

The Constitution of the Current State: Article 13 and Russian Cultural Politics

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IN the last few years, the Russian Federation has been facing the task of constructing a nation with its own history, its spirituality and its ethnic and geographic diversity. Against this backdrop, significant emphasis is placed on the importance of the politics of culture in the broader task of the securitization of the Russian state. In the absence of an open public sphere that would guarantee the functioning of democratic institutions, cultural and historical narratives step in to legitimize the strategies of the current political order. In this article, I will show how the “current state” in Russia is constituted in a legal framework that expresses itself in cultural discourses.

The current state is, of course, not only the political state (*Rossiiskaia Federatsiia*) with its administration and institutions. It is first and foremost the current state of *being* which must be preserved at all cost. This homonymy has a Hegelian basis. The Prussian state (in the first sense of the word) was for Hegel the ultimate institutionalization of the state (in the second sense of the word) of freedom. In German, there is a lexical distinction between these two meanings: “Staat” (the political institution) and “Zustand” (a state of being). In most European languages there is only one word: “state,” “état,” “stato,” “estado.” According to the new politics of culture, the Russian state should become an everlasting state (in both senses of the word). One of the most influential political engineers of the Kremlin, Vladislav Surkov, prominently expressed this view in recent public interventions: In April 2018, he published a piece with the title “The Loneliness of a Halfbreed” where he said that Russia tried

to side 300 years with Asia and 300 years with Europe, in both cases to no avail. Now, Russia needs to stand alone for the next 300 years. In February 2019, Surkov continued this topic with an article about “Putin’s Long State”—and long was actually meant in the chronological sense of the word. The long state—according to Surkov—represents a stable political system which ultimately makes institutional change over time obsolete (Surkov 2018; 2019). Ironically, Surkov’s own political fate is rather unstable. During Putin’s first two terms in office, his main task consisted in endowing the Russian state and its repressive organs with an attractive outlook. He created youth organizations, had meetings with rock stars, and influenced the choice of topics for TV series, blockbusters and video games. In the aftermath of the mass protests in late 2011, however, he had to change his position in the Kremlin several times and was finally dismissed as advisor to President Putin in 2020.

In the following, I will show how Russian cultural politics have been interacting with the constitution from 1993 and how the coherence between state and society has been moving from a legal project to a cultural one. In order to explain this development, I will use the concept of “truth systems” that was developed by the émigré Russian sociologist Pitirim Sorokin (1889–1968). Finally, I will analyze three artifacts that may be interpreted as corroborations of my hypothesis.

Constitution and state ideology

Article 13 of the Russian constitution prohibits all forms of state ideology. As of late, however, government officials came to question the timeliness of this regulation. Originally, the constitution held a prominent position in the official holiday calendar. Since 1994, the constitution had been honored with a special constitution day. However, this official holiday was quietly dropped in 2004 and downgraded to a remembrance day (Scheppele 2005, 966). Nevertheless, the Russian constitution remained untouchable for quite a long time. Already in his programmatic essay “Russia at the Turn of the Millennium” from 1999, Vladimir Putin highlighted the stability of the constitution:

Amending the Constitution does not seem to be an urgent, priority task. What we have is a good Constitution. Its provisions dealing with the individual rights and freedoms are seen as the best Constitutional

instrument of its kind in the world. It is a serious task, indeed, to make the current Constitution and the laws made on the basis thereof, the norm of life of the state, society and every individual, rather than draft a new Basic Law for the country. (Putin 2000, 216)

The Kremlin lifted the unofficial ban on debates about the fundamental law only in 2013—on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the constitution. Before, commentators had speculated about a possible change in the constitution especially in the wake of the 2008 presidential elections. A third subsequent term for Putin would have required an adaptation of the constitution. However, the Kremlin did not decide to tamper with the basic text of the constitution and opted for the informal model of “tandemocracy.” It soon became clear that the castling between president and prime minister did not represent a sustainable strategy. Under Dmitrii Medvedev’s presidency the presidential term was extended from four to six years—of course, in preparation for Putin’s next two terms in office. At the time, this change was treated like an administrative measure. Ten years later, Medvedev downplayed the extension of the president’s term in office as a “punctual refinement” of the constitution (Medvedev 2018, 16). As if to prove this point, the constitution was left alone for the subsequent years.

