemporary Russian Federation is an illiberal regime as of the start of the 2020s.² Furthermore, we can speak of the Russian regime as now holding to a general ideology of illiberalism as well as containing many longstanding illiberal elements. Once a curious mixed (or “hybrid”) polity of kleptocratic, neoliberal authoritarianism built atop a liberal democratic constitutional structure, a fully illiberal Thermidor has taken hold in recent years, engendering a sharp turn toward social conservatism, cultural traditionalism, philosophical reaction, and explicit anti-Westernism.³

For many, Russian illiberalism is synonymous with its undoubtedly authoritarian form of governance.⁴ This general association of non-democracy with non-liberal politics has inspired scholars to look for regime-level motivations to explain rising illiberalism. In this widespread and diverse school of thought, illiberalism within both the state and the broader society is a function of an instrumental logic on the part of the authoritarian executive.⁵ In this sense, Russian illiberalism has been intentionally cultivated and promoted domestically and abroad for reasons of state security, geopolitical posturing, and regime maintenance.⁶ This search for instrumental reasoning behind changes in regime ideology tends to view illiberalism as primarily cynical and locates agency primarily in the Kremlin.

This framework holds many insights, and it is certainly the case that the Kremlin has put much thought into crafting strategies that bolster illiberalism, while also ensuring that the proceeds of this effort attend to regime priorities and do not

¹ The author thanks Marlene Laruelle and Anya Fink for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

² Marlene Laruelle, “Making Sense of Russia’s Illiberalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (2020): 115–29, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0049>.

³ Petr Kratovil and Gaziza Shakanova, “The Patriotic Turn and Re-Building Russia’s Historical Memory: Resisting the West, Leading the Post-Soviet East?” *Problems of Post-Communism* (June 2020): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2020.1757467>; Neil Robinson, “Russian Neo-Patrimonialism and Putin’s ‘Cultural Turn,’” *Europe-Asia Studies* 69, no. 2 (February 2017): 348–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2016.1265916>; Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, “The Pussy Riot Affair and Putin’s Démarche from Sovereign Democracy to Sovereign Morality,” *Nationalities Papers* 42 (July 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09005992.2014.917027>;

⁴ Marlene Laruelle, “Conservatism as the Kremlin’s New Toolkit: An Ideology at the Lowest Cost,” *Russian Analytical Digest* 138 (November 2013): 2–4.

⁵ M. Steven Fish, “What Has Russia Become?,” *Comparative Politics* 50, no. 3 (2018): 327–46; Vladimir Gel’man, *Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015).

⁶ Instrumentalist analytical frameworks explain political activity by assuming that they are undertaken intentionally for a specific outcome and the means by which an activity is undertaken reflects primarily a narrowly rational effort to achieve that outcome. Thus, ideological shifts can be accounted for by their beneficial outcomes for the regime, rather than any genuine belief on the part of political actors. Instrumentalism holds a family resemblance to older models of structural functionalism, although admitting more agency on the part of politically relevant actors. See: B. Guy Peters, *Institutional Theory in Political Science, Fourth Edition: The New Institutionalism* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019); George Ritzer and William Yagatich, “Contemporary Sociological Theory,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer, Wiley Online Books, 2012, 98–118, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444347388.ch6>; Ruth Lane, “Structural-Functionalism Reconsidered: A Proposed Research Model,” *Comparative Politics* 26, no. 4 (July 1994): 461–77, <https://doi.org/10.2307/422026>.

⁷ For examples of instrumentalist approaches to explaining rising illiberalism broadly, see: Ruth Wodak, “Entering the ‘Post-Shame Era’: The Rise of Illiberal Democracy, Populism and Neo-Authoritarianism in Europe,” *Global Discourse* 9, no. 1 (January 2019): 195–213, <https://doi.org/10.1332/204378919X15470487645420>; Ivan Krastev, “Eastern Europe’s Illiberal Revolution: The Long Road to Democratic Decline,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 3 (2018): 49–59.

empower independent actors.⁷ In this sense, illiberalism is simply the regime trimming the ideological sails for maximum popular support and opposition demobilization. On this reading, the substantive content of Russian illiberalism is at best an opportunistic example of successful instrumentalism and at worst an insultingly cynical manipulation of a passive population that illiberalism seems able to hold in thrall. That is, there is little genuine about Russian illiberalism, beyond an instrumentalist decision-making logic at the very center of the regime that has found a new, manipulable means of ensuring its own survival.

This article furthers an alternative view. While today's growing illiberalism is without a doubt partially a function of safeguarding priorities operationalized in an illiberal manner, it continues to creatively develop and find fertile soil due to internal drivers of Russian illiberalism that act in congruence with, but not necessarily directed by, regime goals. I argue that incentives for political signaling among lesser elites and the power of genuine institutional bastions of illiberalism have as much to do with Russian illiberalism as more instrumentalist explanations. In this way, a mixture of demand-side and voluntarist approaches to Russian illiberalism helpfully supplements the dominant instrumentalist framework to explain the interplay of illiberalism and politics in Russia today.⁸

What are these alternative sources of dynamic illiberalism then? I suggest there are both *entrepreneurial* and *inherent* forms of illiberalism operating in Russia that are distinct from the instrumentalist strategies promoted at the top of the regime. Dynamics of entrepreneurial illiberalism are the result of signaling behavior by *lower-tier elites*, that is, dependent political actors in subordinate, public-facing institutions. These elites are strongly influenced by shifts in the Kremlin line, but some take an ambitious, creative approach that leads to producing the substantive content of illiberal policy and legitimating narratives without full direction by the regime itself. In both the parliament and the press, this dynamic has played out quite successfully for some figures—even sometimes to the embarrassment of the regime leadership. In this way, the instrumental encouragement of illiberalism for regime maintenance purposes has led to policy innovation as well as new narratives developed directly by illiberal entrepreneurs—something beyond the scope of top-down models of instrumental illiberalism.

Inherent illiberalism, meanwhile, can be sourced to stable institutions that are organizationally or symbolically illiberal at their core, such that illiberalism would be promoted from these organizations regardless of the regime's given preferred ideology, or lack thereof. These important entities in state and society do not need incentives to push illiberal agendas, as a form of inherent illiberalism is already constitutive to their makeup. This article identifies three such inherently illiberal institutions: the Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian Armed Forces, and the symbolic institution of the patronal presidency itself.⁹ All three institutions are already endowed with significant illiberal characteristics, histories, and structural positions that make the expansion of illiberalism quite congruent with their self-understood institutional missions and inherited worldviews.

This article explores how lower-tier elites—incentivized to engage in illiberal creativity as signals from the top interact with their own precariousness—and the increasingly powerful Church, military, and presidency contribute to contemporary Russian illiberalism in a way that supplements frameworks of instrumental

⁷ For high-quality examples of instrumentalist analyses of illiberalism in the Russian case, see: J. Paul Goode, "Patriotic Legitimation and Everyday Patriotism in Russia's Constitutional Reform," *Russian Politics* 6, no. 1 (March 30, 2021): 112–29, <https://doi.org/10.30965/24518921-00601002>; Katharina Bluhm and Mihai Varga, "Conservative Developmental Statism in East Central Europe and Russia," *New Political Economy* 25, no. 4 (June 6, 2020): 642–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2019.1639146>.

⁸ Sheri Berman, "The Causes of Populism in the West," *Annual Review of Political Science* 24, no. 1 (2021): 71–88, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041719-102503>.

⁹ This article uses "Russian Orthodox Church," "Orthodox Church," and "the Church" interchangeably.

illiberalism directed from the top. Although the latter is quite clearly operational in the Russian state and society as well, we are well placed to complicate the picture by noting a much more multilayered dynamic of illiberalism in Russia today.

From Artifice to Genuine Reaction—Illiberalism in Thermidorian Russia

A *post hoc* overview of the Russian regime's post-Soviet political trajectory might suggest a considerable legacy of illiberalism, yet that would poorly serve the far more varied ideological contortions of the last three decades. Although the advent of the Putin regime quickly turned consolidated authoritarian control into the primary frame through which scholars viewed Russia, subsequent movements toward associating Russia with illiberalism specifically have been most concentrated in the last decade. The Russian regime of the 2000s, autocratizing as it was, remained in many senses a solid partner and collaborator with the liberal international order, and indeed supported liberal economic policies within its borders.¹⁰ Even on cultural matters, Russia was far more liberal in the mid-2000s, especially in media and entertainment spheres, than an observer a decade later might be willing to believe.¹¹

It is, of course, helpful to understand what we mean by illiberalism here. As a general term, “illiberalism” can be conceptualized as a strain of political culture that opposes philosophical liberalism, chafes against counter-hierarchical political institutions, and promotes a variety of collective, majoritarian, national-level, and culturally integrative approaches to contemporary political society.¹² When found in institutions or when describing the impact of legislation or government policies, we may understand them to be “illiberal.” When supported at the level of the entire polity, we can view “illiberalism” as a descriptor for the regime’s ideology itself.

Although it would in no way be fair to say that Russia was ever a liberal society, the convergence on traditionalist illiberalism that has occurred in the second decade of the twenty-first century is quite far from the booming, fast-living reality of urban Russia in the first decade of Putin’s rule. Proposed turning points have been put forward many times: for analysts of domestic formal politics, the state-patriotic framing of the Second Chechen War; for foreign policy specialists, the 2007 Munich Conference speech; for cultural critics, the 2012 Pussy Riot affair. One can, of course, find accounts desperately warning of illiberalism even in the 1990s, but these blanket statements should be viewed against the empirical reality of neoliberal economics, efforts at Western integration, and media-promoted antipolitical entertainment-liberalism during different segments of the Russian long 2000s.

Yet an illiberal Thermidor undoubtedly has set upon the Russian regime, at the very

¹⁰ Peter Rutland, “Neoliberalism and the Russian Transition,” *Review of International Political Economy* 20, no. 2 (April 2013): 332–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2012.727844>; Stephen J. Collier, *Post-Soviet Social: Neoliberalism, Social Modernity, Biopolitics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Sharon Werning Rivera, “Elites and the Diffusion of Foreign Models in Russia,” *Political Studies* 52, no. 1 (March 2004): 43–62, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2004.00463.x>.