The debates around Article 13 started in November 2013 when the rectors of the institutions of higher education in St. Petersburg suggested a new academic discipline for their students: ideology. The reaction, especially from the Kremlin, was negative. Prominent exponents like Putin’s spokesman Dmitrii Peskov and First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration Viacheslav Volodin were against the project—it seemed that Rome had spoken (Viktorov 2014).

However, soon afterwards, the representative of the Federal Council within the Russian Constitutional Court, Aleksei Aleksandrov, presented a paper at a high-ranking conference with the title “The Russian Constitution and the Ideology of the State and the Law.” His argument was quite sophisticated. He maintained that the Russian Constitution itself amounted to an ideology that needs to express itself in state politics and in the jurisdiction of the official courts. He came to a striking conclusion: “It is a mistake that the Russian constitution forbids itself in Article 13.” (Golubkova 2013).

In April 2016, the president of the Russian investigative committee Aleksandr Bastrykin published a newspaper article in which he called for decisive measures in the fight against, what he called, “terrorism.” Among the proposed measures was also the development of a state ideology. He wrote:

Крайне важно создание концепции идеологической политики государства. Базовым ее элементом могла бы стать национальная идея, которая по-настоящему сплотила бы единый многонациональный российский народ. В концепции можно было бы предусмотреть конкретные долгосрочные и среднесрочные меры, направленные на идеологическое воспитание и просвещение нашего подрастающего поколения. (Bastrykin 2016)¹

Soon thereafter, judge Valerii Zorkin from the Russian Constitutional Court also raised his voice in this matter. Zorkin is a remarkable man with an even more remarkable career. He was appointed by El'tsin as the first president of the newly established Constitutional Court in 1991. He took a very independent stance in his position. After El'tsin had dissolved the parliament in March 1993 and seized dictatorial powers, Zorkin fiercely criticized him. At the time, Zorkin claimed the role of the guardian of the constitution for himself (Scheppele 2006, 1793f.). In the turmoil of the constitutional crisis of 1993, Zorkin eventually had to step down as president of the Constitutional Court (he remained a judge though), and was re-elected as president ten years later, in 2003. He has been acting president of the Constitutional Court to this very day. The stability of the political order, which needs to be based on a firm social consensus, remains Zorkin's main concern. In 2008, Zorkin edited a commentary on the Russian Constitution together with his colleague Leonid Lazarev. The editors pointed to the necessity of a dynamic interpretation of Russia's fundamental law:

1 “Especially important is the creation of an ideological politics of the state. Its basic element could be the national idea, which would effectively unify the multinational people of the Russian Federation. In this conception, we could provide concrete long- and mid-term measures aimed at the ideological education of our young generation.” (Unless noted otherwise, translations are my own.)

В широком социальном контексте речь идет о создании условий эволюционного развития Конституции, следовательно, также общества и государства, альтернативой которому является революция. (Zorkin & Lazarev 2008, 146)²

Evolution of the constitution or else revolution—such an opposition of options seems to be a direct expression of a Dostoevskian nervous and maximalist mind. Interestingly enough, this line is at the same time a hidden quote from Abraham Lincoln’s first inaugural address. Lincoln said in 1861:

This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they should grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it, or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it. (Moore 1996, 10 of.)

Valerii Zorkin came back to the troubling perspective of an impending revolution in a newspaper article in October 2018. The title of his contribution was “The Letter and the Spirit of the Constitution.” Again, he advocated for a flexible interpretation of the constitution. The main danger, in Zorkin’s view, lay in the loss of a societal consensus about the fundamental law. Zorkin pointed to the appalling social inequality in contemporary Russia. He quoted a statistic that illustrated the rich/poor divide in which 10 percent of Russia’s wealthiest citizens own 17 times more compared to the poorest 10 percent. Zorkin hastened to add that it was exactly such socioeconomic inequality that led to the revolutions in 1917. In this context, Zorkin saw the evolution of the constitution as imperative:

Конституция содержит в своем тексте потенциал правовых преобразований, рассчитанный на обозримое историческое будущее страны. Она позволяет в определенной степени уточнять условия общественного компромисса в меняющихся социальных реалиях, обеспечивая таким образом социально-политическую

2 “In the broad social context, we have to create the conditions for an evolutionary development of the constitution, and, as a consequence, of society and the state. The alternative is revolution.”

стабильность, необходимую для дальнейшего развития. (Zorkin 2018)³

Zorkin continued by calling for a specific sociocultural interpretation of human rights. To be sure, he did not insinuate a specifically Russian cultural interpretation of human rights, nevertheless maintaining that every state has its own understanding of human rights.

Если согласиться с тем, что конституционная идентичность отражает результат общественного согласия граждан государства по вопросам понимания прав человека, т.е., по сути дела, по вопросам, связанным с пониманием того, что есть человек и в чем состоит его человеческое достоинство, то тогда надо признать следующее: 1) общественное согласие в вопросе о правах человека в различных государствах имеет социокультурную специфику и 2) это именно общественное согласие, которое устанавливается большинством общества и устанавливается для большинства.⁴

Zorkin has made a quite remarkable evolution in the last 25 years. In the early nineties, he fought with the constitution against the president. Now, he fights for the president in the name of “constitutional identity” (Podolian 2017). The concept of “constitutional identity,” however, is not a Russian invention. It was developed within the debate of international courts and meant to preserve a certain autonomy of national constitutional law within the international framework of legal settlement (Jacobsohn 2010). Soon autocratic regimes became aware of this seemingly democratic notion within international constitutional law and used it for their own political purposes (Kelemen & Pech 2018).

3 “The constitution contains in its text the potential for legal changes that is designed for the near future of the country. To a certain degree, the constitution allows clarification of the conditions of the societal consensus in the framework of changing social realities. By doing so, it ensures the socio-political stability of the country, which is necessary for further development.”

4 “If we agree that constitutional identity is the result of a societal consensus about how the citizens of a state understand human rights, i.e., in fact, how they understand man and human dignity, then we have to accept the following: 1) The societal agreement about human rights in different states has a sociocultural specificity, and 2) this societal agreement is constituted by and for the majority of society.”

In Russia, the concept of “constitutional identity” is an idiosyncratic reinterpretation of Dolf Sternberger’s seminal concept of “constitutional patriotism.” Sternberger claimed that in a post-national era, the constitution can be the only object of patriotism. Of course, Sternberger tried to de-nationalize the traditional ethno-cultural German patriotism by redirecting its emotional energies towards a sober legal document (Dierse 2015). This stance became a good German tradition in the 1970s. In a similar vein, the third president of the Federal Republic of Germany, Gustav Heinemann, famously answered the question if he loved his fatherland by saying: “I love my wife.” Later, Jürgen Habermas defined “constitutional patriotism” as the core of voluntary nations.

In the Russian Federation, by contrast, the forced veneration of the fundamental law is actually being used to nationalize “constitutional patriotism.” Ultimately, the new “constitutional patriotism” is supposed to absorb all emotional energy from the Russian citizens. From the Kremlin’s point of view, the constitution embodies the necessary multinational patriotism that is required for the coherence of the state. Since 2000, the Kremlin’s worst fear has been that the Russian Federation might encounter the same fate as the Soviet Union: that it would disintegrate. Probably the most important societal initiative of the Kremlin in the last years was the attempt to build a “Russian federal nation” (*Rossiiskaia natsiia*). Vladimir Putin himself started the debate about this project. On 23 January 2012, during his presidential election campaign, he published a newspaper article with the title “Russia: The National Question.” Putin clearly dismissed the concepts of assimilation or multiculturalism. Instead, he advocated the holistic vision of a “polyethnic civilization.” Each people in the Russian Federation should have its own cultural code. However, the Russian language, literature and culture serve as a kernel that holds the “unique civilization” of the Russian nation together (Putin 2012). Putin voiced the same idea in his Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly on 4 December 2014:

Если для ряда европейских стран национальная гордость—давно забытое понятие, а суверенитет—слишком большая роскошь, то для России реальный государственный суверенитет—абсолютно необходимое условие её существования! Прежде всего это должно быть очевидным для нас самих. Я хочу подчеркнуть:

или мы будем суверенными, или растворимся, потеряемся в мире. (Putin 2014)⁵

The annexation of Crimea was perhaps the most prominent act of asserting Russian identity. Putin even elevated Crimea to a role model of a “multifaceted, but solid and centralised” Russian state.

Воссоединение Крыма и Севастополя с Россией [...] имеет особое значение, потому что в Крыму живут наши люди и сама территория—стратегически важна. И потому, что именно здесь находится духовный исток формирования многоликой, но монолитной русской нации и централизованного Российского государства.⁶

Later on, Putin defined the conservative values of Russia’s national identity:

Добросовестный труд, частная собственность, свобода предпринимательства—это такие же базовые, консервативные, подчеркнутые, ценности, как и патриотизм, уважение к истории, традициям, к культуре своей страны.⁷

A few years later, Putin even suggested the Duma draft a new law on the “Russian federal nation.” However, the legislative process soon came to a halt, especially because republics like Tatarstan or Dagestan protested

5 “If for some European countries national pride is a long-forgotten concept and sovereignty is too much of a luxury, true sovereignty for Russia is absolutely necessary for its existence. Primarily, this should be obvious to ourselves. I would like to emphasize this: either we remain a sovereign nation, or we dissolve and lose ourselves in the world.”

6 “The reunification of Crimea with Russia [...] is especially important because our people lives here in Crimea and the territory is of strategic importance. And because Crimea is the spiritual source of the development of a multifaceted but solid Russian nation and a centralised Russian state.”

7 “Conscientious work, private property, the freedom of enterprise—these are the same kind of fundamental conservative values as patriotism, and respect for the history, traditions, and culture of one’s country.” (Translation: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47173>).

against the leading role of Russian culture in the multinational federal state.

In December 2015, the Kremlin published a new National Security Strategy, which emphasized the role of culture that allegedly protects the nation. At the same time, Putin approved of a document that defines the foundations of Russian cultural politics. Generally, the document approves the principle of the freedom of artistic creativity. On the first page, the document states that cultural politics is an integral part of Russian national security. However, the document continues, the state should not blindly support every creative effort:

Никакие эксперименты с формой не могут оправдать содержания, противоречащего традиционным для нашего общества ценностям, либо отсутствия какого бы то ни было содержания вообще. (Aristarkhov & Anisimova 2015, 28)⁸

Later on in this document, the notion of “cultural sovereignty” becomes a leading principle. The authors even devise a new cultural global mission for Russia:

Но борьба за культурный суверенитет не сводится лишь к сохранению нашего наследия. Речь должна идти о мировой культурной экспансии России как хранителя традиционных ценностей, близких огромному большинству нормальных людей на планете. Именно таким должно быть содержание нашей «мягкой силы». Чтобы победить, нужно наступать.⁹ (Aristarkhov & Anisimova 2015, 39)

The military rhetoric did not surface by chance. The Kremlin perceived the situation in the country as vulnerable and instable. The political engineers wanted to avoid by all means a repetition of the situation in 2011 and 2012 when tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets.

8 “No formal experiment may justify the production of content that is at odds with the traditional values of our society or the absence of any content at all.”

9 “The fight for our cultural sovereignty should not be limited to the preservation of our traditions. We are talking about a global cultural expansion of Russia as the guardian of traditional values that are close to the vast majority of normal people on the planet. This has to be the content of our soft power. If we want to win, we have to attack.”