¹¹ Elisabeth Schimpfössl and Ilya Yablokov, “Media Elites in Post-Soviet Russia and Their Strategies for Success,” *Russian Politics* 2, no. 1 (March 2017): 32–53, <https://doi.org/10.1163/2451-8921-00201003>; John A. Dunn, “Lottizzazione Russian Style: Russia’s Two-Tier Media System,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 66, no. 9 (October 21, 2014): 1425–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2014.956441>; Ruben Enikolopov, Maria Petrova, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya, “Media and Political Persuasion: Evidence from Russia,” *American Economic Review* 101, no. 7 (2011): 3253–85.

¹² For a variation on this working conceptualization, see Marlene Laruelle, “Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction,” *Illiberalism Studies Program* (blog), April 8, 2021, <https://www.illiberalism.org/illiberalism-conceptual-introduction/>, as well as rather differing definitions in the growing scholarly literature. See, for example, Jasper Theodor Kauth and Desmond King, “Illiberalism,” *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 61, no. 3 (December 2020): 365–405, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975620000181>; Reijer Hendrikse, “Neo-Illiberalism,” *Geoforum* 95 (October 1, 2018): 169–78, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.07.002>; Péter Krekó and Zsolt Enyedy, “Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán’s Laboratory of Illiberalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018): 39–51, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0043>; Laurent Pech and Kim Lane Schepple, “Illiberalism Within: Rule of Law Backsliding in the EU,” *Cambridge Yearbook of European Legal Studies* 19 (December 2017): 3–47, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cel.2017.9>.

latest sometime between the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and the Crimean crisis of 2014. Most scholars peg the 2011–2012 opposition protests that nearly toppled the regime as the pivot, with many terming it a decisive “conservative turn,” while others regard it as the final step in the transition from a “hybrid” to a “full” authoritarian regime.¹³ Thermidorian Russia has been a complicated place, however: whenever the illiberal turn came, it brought with it a variety of quite different incentives for political, economic, and societal elites to take advantage of the worldview shift away from 2000s-era hegemonic liberalism.

Some accounts suggest that the movement to illiberalism was baked into the process of political consolidation and gradual autocratization that began when Vladimir Putin rose to the presidency, and thus was simply a natural movement based on logics of authoritarianism.¹⁴ Others have argued that illiberalism itself was primarily a tool of foreign policy, used to drum up domestic support by ratcheting up international tensions, a peacetime form of diversionary war theory that would later turn hot.¹⁵ Finally, many have argued for a variant on this thesis (with less emphasis on the geopolitical component) where the transformation into a fully illiberal regime was all about domestic political management from the get-go, an instrumental means of purging Western-tied elites, civil society groups, and businesses in order to solidify and secure power.¹⁶

These theories may all be correct—indeed, they all likely play large roles in ensuring the place that illiberalism now holds at the center of the regime. Yet they all share a similar logical core, claiming that illiberalism was a conscious choice by the autocratizing executive to consolidate allies against oppositional rivals, to posture internationally against the dominant global order, or to ensure domestic tranquility and ostracize regime opponents. This logic is instrumental and functionalist, and while such theories may explain much, they attribute far too much agency to an omniscient, all-calculating ruling figure (or group) that knows just which knobs to turn and buttons to push to arrive at preferred outcomes for regime stability and opposition management.¹⁷

The alternative account put forward here suggests instead that while instrumental motivations are powerful and relevant to the study of authoritarian politics in general and in Russia in particular, there are important political and societal institutions in

13 Nicolai N. Petro, “How the West Lost Russia: Explaining the Conservative Turn in Russian Foreign Policy,” *Russian Politics* 3, no. 3 (November 2018): 305–32, <https://doi.org/10.1163/2451-8921-00303001>; Sharafutdinova, “The Pussy Riot Affair and Putin’s Démarche from Sovereign Democracy to Sovereign Morality”; Vladimir Gel’man, “The Rise and Decline of Electoral Authoritarianism in Russia,” *Demokratizatsiya* 22, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 503–22.

14 Graeme Gill, “Russia and the Vulnerability of Electoral Authoritarianism?” *Slavic Review* 75, no. 2 (2016): 354–73, <https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.75.2.354>; Gel’man, *Authoritarian Russia*.

15 Joe D. Hagan, “Diversionary Theory of War in Foreign Policy Analysis,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, October 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.412>; Lilia Shevtsova, “The Authoritarian Resurgence: Forward to the Past in Russia,” *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 2 (April 2015): 22–36, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0028>; Andrei P. Tsygankov, “Assessing Cultural and Regime-Based Explanations of Russia’s Foreign Policy: ‘Authoritarian at Heart and Expansionist by Habit?’,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 4 (June 2012): 695–713, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2012.671568>; although for a more skeptical alternative account of illiberalism and foreign policy, see Paul Robinson, “Russia’s Emergence as an International Conservative Power,” *Russia in Global Affairs* 18 (January 1, 2020): 10–37, <https://doi.org/10.31278/1810-6374-2020-18-1-10-37>.

16 Robinson, “Russian Neo-Patrimonialism and Putin’s ‘Cultural Turn’”; Jardar Østbo, “Securitizing ‘Spiritual-Moral Values’ in Russia,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 3 (May 4, 2017): 200–216, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2016.1251023>.

17 For examples of the important functionalist school of authoritarian politics, see, among many, Jennifer Gandhi, Ben Noble, and Milan Svolik, “Legislatures and Legislative Politics Without Democracy,” *Comparative Political Studies* 53, no. 9 (August 2020): 1359–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414020919930>; Milan W. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511510090>; Ellen Lust-Okar, “Divided They Rule: The Management and Manipulation of Political Opposition,” *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2 (January 2004): 159, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4150141>.

Russia that act as inherent, genuine sources of illiberalism. One cannot understand even the instrumental usage of illiberalism as a broad ideology without understanding that Russian society itself is powerfully infused with illiberal institutions. This is a demand-side and voluntarist approach to explaining Russian illiberalism, without rising to the claim that illiberalism is itself inherently grassroots or based in mass appeal, although this certainly may be true as well.¹⁸

Instrumentalist logics remain useful, of course. Illiberalism has certainly been powerfully incentivized by signals from the top, with the 2007 Munich Security Conference providing presidential imprimatur for anti-Westernism, the 2012 Pussy Riot affair acting as a signpost for a fundamental change in the symbolic relations between church and state, and the 2013–2014 Ukraine crisis and particularly the annexation of Crimea as a hard line in marking out an authorized, official nationhood. This sea change from a crony-capitalist, antipolitical Russia to an illiberal one has caused a resounding shift in institutional and political incentives.¹⁹

With many of these ideological shifts directly attributed to statements from the national leader himself, many observers have inferred instrumentalism as their motivation. What is perhaps more important, however, is the degree to which the rest of the country has followed suit. Below, I supplement this instrumentalist depiction with two interrelated realities often missing from existing accounts: 1) that elites, especially in the political class, have reacted to these strong signals from above with an entrepreneurial spirit and sought to signal in turn their own loyalty to the executive by performing and developing ever more illiberal policies and rhetoric; and 2) that illiberalism was already deeply entrenched in key institutions in society and the state, such that their gradual empowerment would naturally lead to further illiberalism down the road. Not all has been artifice or instrumentality in the Russian illiberal revanche, yet nor has it all been genuine. Rather, between the two we can find a far more plausible overarching descriptive statement about illiberalism in modern Russia.

The Conservative Turn and Elite Opportunism

The Russian regime's shift in tonal emphasis toward an explicit form of illiberalism in its ideological and discursive content has not been a subtle affair and is a central point of departure for scholars writing over the last decade. Often termed the “conservative” or “cultural turn,” the change should be understood to be distinct from the polity’s movement toward authoritarianism (noted as early as the first years of Putin’s first term) or growing reliance on repression of the opposition (clear since at least the abrupt contraction of the party system in 2005–2007).²⁰

Many have argued that this preference for illiberal rhetoric and increasing reliance on illiberal symbolism can be explained as a tool of regime maintenance, in keeping with the instrumentalist logics noted above. Taking sides in a series of cultural battlegrounds—primed by the Pussy Riot affair and then let loose in the “Mad

¹⁸ Berman, “The Causes of Populism in the West.”

¹⁹ Robinson, “Russian Neo-Patrimonialism and Putin’s ‘Cultural Turn.’”

²⁰ Nikolay Petrov, Maria Lipman, and Henry E. Hale, “Three Dilemmas of Hybrid Regime Governance: Russia from Putin to Putin,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 30, no. 1 (January 2014): 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2013.825140>; Grigorii V. Golosov, “Co-Optation in the Process of Dominant Party System Building: The Case of Russia,” *East European Politics* 30, no. 2 (April 3, 2014): 271–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2014.899211>.

Printer”²¹ era—the regime outflanked growing oppositional agitation by casting protesters and the publicly discontented as a disloyal, anti-Russian minority. Key speeches by Putin, the instigation and acceptance of a variety of new illiberal laws and increasing use of illiberal frameworks based on supporting family values, traditional Russian culture, religiosity, national greatness, and military strength vis-à-vis a libertine and threatening West are all hallmarks of this new approach.²²

Much of this turn toward cultural issues can be found piecemeal in the 2000s, yet only after 2011 did it receive explicit regime backing at the top in all forms, alongside a concomitant rejection of Western social and political influence more broadly.²³ The instrumental use of conservative and traditionalist frames for political gain has not only been successful in outmaneuvering an opposition already on the backfoot from simple authoritarian repression, but has also been largely internalized by the lower-tier regime elite—in contrast to actual regime insiders, who are often more moderate in their articulation of this new regime framework.²⁴

Lower-tier elites are political, economic, and cultural elites that are members of the regime writ broadly but are not part of the selectorate—or “power groups,” in local parlance—that forms the core set of decision-making and decision-confirming actors. We understand the regime here to be a set of individuals and central institutions that determine practices of power and are bound in a “single-pyramid” patronal network extending from the ruler to provincial officials and non-government, loyalist actors.²⁵ Yet lower-tier elites can also be ambitious figures, and dependence does not automatically equate to quiescence, even if it certainly encourages regime loyalty.²⁶ Rather, the turn toward illiberalism provides new opportunities to prove worth, signal loyalty, and even find means to climb higher in the ranks— incentivizing a form of entrepreneurial illiberalism that has led to considerable policy and narrative creativity.

²¹ The “Mad Printer” (or “Rabid Printer”) is a pejorative term that refers to the VI convocation (2012–2016) and the first sessions of the VII convocation (2016–2017) of the State Duma, in which the parliament was labeled a “vzbesivushisa” or “beshenyi printer” for the rapid passage of bills that were considered by the press to be hastily written and abnormally illiberal. For usage in media, see for example, “Shestoi soziv Gosdumy prinial rekordnoe chislo zakonov za dvadsat’ let,” *RBC*, July 25, 2016, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/25/07/2016/5795314c9a7947daf4d5b941>. For a partial scholarly account, see Julian G. Waller, “Mimicking the Mad Printer: Legislating Illiberalism in the Post-Soviet Space,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, April 28, 2021), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3836226>. For a discussion of the reining-in of the “Mad Printer” era during the VII Duma convocation, see Ben Noble, “The State Duma, the ‘Crimean Consensus,’ and Volodin’s Reforms,” in *A Successful Failure: Russia After Crimea*(a), ed. O. Irisova et al. (Warsaw: Centrum Polsko-Rosyjskiego Dialogu i Porozumienia, 2017), 103–17; Ben Noble, “Volodin’s Duma,” *Oxford University Politics Blog*, December 14, 2016, <https://blog.politics.ox.ac.uk/volodins-duma-volodins-reforms-go-much-beyond-symbolic-pr/>; Ben Noble, “Volodin’s Duma: Cabinet 2.0,” *RIDDLE Russia*, December 23, 2019, <https://www.ridl.io/en/volodin-s-duma-cabinet-2-0/>.

²² Katharina Bluhm and Martin Brand, “Traditional Values’ Unleashed: The Ultraconservative Influence on Russian Family Policy,” in *New Conservatives in Russia and East Central Europe*, ed. Katharina Bluhm and Mihai Varga (New York: Routledge, 2019), 223–44; Glenn Diesen, “Russia as an International Conservative Power: The Rise of the Right-Wing Populists and Their Affinity Towards Russia,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 28, no. 2 (2020): 182–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2019.1705770>; Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk, “A New Russian Conservatism: Domestic Roots and Repercussions for Europe,” *Notes Internacionales CIDOB* 93 (June 2014): 1–6.

²³ Sharafutdinova, “The Pussy Riot Affair and Putin’s Démarche from Sovereign Democracy to Sovereign Morality”; Melik Kaylan, “Kremlin Values: Putin’s Strategic Conservatism,” *World Affairs* 177, no. 1 (2014): 9–17.

²⁴ “Politburo 2.0: Renovation Instead of Dismantling,” Minchenko Consulting, October 12, 2017, http://www.minchenko.ru/netcat_files/userfiles/2/Dokumenty/Politburo_2.0_October_2017_ENG.pdf; Konstantin Gaaze, “Court and Politburo: Putin’s Changing Inner Circle,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, September 22, 2017, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/73193>.

²⁵ Henry E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Milan W. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival* (New York: MIT Press, 2003).

²⁶ Bryn Rosenfeld, *The Autocratic Middle Class: How State Dependency Reduces the Demand for Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

Existing explanations account for elite acceptance of this new culturalist illiberalism, but often fail to distinguish among regime actors. Robinson argues that the cultural turn acted as a singular ideational coordination point such that elites could be assured of their position by towing the new Kremlin line.²⁷ This is justified by the neopatrimonial substrate upon which the regime is built but misses some of the fundamental power dynamics at play. As Hale shows, patrimonial forms of governance and elite networks are based on actual personal networks, embedded power groups, and the focal point of the patronal presidency itself. Ideational justification in this schema is *post hoc* or an overlay on the fundamental power structure, not the basis of the structure itself.²⁸

Robinson is correct in pointing to the new cultural framework as important for elite coordination—and therefore for mutual signaling between principals and clients—but not at the level of the selectorate elite. That upper-tier selectorate remains full of secular, neoliberal, or otherwise ideologically uncommitted figures as well as true believers and eager instrumentalists. The difference is that these actors hold their places in the “single-pyramid” system by dint of their *de facto* location in the political order—real positions of economic, military, or security forces-based power, plus those with personal connections to and histories with the president himself.

The coordination dynamic of resurgent illiberalism, meanwhile, is most strongly felt by figures who do *not* have such ties or hold the command of these sources of real political power. These are what I have termed “lower-tier” elites: people who occupy subordinate institutions and are fundamentally dependent on higher patrons or the focal authority of the Kremlin itself (not the powers that constitute it). It is lower-tier elites who have reacted most forcefully to the illiberal shift in rhetoric.

This is an important point, as it explains why the most illiberal segments of the state-regime matrix are in public-facing institutions understood to be distant from power fully expressed. Yet because these institutions *do* have important formal and discursive powers, illiberalism is substantively strengthened by their increasingly illiberal activities and behaviors. Expectations of reward—or at least not punishment—for pushing the new line are an example of the power of positional uncertainty acting on dependent elites. Lower-tier elite uncertainty is a powerful motivator, especially for those that do not have other bases of power to fall back upon.

It is in those institutions filled with lower-tier elites that we see illiberalism in action beyond a cynical instrumentalism used for immediate regime strengthening. Here, illiberalism is promoted not as a tool of regime control, but as a signal by subordinate elites that they are on the same page as the regime and are “useful engines” for its new course. The belief that acting in line with the wishes of superiors – even if they do not express themselves perfectly clearly on a given matter – is a common feature of principal-client analysis, and disaggregating selectorate elites from lower-tier regime elites is the key to understanding how illiberalism has been promoted in the Russian state and society since the “turn” at the start of the 2010s.

Illiberalism as National-Political Congruence

This promotion of illiberalism, incentivized by signals from the top and acted upon by elites concerned and uncertain about their future place in the regime, is far from the only source of illiberalism in Russia today. Both scholarship and the popular press have long employed the unfortunate trope of Russia’s supposed natural authoritarianism (often conflated with illiberalism), with the most sophisticated arguments showing a strong path-dependence of illiberal governing institutions

²⁷ Robinson, “Russian Neo-Patrimonialism and Putin’s ‘Cultural Turn.’”

²⁸ Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective*.

throughout its political history.²⁹ Although we should question simple narratives of an inevitably authoritarian or illiberal Russian state, it is undeniable that there remains a strong streak of inherent illiberalism in societal and state institutions in Russia that has survived intact into the present day.

We can understand this in two distinct ways. First, we can see it as the legacy of prior dominant ideologies, such as Soviet-era communism, Tsarist autocracy, Russian ethnic nationalism or non-Russian ethnic particularism, state-centric patriotism, and the metaphysical claims of the Russian Orthodox Church, traditional forms of Islam, and other religious traditions. All of these make claims, to greater or lesser degrees, on communal membership or humanity writ large, deny the validity of competing pluralist truths, argue for mutually exclusive forms of the common good, and reject absolute individualism as an organizing or legitimating principle vis-à-vis collective or communal authorities. These worldviews are indeed definitionally illiberal at their core.

Second, we can see forms of natural illiberalism in specific institutional formats that rely on hierarchical authority, often without—or with explicitly subordinate and denuded—electoral or popular assent. This can be seen at the state level in authoritarian or autocratic political formats or at the societal unit level, where individual institutions or social bodies are arranged and structured in non-liberal or non-pluralist ways. We will focus the selected vignette cases below on these sorts of structurally-illiberal institutions, although most of these also take important legitimating principles from these prior ideational inheritances. Illiberal structural forms and constitutive illiberal principles indeed are often strongly associated in the Russian case, even if they do not necessarily follow.

Of course, these forms of inherent illiberalism should not be understood as unique either to Russia or to authoritarian regimes. Modern liberal democracies also make illiberal or totalizing claims, with liberalism itself often acting as a hegemonic arbiter of collective norms—although defined through individual choice and autonomy, rendering it distinct from illiberalism as we conceptualize it here. Furthermore, illiberalism—in institutional form or as illiberal “practices”—in liberal democracies often coexists with liberal governance or cultural institutions.³⁰ Thus, we should understand these composite forms and sources of illiberalism to be a normal human phenomenon; the question is simply one of emphasis and relative political or societal power.

Inherited sources of illiberalism are therefore distinct from either regime maneuvering or elite incentivization patterns. These sources have undoubtedly become more pronounced in recent years, with a clear working relationship and instrumental usage of these inherent illiberal institutions in the service of regime goals. Yet they would promote and act in generally illiberal capacities regardless of regime preference—it is merely that their relative importance has changed.

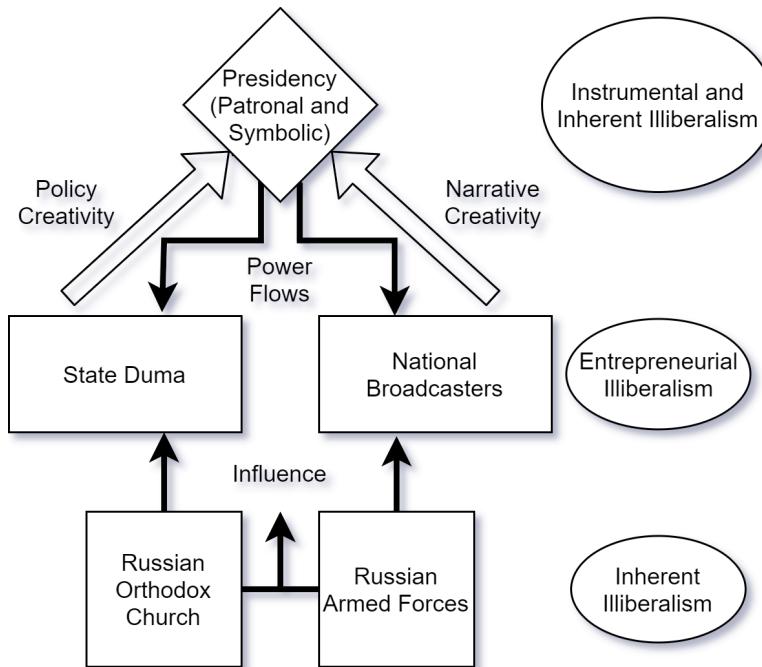
By accepting the inherent illiberalism found within certain key institutions situated firmly within the shifting political whirl of Russian state and society, rather than simply instrumentalist vehicles wielded at the whim of the regime, we can understand such institutions to operate as congruent with the *longue durée* of Russian political history. They are perennial sources of illiberalism, as well as newly-empowered means by which the regime has promoted illiberalism using a distinct cultural, societal, and state toolbox of options found in the Russian sociocultural and political milieu.

²⁹ Paul Robinson, *Russian Conservatism* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Richard Pipes, *Russian Conservatism and Its Critics: A Study in Political Culture* (Yale University Press, 2005).

³⁰ Kauth and King, “Illiberalism,” 367–69; Marlies Glasius, “What Authoritarianism Is ... and Is Not: A Practice Perspective,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 3 (May 1, 2018): 515–33. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iwy060>; Jacqueline Behrend and Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Illiberal Practices: Territorial Variance within Large Federal Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

What Gjerde terms the striving for a “consensus history” of Russia is a case in point in this sense: institutions, historical memories, and frames of understanding that are already illiberal in makeup have become increasingly prominent and been chosen by a regime that is itself inching toward illiberalism.³¹ To that end, it is insufficient to hold only to an instrumentalist and cynical reading of Russian illiberalism, but rather to acknowledge and explore *sui generis* sources of illiberalism alongside and supplemented to useful functionalist frames.

Figure 1. Stylized Depiction of Some Domestic Illiberal Dynamics in Russia



Source: Author

The figure above presents a stylized rendition of how illiberalism in Russia maintains a dynamism described by both entrepreneurial and inherent characteristics, even while being enmeshed in a regime seeking to instrumentalize illiberalism for its own purposes. Here, the public-facing, subordinate institutions of the parliament and broadcast media ecosystem react to the broad illiberal turn by engaging in entrepreneurial illiberalism – leading to illiberal policy creativity and innovation from the more ambitious parliamentarians, while narrative creativity and discursive innovation is prompted by broadcast personalities taking opportunistic advantage of the new illiberal environment. Meanwhile, stable institutional sources of inherent illiberalism – such as the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Armed Forces – influence and inform the ideational and symbolic toolkit used by illiberal entrepreneurs as well as the Kremlin itself, while also further aggrandizing their own power. Finally, the presidency in its central, symbolic position at the top of the regime similarly acts as a locus for inherent illiberalism, while also acting instrumentally per

³¹ Kristian Lundby Gjerde, “The Use of History in Russia 2000–2011: The Kremlin and the Search for Consensus,” *East European Politics* 31, no. 2 (April 3, 2015): 149–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2015.1035779>.

its place at the core of the regime itself, from which power ultimately flows in the Russian system of authoritarian governance.

What follows is a discussion of how illiberalism has been instrumentally activated by the regime and acted upon by lower-tier elites as a form of loyalist signaling and coordination. Two public-facing bodies of lower-tier regime elites—the parliament and the national broadcast media—are provided as examples of this entrepreneurial illiberal dynamic. The article then provides vignette illustrations of three inherently illiberal institutions—the Church, the Armed Forces, and the presidency—that have become bolder in their influence and work to propagate illiberalism in the contemporary regime, while not holding to the same elite incentivization dynamics found elsewhere.

Entrepreneurialism in Action—Illiberalism as Regime Signaling

Entrepreneurial illiberalism has flourished across the Russian regime, especially in subordinate, yet public-facing institutions. This is not surprising, as lower-tier elites in authoritarian regimes—that is, elites that constitute the regime writ broadly but not the electorate—are particularly vulnerable to sudden changes in regime whims. Lower-tier elites have considerably less political heft should they become the target of anticorruption actions, the victim of corporate raiding or personal property violations, or the subject of black PR smear campaigns. Their vulnerability is a feature of their very position, reliant on patrons higher up the political vertical. This is notable because lower-tier elites are sometimes less targeted than their patrons (see recent major corruption cases brought against sitting regional governors rather than members of the local legislature or judiciary). Yet in their place as patronal subjects far lower down the chain of *kryshas* relative to other regime elites, the shifting sands of regime ideology means much more. There is simply far less room for error.

In this vein, and akin to Robinson's contention that the illiberal turn is fundamentally about elite coordination, Goode has recently argued that a form of “everyday patriotism”—strongly imbued with patriotic and nationalist symbolism—has provided an all-inclusive means of regulating elite competition, policing discursive boundaries of the acceptable, and providing access to patronage.³² This was seen recently in the uncontested acceptance of new constitutional revisions adopted in 2020 by various lower-tier elites in formal political positions and in the media. To some commentators' surprise, such elites spent far more time fussing about matters of illiberal signaling to be included in the constitution, such as confirming certain traditional values and formalizing a conceptualization of the nation, rather than negotiating even modest changes to the institutional distribution of power that a revised constitution could have hypothetically offered them.

While for upper-tier elites, changing ideological winds and regime autocratization often lead to greater silence and quiescence, for lower-tier elites silence is often not good enough. In fact, the more precarious nature of lower-tier elites means that they are far more eager to stick out their necks to entrepreneurially propose something in accordance with the current fashion of the regime. This audacity only goes one way: in the direction of upper-tier elite interest. There is no powerbase for such lower-tier elites to successfully and publicly oppose Kremlin goals. Yet it has led to cycles of illiberal creativity in Russia since at least 2012—most notably in the parliament and in national broadcast media.

In the Russian State Duma, long understood to be a “rubber-stamp” body under the firm control of political managers in the Presidential Administration, illiberalism as translated into rapid policy has been the guiding principle of one full convocation of deputies and remains an underlying current even after being curtailed by an embarrassed executive. Between 2012 and 2016, the Duma gained a reputation as a

³² Goode, “Patriotic Legitimation and Everyday Patriotism in Russia’s Constitutional Reform.”

“Mad Printer,” producing and passing reams of illiberal moral and social legislation, very little of which could be directly tied to administration prerogatives and which sometimes even embarrassed leadership. Small but ambitious cadres of lower-tier elites sought to raise their national profiles and signal their regime loyalty by putting forward increasingly illiberal laws that were deemed in keeping with indications coming from the Kremlin. As social legislation is often given a broader scope of parliamentary autonomy than that which impacts foreign policy, the military, or national industrial projects, the illiberal turn in Russia has been particularly noticeable in the Duma’s legislative business.

A second arena in which incentives derived from the Kremlin’s instrumentalism have necessitated increasing loyalist signaling behavior is the national media, which—while their subjects have long been determined by executive managers—have historically enjoyed considerable freedom of narrative framing and relative discursive emphasis. While some have argued that the media came under tighter central control after 2012 and especially the Crimean crisis, the opposite is closer to the truth: the Russian media were given ever-freer range to explore sensationalism, emotionalism, and yellow journalism, provided that these were always intoned in an expressly illiberal cant and never indicated concern about Kremlin policy. Charismatic talk shows and debate formats became rife with rivalrous signaling of ever more loyalty and innovation in pursuing the new Kremlin line, again peaking in ferocity in the mid-late 2010s.

Policy Creativity and Illiberal Incentives in the State Duma

The Russian legislature is often derided as a rubber-stamp body, and although a new corpus of academic literature has argued that subordinated authoritarian parliaments can remain quite meaningful for politics, it is undeniable that the body enjoys little respect either among the population or among regime elites.³³ Indeed, the State Duma is an excellent place to look at the behavior of lower-tier elites precisely because it is an unusually public venue for regime loyalists that sit outside of the electorate proper.

Despite its reputation as a non-entity, the Duma is far more engaged in authoritarian politics than many critics would admit. The primary problem with understanding the Duma is that many observers hold a naïve view of what parliaments *should* do, do not see that activity taking place in Russia, and therefore assume that the Duma is just a rubber stamp. In fact, although some periods of the Duma’s history can certainly be characterized as quiescent and dull, this has not been uniformly true throughout Putin’s tenure. The Duma may not have served as a body hostile to the presidency since the late 1990s, but that does not mean that it has been functionally nonexistent in Russian politics since the turn of the millennium.

Some scholars have noted that the Duma plays an important role in inter-ministerial fights, given the constitutional primacy of the legislature in formal policymaking. This makes the Duma a proxy in fights over budget items, as well as a tool to slow down policymaking progress and hammer out compromises between different government factions.³⁴ Other accounts suggest that Duma members are actively engaged in substantive amendment and policy initiatives, even if this function is

³³ Sharon Werning Rivera et al., “Survey of Russian Elites 2020: New Perspectives on Foreign and Domestic Policy,” *Hamilton College Report*, July 2020; Sharon Werning Rivera and David W. Rivera, “Are Siloviki Still Undemocratic? Elite Support for Political Pluralism during Putin’s Third Presidential Term,” *Russian Politics* 4, no. 4 (November 2019): 499–519, <https://doi.org/10.1163/2451-8921-00404004>; Kirill Petrov and Vladimir Gel’man, “Do Elites Matter in Russian Foreign Policy? The Gap between Self-Perception and Influence,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 5–6 (November 2, 2019): 450–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1662185>.

³⁴ Ben Noble, “Authoritarian Amendments: Legislative Institutions as Intraexecutive Constraints in Post-Soviet Russia,” *Comparative Political Studies* 53, no. 9 (August 1, 2020): 1417–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414018797941>; Ben Noble and Ekaterina Schulmann, “Not Just a Rubber Stamp: Parliament and Lawmaking,” in *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin’s Russia*, ed. Daniel Treisman (Brookings Institution Press, 2018), 49–82, <https://www.elibrary.ru/item.asp?id=38626395>.

usually limited to members of the ruling United Russia party.³⁵ And new evidence suggests that at least on moral and cultural issues, Duma committees may sometimes seize significant room to maneuver.³⁶

The focus on moral and cultural matters, especially during the “Mad Printer” era from 2012 to 2016, sheds light on how incentivization works on ambitious deputies to promote further illiberalism. Many bills that had previously been muzzled due to their controversial character were returned to committee and plenary discussion, leading to legislation that restricted public homosexuality, banned adoption to the United States, provided new legal protections for religious believers, and patronized the Russian Orthodox Church and other institutions of official religion in the 2010s.³⁷

While Western observers attributed this flurry of culturally conservative legislation to directives from the Kremlin, closer examination of the legislative process reveals a far more complicated picture in which the Duma Committee on the Family, Women, and Children, led by deputy Elena Mizulina, often played a leading role. Mizulina herself is a posterchild for the promotion of illiberalism as an agential tactic by ambitious lower-tier elites. A former member of a liberal party, she found greater status as a loyalist parliamentarian, rising to leadership over the course of a fairly quiescent period of legislative history in the late 2000s. By the early 2010s, she was in a position of procedural power as committee chairwoman that allowed her to act far more forthrightly and independently, although always remaining within the confines of regime acceptability. Both promoting and guiding final negotiations on a series of moral-cultural bills in the first half of the 2010s, her ingenuity and name-making in the committee seat seemed to prove worthwhile, and she was promoted to a Senatorial seat in the Federation Council in 2015.

As the State Duma is without a doubt a subordinate body relative to other parts of the state apparatus (with the exception of the Duma leadership, and particularly its speakership, which is very prestigious but rarely appointed from within), public signaling of ideological loyalty to the regime, coupled with the pursuit of creative legislative projects, has often been a rewarding approach, especially for those pushing illiberal policy. Another chairwoman, Irina Yarovaya, similarly found regime favor and promotion to higher ranks of the Duma leadership by sponsoring restrictive laws on protest and surveillance from her perch on the Committee on Security and Anticorruption.³⁸ There is evidence that Yarovaya acted more as a proxy for security agencies than as a creative illiberal entrepreneur in her own right, but the complexity and heavy scrutiny involved in the passage of bills such as the famous “Yarovaya Package” suggests that it would be oversimplification to consider her a mere proxy. The notable preeminence of female deputies in the sphere of illiberal policy suggests that while women are often directed into more feminine-coded spheres in contemporary Russian politics, this does not equate to locking them out of genuine political influence.³⁹

³⁵ Gerrit Krol, “Legislative Performance of the Russian State Duma: The Role of Parliament in an Authoritarian Regime,” *East European Politics* 33, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 450–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2017.1346504>.

³⁶ Waller, “Mimicking the Mad Printer.”

³⁷ Waller, “Mimicking the Mad Printer”; Lucy Pakhnyuk, “Foreign Agents and Gay Propaganda: Russian LGBT Rights Activism Under Pressure,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 27, no. 4 (2019): 479–96; Nikita Sleptcov, “Political Homophobia as a State Strategy in Russia,” *Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective* 12, no. 1 (January 2018): 140–61; Cai Wilkinson, “Putting ‘Traditional Values’ Into Practice: The Rise and Contestation of Anti-Homopropaganda Laws in Russia,” *Journal of Human Rights* 13, no. 3 (July 1, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2014.919218>.

³⁸ Federal Law of 6 July 2016 No. 375-FZ, “On Amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and the Criminal Procedure Code of the Russian Federation in terms of Establishing Additional Measures to Counter Terrorism and Ensure Public Safety.” See *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, July 20, 2016, <https://rg.ru/2016/07/11/uk375-dok.html>.

³⁹ Janet Elise Johnson, “Fast-Tracked or Boxed In? Informal Politics, Gender, and Women’s Representation in Putin’s Russia,” *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 3 (September 2016): 643–59, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592716001109>.

We can also note the attractiveness of illiberalism to ambitious and fame-eager deputies through the laws that were not in the end passed. The “Mad Printer” era was famous as much for scandalous legislative bills that had to be tabled and neutered in committee or in first readings because they attracted too much illiberal infamy for the Kremlin as the successful legislation that passed three readings and became law. Changing the national anthem to “God Save the Tsar,” opposing Darwinism in state education, proposing the creation of a “morality police” in the Ministry of Internal Affairs modeled on the Islamic *mutawa* that “promote virtue and prevent vice,” and reams of restrictive social media bills never made it beyond plenary or committee sessions. Yet the public-facing position of the Duma meant that such projects were consistently talked about in the press and within the halls of the legislature.⁴⁰

The State Duma is a thoroughly subordinate organ in the *de facto* constitutional order of the Russian polity, yet it has been one of the main venues through which we can see illiberalism in action—not through stage-managed speeches and carefully crafted repression, but as a tumultuous and often embarrassing mess of ambitious yet thoroughly dependent lower-tier elites working through their own perceptions of what the new regime line actually is. And given its formal powers and very public position, what is discussed in the Duma can quickly become either the impetus for new and creative forms of illiberalism or an unfortunate headache to be managed. Through the public-facing activity of the subordinate Russian parliament, we can see unplanned illiberalism grow in real time—connected to regime instrumentalism, but decidedly distinct in process and reasoning.

Russian Popular Media and the Draw of Illiberal Worldviews

The media ecosystem is perhaps an even more important arena of influence than the parliament, although they inevitably interact with each other quite extensively. From the outset, capturing and managing media was an important goal of the Putin regime.⁴¹ The active phase that involved taking control of national broadcasters was completed quite quickly, however; they were well in hand by the mid-2000s.⁴² What we find today is a media ecosystem that has been under regime control for so long that new generations of media elites are rising and it is no longer analytically relevant to simply recapitulate the truth that it is under Kremlin authority.⁴³

Thus, it is better to view media managers and media elites as fully coopted members of the lower-tier regime elite instead of as living in an active zone of political contestation, let alone as being a fourth estate *per se*. While the Kremlin continues to determine topics to be discussed or avoided in weekly Friday meetings with editorial heads, entrepreneurial television personalities are now permitted a great deal of leeway. Shifting incentives, viewer preferences, and internal views on the best way to sell or support the Kremlin now exist in a surprisingly fluid format.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ See, for some examples, “V Peterburge idet kampaniya za otstavku deputata Milonova,” *BBC Russian Service*, December 11, 2012, https://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2012/12/121211_st_pet_anti_milonov_campaign; “Milonov predlozhil ministru MVD sozdat v Rossii ‘Politsiu nrayov,’” *Rosbalt*, March 31, 2014, <https://www.rosbalt.ru/piter/2014/03/31/1250740.html>; “Russian Nationalist Lawmakers Call for Return to Tsarist Calendar, Anthem,” *Radio Farda*, June 7, 2017, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/russia-nationalist-lawmakers-tsarist-calendar-anthem/28534351.html>; “Milonov vnes zakonoproekt a zaprete sotssetei dla detei do 14 let,” *Radio Liberty*, April 10, 2017, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/28420660.html>.

⁴¹ Jonathan Becker, “Russia and the New Authoritarians,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 22, no. 2 (January 2014): 191–206; Olessia Koltsova, *News Media and Power in Russia* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁴² Anna Arutunyan, *The Media in Russia* (London: McGraw-Hill Education, 2009); Jonathan Becker, “Lessons from Russia: A Neo-Authoritarian Media System,” *European Journal of Communication* 19, no. 2 (June 1, 2004): 139–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323104042908>.

⁴³ Dmitry Strovsy, “The Impact of Political, Legal, and Economic Factors on Media Development in Russia (2000–2020),” in *Media and Public Relations Research in Post-Socialist Societies*, ed. Maureen C. Minelli et al. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

⁴⁴ Schimpfössl and Yablokov, “Media Elites in Post-Soviet Russia and Their Strategies for Success.”

This does not mean there is greater pluralist freedom, but rather that the tenor of loyalist state media often oscillates across different programs and channels, with innovative means of capturing viewership and molding public discourse often rewarded by editorial teams. The cultural shift toward state-approved illiberalism has led to a movement from an “infotainment” model to a much more directly ideological one.⁴⁵ We can see how elite incentives to conform to the regime’s new ideational preferences have led to the development of a particularly combative strain of illiberalism in the national media. Popular illiberal commentators have been given pride of place in no small part because they have not only correctly judged the regime’s mood, but also have been illiberal innovators themselves.

Much of this dynamic can be seen in the meteoric rise of Dmitry Kiselyov, with his entertaining promotion of a caustic anti-Westernism and vibrant state patriotism, on primetime state television. Although often given the title of the Kremlin’s spokesperson, he is better understood as an extremely successful illiberal entrepreneur who massages and even creates new regime discursive frames as an agenda-setter in national media. Distilling the illiberal mood into catchy soundbites, alarmist portrayals of the West, and slick presentations, he has met with considerable success that has been emulated by other media elites in press and on television.⁴⁶

Yet illiberalism in broadcast formats extends beyond headline news. Talk shows and political debates feature a bevy of lesser-known media figures and political agitators, all of whom play with different illiberal narratives or are weak liberal or leftist foils for more effective illiberal media performers. Broadcast channels associated with the Russian Orthodox Church or the Russian military similarly host a variety of illiberal programs that compete for ratings and audiences. In this sense, Russian media are quite plural, albeit with liberal or oppositional voices systematically marginalized.

There is no doubt that if the Kremlin reduced the pressure on national media, illiberalism in the broadcast media would be less hegemonic, yet individual personalities, programs, and channels have responded vigorously to the new illiberal incentives promoted by the system. In this way, lower-tier elites have made their names by competing to find the most popular or captivating way to publicize illiberalism—a far cry from the dull state propaganda found in the Soviet past or in other authoritarian regimes. Rather than seeking to provide a monotone pro-regime voice, Russian broadcast media elites have learned from the messy pluralist 1990s and the “infotainment” of the 2000s to create far more compelling forms of media illiberalism today.

Anchors of Inherent Illiberalism—Sources of Genuine Support

Illiberalism in Russia is not found simply in directives percolating from and promulgated by the top of the regime or in lower-tier elites’ responses to this ideological shift. In addition to these actors, illiberalism is found in its most genuine sense in certain core state and societal institutions that have a fundamentally illiberal worldview and are imbued with structures that naturally promote illiberalism. The implications here are important: even had the political history of the last three decades unfolded completely differently, producing a more liberal Russia, these would still be strong centers of illiberalism. Inherently illiberal entities in society act as important sources of support and magnification for illiberalism today. In an already illiberal regime, such institutions can more comprehensively promote illiberalism; they will mark state and society for decades to come, regardless of the regime’s specific future.

⁴⁵ Vera Tolz and Yuri Teper, “Broadcasting Agitainment: A New Media Strategy of Putin’s Third Presidency,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34, no. 4 (July 2018): 213–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2018.1459023>.

⁴⁶ Andrei Guter-Sandu and Elizaveta Kuznetsova, “Theorising Resilience: Russia’s Reaction to US and EU Sanctions,” *East European Politics* 36, no. 4 (October 1, 2020): 603–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1743690>.

Preeminent among the bastions of inherent illiberalism in Russia are the Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian Armed Forces, and the presidency itself. The first two are subordinate societal and state actors among other sources of a more potentially pluralist vein. The latter sits at the pinnacle of the regime, and has been an illiberal actor since its founding years at the tail end of the Soviet Union and the immediate post-collapse constitutional crisis. Indeed all three consistently rank among the most trusted institutions in modern Russia in public opinion polls.⁴⁷ That the institutions suffused with forms of inherent illiberalism are also the most popular institutions today suggests the importance of assessing illiberalism from the inside-out, and not just the top-down.

It is important to distinguish these bodies from the more instrumental or incentive-based forms of illiberalism promoted by public-facing institutions filled with lower-tier elites, like the parliament or the national broadcast media. This is because public-facing institutions, and the elites that fill them, are not inherently illiberal—indeed, they certainly could be (and have in the past been) places of far more substantive pluralism and liberalism. The core anchors of illiberalism, by contrast, have never promoted such worldviews for structural, ideational, or positional reasons. All inherently illiberal institutions share worldviews that instead emphasize hegemonic authority or even metaphysical premises that are by their nature exclusionary and illiberal.⁴⁸

The coordination of Russian elites on illiberalism in the contemporary period is a function of regime priorities, decisions, and a broader cultural toolkit of symbolic options. Yet the Church, the military, and the presidency would be fundamentally illiberal in their makeup and societal claims regardless. We should understand these bodies as societal and political entities whose relative position may grow or diminish over time but is directionally constant. Today we observe greater activity among these institutions—and therefore more strident and confident illiberalism—as a testament to their increasing power and monopolization of relative influence, not a change in illiberalism itself.

The Russian Orthodox Church as Lobbyist and Culture-Bearer

The Russian Orthodox Church emerged from the Soviet period much weakened and denuded of both political power and social relevance, yet it retained its fundamentally illiberal internal character.⁴⁹ This is due in large part to both the inherently non-liberal metaphysical claims of Orthodox Christianity and the Church's hierarchical ecclesial structure, which is rooted in medieval and early modern Russian church history. Even when subordinated institutionally to modernizing and secularizing forces from Peter the Great onward, it never abandoned these positions. In this sense, the Russian Orthodox Church is no different from other Christian church organizations of similar pedigree, most notably the Catholic Church and other bodies

⁴⁷ A 2016 poll found the presidency (74%), the army (60%), the security agencies (46%), and the church (43%) to be the four institutions most trusted by the Russian population, followed at a significant distance by the press (27%) and a variety of state institutions. See “Institutional Trust,” *Levada Center*, November 10, 2016, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2016/11/10/institutional-trust-2/>. Polling from VTsIOM in 2018 affirmed this general trend of institutional trust, with even higher numbers for the church, although that poll did not include the presidency. See “Oruzhie, pravoslavie, bezopasnost’: komy bol’she vego doveriaut rossiane,” *RBC*, December 27, 2018, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/27/12/2018/5c20cf410a7947c7a75c14fd>.

⁴⁸ There are mixed cases in which new sub-organizations filled with illiberal entrepreneurs in the state have been formed with explicit conservative goals, such as “the Commission on Public Diplomacy, Humanitarian Cooperation and Maintenance of Traditional Values at the Civic Chamber, the Interfaction Group in Defence of Christian Values of the Russian Duma, the Russian Association for Defence of Religious Freedom and the Council for the Implementation of State Policy in the Sphere of Protecting Family and Children,” but these are recent creations rather than longstanding, core inherent illiberal institutions. See Alica Curanović, “Domestic Lobbyists and Conservatism in Russian Foreign Policy,” in *Russia’s Foreign Policy: The Internal-International Link*, ed. Aldo Ferrari and Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti (ISPI, 2021), 45.

⁴⁹ Katja Richters, *The Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church: Politics, Culture and Greater Russia*, 1st edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2012); Tatiana A. Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia: Russian Orthodoxy from World War II to the Khrushchev Years* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002).

derived from the early Christian apostolic mandate.⁵⁰

For a variety of reasons, the church has seen tremendous growth in its membership, societal position, and support from the regime since the early 1990s. First, Russian Orthodoxy is closely tied to conceptions of ethnic Russian identity: it served as the primary antagonist of Soviet state atheism and has the benefit of being an institution traditionally patronized by the Russian state. Second, Russian Orthodoxy is both a *de facto* national church and a source of connection to other Slavic and non-Slavic Orthodox churches internationally, increasing its legitimacy in the absence of explicit, anti-clericalist state coercion.⁵¹

As such, the Russian Orthodox Church was well-placed for a post-Soviet renaissance, just as national religious traditions in other former Soviet republics reasserted themselves institutionally after independence. The Church has also been a considerable recipient of state largesse, especially under Putin, which many commentators rightly view as an example of regime instrumentalism to bolster domestic popularity and societal legitimacy.⁵²

Yet the Church itself does not promote religious illiberalism for instrumentalist reasons, but rather has simply taken advantage of its newly empowered position to pursue goals it has always maintained.⁵³ Thus, we should view the Church as a primary source of illiberalism in Russia rather than as a reactive actor that only pushes illiberalism when under pressure from the regime.⁵⁴ No believable alternative political history of Russia involves a national-level liberal Orthodox Church.

Given its inherent illiberalism, the Russian Orthodox Church has been particularly effective at providing a legitimating background and worldview for other more instrumental and entrepreneurial actors. Specifically, the Church has used its growing societal authority and regime patronage to lobby institutions. Efforts to pass illiberal legislation in the regions—from the successful “homosexual propaganda” bill to tentative abortion restrictions—are often driven by Orthodox political lobbyists and civil society actors.⁵⁵ The Church now also has close ties with illiberal international organizations such as the World Congress of Families, with such connections serving as useful learning mechanisms through conferences and sharing best-practices for

⁵⁰ Even if one takes as a given the existence of more liberal or progressive strains, tendencies, and emphases within global Catholicism, both institutionally and theologically it is clear that the Catholic Church retains an inherent illiberalism that is consistently challenged by liberal modernity, a position shared with other Eastern Orthodox churches. Older traditions of institutional Christianity often have a very wide degree of internal pluralism regarding specific cultural markers and traditions, but this is an *illiberal* pluralism quite distinct from the individualist assumptions and relativism inherent in liberal pluralism. See, for example, Peter Galadza, “Eastern Catholic Christianity,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*, ed. Ken Parry (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008); Francis Oakley, *The Conciliarist Tradition: Constitutionalism in the Catholic Church, 1300–1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁵¹ Curanović, “Domestic Lobbyists and Conservatism in Russian Foreign Policy”; Vasile Rotaru, “Forced Attraction? How Russia Is Instrumentalizing Its Soft Power Sources in the ‘Near Abroad.’” *Problems of Post-Communism* 65, no. 1 (January 2018): 37–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2016.1276400>.

⁵² Laruelle, “Conservatism as the Kremlin’s New Toolkit: An Ideology at the Lowest Cost.”

⁵³ Kristina Stoeckl, “The Russian Orthodox Church as Moral Norm Entrepreneur,” *Religion, State and Society* 44, no. 2 (April 2016): 132–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2016.1194010>; Kristina Stoeckl, *The Russian Orthodox Church and Human Rights* (London: Routledge, 2014), <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/31236>.

⁵⁴ John P. Burgess, *Holy Rus’: The Rebirth of Orthodoxy in the New Russia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

⁵⁵ Irina Papkova, *The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics* (Washington D.C., and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); John Anderson, “Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church: Asymmetric Symphonies?” *Journal of International Affairs* 61, no. 1 (2007): 185–201; Aleksandr Verkhovsky, “The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Nationalist, Xenophobic and Antiwestern Tendencies in Russia Today: Not Nationalism, but Fundamentalism,” *Religion, State and Society* 30, no. 4 (December 2002): 333–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0963749022000022879>.

new legislative lobbying efforts.⁵⁶

The lobbying role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russian politics—a role that the Church had been seeking without success since the early 2000s—has expanded in the last decade.⁵⁷ Working at the regional level, it led a number of illiberal initiatives in the Russian regions that would move onto the national scene in the 2010s.⁵⁸ The influential church-associated parliamentarian Vitaly Milonov, for example, very publicly spearheaded illiberal legislation in St. Petersburg long before equivalent national bills on family values emerged. Similarly, the Church has grown increasingly involved with the Russian military's personnel policies, providing blessings and chaplaincy services to all branches of the Russian Armed Forces.⁵⁹ Major church-building projects, most recently the newly opened Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces outside Moscow, further stands as a testament to the growing power of Orthodox lobbying efforts.⁶⁰

The Russian Orthodox Church has also increasingly been integrated into state-approved conceptions of nationhood and patriotism, with Orthodox theism included in the revised constitution promulgated in 2020 and Church lobbyists successfully inserting claims about the culture- and state-bearing qualities of the ethnic Russian people, as well as supporting traditional family structures.⁶¹ The Patriarch of Moscow now features regularly in official ceremonies: his presence allows the nominally secular leadership to show their religious bona fides at religious services for Christmas and Easter, as well as fully secular ceremonies like presidential inaugurations and military parades.⁶² While instrumental for the regime's new course of official cultural illiberalism, the Church has been savvy in positioning itself to be used in this manner, to both its own and the regime's benefit.⁶³ The Russian Orthodox Church is thus a prime example of an inherently illiberal institution promoting itself powerfully in this new moment.

⁵⁶ Curanović, "Domestic Lobbyists and Conservatism in Russian Foreign Policy"; Kristina Stoeckl, "The Rise of the Russian Christian Right: The Case of the World Congress of Families," *Religion, State and Society* 48, no. 4 (August 2020): 223–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2020.1796172>.

⁵⁷ Stoeckl, *The Russian Orthodox Church and Human Rights*.

⁵⁸ Waller, "Mimicking the Mad Printer"; Wilkinson, "Putting 'Traditional Values' Into Practice."

⁵⁹ Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019); Jeremy W. Lamoreaux and Lincoln Flake, "The Russian Orthodox Church, the Kremlin, and Religious (Il)Liberalism in Russia," *Palgrave Communications* 4, no. 1 (September 25, 2018): 1–4, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0169-6>; Stoeckl, "The Russian Orthodox Church as Moral Norm Entrepreneur."

⁶⁰ See recent documentaries on the military TV channel *Zvezda* on the new cathedral as an example. English-language dubbing is available at "The Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces," YouTube video, 38:26, posted by "Telekanal Zvezda," June 30, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3dJfQWfhNERw>.

⁶¹ Kristina Stoeckl, "The End of Post-Soviet Religion: Russian Orthodoxy as National Church," *Public Orthodoxy*, July 20, 2020, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2020/07/20/the-end-of-post-soviet-religion/>; Mikhail Antonov, "God and 'the Belief of Ancestors' in the Russian Constitution," *BYU International Center for Law and Religion Studies*, October 31, 2020, <https://talkabout.icls.org/2020/10/31/god-and-the-belief-of-ancestors-in-the-russian-constitution/>.

⁶² Mariya Omelicheva, "A New Russian Holiday Has More Behind It Than National Unity: The Political Functions of Historical Commemorations," *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 63, no. 3 (2017): 430–42, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajph.12375>. Note as well that while relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Soviet legacy are strained (and indeed are increasingly the main framework through which anti-Soviet views can be expressed officially), Patriarch Kirill drafted a specific prayer in commemoration of the sixty-fifth anniversary of the victory in WWII—see "Patriarkh Kirill napisal spetsial'nuiu molitvu dlia Dnia Pobedy," *Interfax*, May 6, 2010, <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=35458>.

⁶³ Robert C. Blitt, "One New President, One New Patriarch, and a Generous Disregard for the Constitution: A Recipe for the Continuing Decline of Secular Russia," *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law* 43, no. 5 (2010): 1337–68.

The Russian Military as Foundational Site of National Memory

Military institutions are often understood, even in liberal democracies, to be relatively illiberal compared to the societies that they defend. This is due in part to their structural makeup, which emphasizes strict hierarchies, engenders authority and obedience, and promotes strong, communal identity as an important element of internal cohesion and battlefield capability.⁶⁴ Furthermore, armed forces are tasked with specific duties—defending the state and nation, operationalizing sovereignty, and opposing external interference—that incline the institution to relative conservatism and skepticism of the divisions inherent in modern liberal pluralism.⁶⁵

The Russian Armed Forces are no exception to this general trend. Furthermore, due to the high degree of professionalism inherited from the Soviet period, institutional culture within the military remains bound to these classical roles and perpetuates itself in a complex and effective network of officer training, military academies, and a comprehensive, centralized General Staff.⁶⁶ As the Soviet military was responsible for some of the great historical achievements of modern Russia, the Russian military today enjoys a symbolic role as guarantor of the state and bearer of national victories.⁶⁷

Much has been written on the Russian military from the perspective of its close identification with the Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany.⁶⁸ Indeed, the Russian military is often framed as a symbolic guardian of the nation in ways similar to other large developing countries such as Egypt and Brazil.⁶⁹ This largely precludes a liberal role for the armed forces, nor would we expect one anyway—again, very few militaries are particularly inclined toward promoting liberalism, with the major exception of the United States.⁷⁰

The Russian Armed Forces thus form a bloc of illiberally inclined service institutions, personnel, and societal roles—which often have “imperial”-nationalist or patriotic-

⁶⁴ Peter Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).

⁶⁵ Meir Finkel, “Conservatism by Choice (Stability)—A Necessary Complement to Innovation and Adaptation in Force Design,” *Defence Studies* 19, no. 4 (October 2, 2019): 392–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2019.1686359>; Karen O. Dunivin, “Military Culture: Change and Continuity,” *Armed Forces & Society* 20, no. 4 (July 1994): 531–47; Bengt Abrahamsson, *The Ideology of an Elite: Conservatism and National Insecurity*, *Armed Forces and Society* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 1968), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111694757-006>.

⁶⁶ Jason Gresh, “Professionalism and Politics in the Russian Military,” Kennan Cable, April 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-67-professionalism-and-politics-russian-military>; Dale R. Herspring, “Creating Shared Responsibility through Respect for Military Culture: The Russian and American Cases,” *Public Administration Review* 71, no. 4 (2011): 519–29, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2011.02380.x>.

⁶⁷ Marlene Laruelle, *In the Name of the Nation: Nationalism and Politics in Contemporary Russia* (New York: Springer, 2009).

⁶⁸ Jade McGlynn, “Historical Framing of the Ukraine Crisis through the Great Patriotic War: Performativity, Cultural Consciousness and Shared Remembering,” *Memory Studies* 13, no. 6 (December 1, 2020): 1058–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698018800740>; Olga Malinova, “Political Uses of the Great Patriotic War in Post-Soviet Russia from Yeltsin to Putin,” in *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, ed. Julie Fedor et al., Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 43–70, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66523-8_2; Elizabeth A. Wood, “Performing Memory: Vladimir Putin and the Celebration of World War II in Russia,” *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 38, no. 2 (January 1, 2011): 172–200, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763321X59175.2017>

⁶⁹ Zeinab Abul-Magd, *Militarizing the Nation: The Army, Business, and Revolution in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Alfred C. Stepan, *The Military in Politics: Changing Patterns in Brazil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁷⁰ Armando X. Estrada, “Gay Service Personnel in the U.S. Military: History, Progress, and a Way Forward,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Military Psychology*, ed. Janice H. Laurence and Michael D. Matthews (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 344; David J. Armor and Curtis L. Gilroy, “Changing Minority Representation in the U.S. Military,” *Armed Forces & Society* 36, no. 2 (January 2010): 223–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X09339900>; Andrew Williams, *Liberalism and War: The Victors and the Vanquished* (London: Routledge, 2005).

religious tendencies that interact with other sources of illiberalism in Russia.⁷¹ Military generals were prominent among the more nationalist and populist politicians in the chaotic 1990s, and former military officers are well-represented in military committees in the State Duma and Federation Council.⁷² Indeed, some evidence suggests that general-politicians in the legislature act more as representational proxies and lobbyists for institutional military interests in parliament than as independent or patronal deputies.⁷³ Meanwhile, the Russian Orthodox Church is increasingly involved in the structural makeup of the Armed Forces, with Adamsky noting its particular capture of the internal culture of the nuclear forces as well as involvement in providing support for the recent Syrian intervention.⁷⁴

More to the point, the Russian Armed Forces' central role in state-patriotic historical memory ties the institution to an illiberal worldview that the institution is proud to uphold. Military illiberalism is not aggressive, given the longstanding subordination of the military chain of command to political control, yet it is strongly intermixed with regime legitimacy-promotion efforts and public memorialization. Annual "Immortal Regiment" processions, massive Victory Day parades, sponsored television programs and historical publications, and popular Cossack-military entertainment shows all point to the military's central role in reproducing an illiberal, national conception of patriotism and state sovereignty.⁷⁵

Given this, we can see the Russian military not as a set of elites responding to regime illiberalism, but as an inherent, genuine source of illiberal narratives, worldviews, and coherent self-understanding of state and nation. Even under the relatively liberal Medvedev presidency, the Russian military did not fundamentally change this position, notwithstanding the partial internal reform that occurred at that time.⁷⁶

Recent active combat experience in Ukraine and Syria has further underlined the military's core illiberal role. The Syrian conflict has been framed as an engagement with the illiberal-secular Assad regime against Islamic fundamentalism and a realist-conservative justification for the action has been promoted, while in Ukraine volunteers declaring nationalist and Orthodox religious motivations have been prominent.⁷⁷ The reformation of the Interior Troops, OMON, and SOBR units into a National Guard (*Rosgvardiya*) subordinate to the president in 2016 created a *de facto* "praetorian" military force to both protect the illiberal presidential core of the regime and ensure that decisive military action could take place on the domestic

⁷¹ Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism: Imaginaries, Doctrines, and Political Battlefields*, 1st edition (London: Routledge, 2018); Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud, eds., *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000–2015*, 1st edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

⁷² Robert Barylski, *The Soldier in Russian Politics, 1985–96* (London: Routledge, 2018); James H. Brusstar, *The Russian Military's Role in Politics* (Washington, DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, 1995).

⁷³ For example, since at least 2010, all defense committees in the State Duma have been chaired by deputies holding at least the rank of Colonel.

⁷⁴ Dmitry Adamsky, "Christ-Loving Warriors: Ecclesiastical Dimension of the Russian Military Campaign in Syria," *Problems of Post-Communism* 67, no. 6 (November 1, 2020): 433–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2019.1684827>; Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*.

⁷⁵ Ivan Kurilla, "The 'Immortal Regiment': A 'Holiday Through Tears,' a Parade of the Dead, or a Mass Protest?" *Russian Politics & Law* 57, no. 5–6 (November 6, 2020): 150–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611940.2020.1913943>; Julie Fedor, "Memory, Kinship, and the Mobilization of the Dead: The Russian State and the 'Immortal Regiment' Movement," *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, 2017, 307–45, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66523-8_11.

⁷⁶ Bettina Renz, "Russian Military Capabilities after 20 Years of Reform," *Survival* 56, no. 3 (May 2014): 61–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2014.920145>; Dale R. Herspring and Roger N. McDermott, "Serd'yukov Promotes Systemic Russian Military Reform," *Orbis* 54, no. 2 (January 1, 2010): 284–301, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2010.01.004>.

⁷⁷ Marlene Laruelle, "The Three Colors of Novorossiya, or the Russian Nationalist Mythmaking of the Ukrainian Crisis," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 55–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2015.1023004>.

front, beyond current law enforcement structures.⁷⁸ Finally, paramilitary forces such as mobilized Cossack regiments have been central to promoting a form of imperial national-patriotism that now supplements the Armed Forces' more traditional, secular Soviet-era forms.⁷⁹

The Presidential Figurehead as Guarantor of National Coherence

A final source of inherent illiberalism exists at the very pinnacle of the state in the form of the Russian presidency. This entity differs significantly from the vignette cases above, given its commanding constitutional and *de facto* position at the very top of the regime. As the central, apex node in Russia's "single-pyramid" system, the presidency constitutes the focal point around which all politics and state activity is conducted, as well as the flagship institution that connotes sovereignty and the national in society for the purposes of continued efforts at state-building.⁸⁰

The tentpole position of the Russian presidency in terms of illiberalism is no accident, and a great deal of effort over the last twenty years has been expended with a view to centralizing symbolic and political power there.⁸¹ Yet we should be careful to distinguish the presidency in its symbolic position at the center of the Russian state from the actual person of Vladimir Putin, who is endowed with his own significant patronalist and personalistic authority as well. Even in the pluralist Yeltsin era, the presidency held a *de facto* position as the central, nation-bearing figurehead and naturally inclined itself towards a self-perception as the singular and final arbiter in the political system.⁸²

Indeed, the empowered parliament and strong federalism of that era found their chief opponent in the illiberal presidency, which acted as a central opponent and interlocutor. This developed quite early, with the 1993 conflict between the presidency, on one side, and the parliament and constitutional court, on the other, as a key critical juncture. The fact that the presidency decisively won and then made the effort to shape the constitution in its own image has meant that the presidency has

⁷⁸ Mark Galeotti, "The Silovik-Industrial Complex: Russia's National Guard as Coercive, Political, Economic and Cultural Force," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 29, no. 1 (2021): 3–29, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/780975>; Jolanta Darczewska, *Rosgwardiya: A Special-Purpose Force. Point of View*, vol. 76, OSW Point of View (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, 2020), <http://aei.pitt.edu/103306/>.

⁷⁹ Kratcovil and Shakhanova, "The Patriotic Turn and Re-Building Russia's Historical Memory"; Nikolai F. Bugai, "The Russian Cossacks and the Problem of Identity with the Question: Who Are We?," *Vestnik Volgogradskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta* 24, no. 4 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu4.2019.4.13>. See also Alla Hurska, "Putin Seeks to Garner Support of Russian Youth Through Military-Patriotic Upbringing (Part One and Two)," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, April 10–15, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/putin-seeks-to-garner-support-of-russian-youth-through-military-patriotic-upbringing-part-one/> and <https://jamestown.org/program/putin-seeks-to-garner-support-of-russian-youth-through-military-patriotic-upbringing-part-two/>.

⁸⁰ K. A. Pakhaluk, "The Historical Past as the Foundation of the Russian Polity: Vladimir Putin's 2012–2018 Speeches," *Russian Politics & Law* 57, no. 5–6 (November 6, 2020): 129–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611940.2020.1913042>; Susanne Wengle and Christine Evans, "Symbolic State-Building in Contemporary Russia," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34, no. 6 (November 6, 2018): 384–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2018.1507409>; Hale, Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective.

⁸¹ Fabian Burkhardt, "Institutionalising Authoritarian Presidencies: Polymorphous Power and Russia's Presidential Administration," *Europe-Asia Studies* 73, no. 3 (March 16, 2021): 472–504, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1749566>; Fabian Burkhardt, "The Institutionalization of Relative Advantage: Formal Institutions, Subconstitutional Presidential Powers, and the Rise of Authoritarian Politics in Russia, 1994–2012," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 6 (November 2, 2017): 472–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2017.1388471>; Alexander Baturo and Slava Mikhaylov, "Reading the Tea Leaves: Medvedev's Presidency through Political Rhetoric of Federal and Sub-National Actors," *Europe-Asia Studies* 66, no. 6 (July 3, 2014): 969–92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2014.926716>.

⁸² Thomas F. Remington, *Presidential Decrees in Russia: A Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Thomas F. Remington, "The Evolution of Executive-Legislative Relations in Russia since 1993," *Slavic Review* 59, no. 3 (2008): 499–520, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2697343>; Eugene Huskey, *Presidential Power in Russia* (M.E. Sharpe, 1999).

been institutionally preeminent ever since.⁸³ In this way, the post-Soviet presidency is structurally bound up in more illiberal forms of centralized, authoritative rule.⁸⁴

This illiberal supremacy at the core of the Russian constitution has been of decisive importance to Putin himself, who has used the presidential office not only as a jumping-off point from which to capture and control the state and all politics, but as a means to command the heights of post-Soviet Russia's sociocultural self-perception.⁸⁵ The presidency is the primary office through which the contours of everyday nationalism in Russia are framed.⁸⁶ Indeed, the presidency now takes on an aspect as the unifying symbolic principle for Russian society and is in many ways the key anchor that holds together the evolving successor national identity to Soviet power.⁸⁷ Although increasing centralization of political decision-making in the presidency and its bureaucratic apparatus has had negative effects on governance, it has also solidified the presidency's place as a primary source of illiberalism both ideologically and symbolically.⁸⁸

The presidential executive sitting at the top of the regime has even taken on many of the trappings of monarchy, from aesthetic choices that call to mind the late Tsarist era to increasing associations between the presidency and nationhood, official religion, and national security. What Petrov terms the "war chieftain" legitimacy of the post-Crimea presidency is better seen—given the continued survival and thriving of the presidential figurehead long after the rally-round-the-flag effect has worn off—as the continued development and concretization of a truly illiberal centroid point around which the entire polity now spins.⁸⁹ As always, the great question remains whether this particular configuration of illiberal authority survives the officeholder, but comparative evidence from other presidentialist regimes in the region suggest that the symbolic illiberalism of the singular presidency is unlikely to melt away.⁹⁰

Conclusion

Illiberalism in Russia at the dawn of the third decade of the twenty-first century is more entrenched than it has been since at least the Soviet collapse, if not earlier. Some of this can be placed at the feet of an aspirational and inventive authoritarian executive, which has gradually developed an amorphous ideological construct counter to Western hegemonic liberalism. In this sense, illiberalism has been quite successfully built for the cynical and instrumental purposes of bolstering regime maintenance and positioning itself geopolitically. Yet evidence laid out here suggests that Russian illiberalism also has important, dynamic roots in less powerful parts of state and society.

⁸³ Nathan J. Brown and Julian G. Waller, "Constitutional Courts and Political Uncertainty: Constitutional Ruptures and the Rule of Judges," *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 14, no. 4 (October 1, 2016): 817–50, <https://doi.org/10.1093/icon/mow060>; Remington, "The Evolution of Executive-Legislative Relations in Russia since 1993."

⁸⁴ Richard Sakwa, "The Dual State in Russia," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 26, no. 3 (July 2010): 185–206, <https://doi.org/10.2747/1060-586X.26.3.185>.

⁸⁵ Stephen White and Ian Mcallister, "The Putin Phenomenon," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 24, no. 4 (December 2008): 604–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523270802510610>; Richard Rose, "The Impact of President Putin on Popular Support for Russia's Regime," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 23, no. 2 (January 2007): 97–117, <https://doi.org/10.2747/1060-586X.23.2.97>.

⁸⁶ Goode, "Patriotic Legitimation and Everyday Patriotism in Russia's Constitutional Reform."

⁸⁷ Jade McGlynn, "United by History: Government Appropriation of Everyday Nationalism During Vladimir Putin's Third Term," *Nationalities Papers* 48, no. 6 (November 2020): 1069–85, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.20>.

⁸⁸ Burkhardt, "Institutionalising Authoritarian Presidencies."

⁸⁹ Nikolay Petrov, "Russia on the Eve of Its Presidential Election: How Long Can Change and Stasis Coexist?" *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, no. 509 (February 20, 2018): 1–7.

⁹⁰ Margarete Klein and Hans-Henning Schröder, *Presidents, Oligarchs and Bureaucrats: Forms of Rule in the Post-Soviet Space* (London: Routledge, 2016); Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective*.

Elites and Institutions in the Russian Thermidor

This article claims that not only is illiberalism pushed as a functional solution to regime problems on domestic and international fronts, but that it is also buoyed by entrepreneurial, lower-tier elites eager to please the regime and by the growing power of important institutions that are deeply illiberal in their current makeup, such that they would promote illiberalism under any conditions.

Accordingly, the article has noted that in at least two public-facing arenas of subordinate political status—the federal parliament and the national broadcast media—lower-tier elites have found considerable incentives to creatively perform and develop illiberalism as policy and as discursive narrative, even if the incentive structure is conditioned on decisions made further up the vertical of power. By contrast, the article has shown that for the Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian Armed Forces, and the symbolic presidential center, illiberalism has always held a tight congruence with institutional self-perceptions, internal beliefs, and preferences, such that there has been a groundswell of internal support for growing illiberalism by way of these inherently illiberal institutional sources.

This article is only a modest attempt at an alternative framework for understanding illiberalism in contemporary Russia, supplementing more cynical and instrumentalist views of illiberalism as a purely top-down affair while bracketing persistent questions of grassroots or popular illiberalism. I maintain that a great deal of illiberalism in Russia—whether it be as policy or narrative creativity, or symbolic influence—comes not from the top-down calculation, but from empowered political, state, and societal actors that are subordinate to or excluded from primary power centers in the regime. Rising illiberalism is therefore an outgrowth of creativity among vulnerable elites and quite congruent with many institutional visions of a well-functioning Russian polity, as well as an instrumental strategy.