Stronger measures than just influencing the public sphere with the traditional media seemed to be required. However, it still came as a surprise when in January 2020 Putin announced a constitutional revision. A working group of 75 people met in several sessions and came up with a set of proposals. Professional competency was not the most apparent trait of the members. Only five legal experts took part in the endeavor. Prominent members included the right-wing nationalist writer Zakhar Prilepin, the first woman in the cosmos Valentina Tereshkova and the pole vaulter Elena Isinbaeva who candidly confessed that—preparing herself for the new task—she had read the constitution for the first time and found “many interesting things.” The constitutional revision included quite a few technical proposals that change the nature of nomination and approval of government offices. The most important additions in terms of “constitutional identity” were the following three elements: Firstly, the Russian people is defined as the state-building people. Secondly, the constitution points to the 1,000-year-old “Russian” history and thus includes Kievan Rus which is also claimed by the Ukrainian state as its political origin. Thirdly, the constitution mentions “belief in God” which of course may be either Christian or Muslim. One member of the preparatory group even wanted to include Russian Orthodoxy into the constitutional text. A referendum on the revised constitution was planned for April 2020 but postponed to July due to the coronavirus situation. The changes were—according to official numbers—approved by 78 percent of all voters, while the turnout was 65 percent (Schmid 2020).

The most interesting feature of the constitutional revision is the fact that the referendum itself was not even necessary. The constitutional changes had already been approved by the competent federal bodies. It became clear that the referendum on the constitutional revision was in fact a plebiscite on what many commentators call the “Putin system.” Consequently, the official campaign cared little about the legal content but reached out to the electorate with posters portraying cultural icons such as Aleksandr Pushkin. As the ban on state ideology remains in the constitution, the political engineers designed a surrogate: a patriotic Russian culture which legitimizes the current political situation. Culture becomes one of the most important tools to stabilize the Russian nation state.

Conceptualization of the problem (Pitirim Sorokin)

How can these constitutional and cultural developments be conceptualized? I will turn to three analytical concepts proposed by Pitirim Sorokin (1889–1968), a sociologist who witnessed the Russian revolution and eventually founded the sociology department at Harvard, but who is now widely forgotten. However, his theoretical framework was very much advanced for his time and can also be related to postmodernist concepts. Recently, the Italian sociologist Emiliana Mangone (2018) revisited Sorokin's encompassing theory in an important book and pointed out its applicability to contemporary sociological problems.

Sorokin states the bold aspiration of his opus magnum already in the title: "Cultural and Social Dynamics." Sorokin sees the main dynamics of cultural evolution in the succession of different truth systems. Sorokin differentiates between "ideational" and "sensate" cultures. Ideational cultures deduct truth mainly from the sphere of ideas and abstract values, whereas sensate cultures rely on empirical data. Sorokin also provides for an intermediate stage, when idealistic and positivistic truth systems are combined. He calls such a truth system "idealistic." How can these categories be applied to contemporary Russian cultural politics, and how are they helpful in explaining the current sociopolitical situation?

First of all, the notion of "truth systems" is remarkable. They exist only in the plural, and this implies that there is no singular and exclusive truth. Sorokin differentiates between the epistemological claims of a specific truth system and its sociocultural conditionality. The ideological basis of Russian cultural politics represents precisely such a truth system in Sorokin's sense. In his terminology, Russian cultural politics may be considered as an ideational truth system that relies on the "traditional Russian spiritual and moral values" (Østbø 2017). These values are explicitly defined in the national security strategy from 2015. Among them are "the priority of the spiritual before the material," "creative work," and "service to the fatherland."

The Russian ministry of culture played an instrumental role in this shift towards conservatism. Immediately following his inauguration in May 2012, President Putin appointed the conservative historian Vladimir Medinskii as minister of culture. Medinskii pursued an unabashedly nationalistic course. His cultural politics is based on the current patriotic mainstream. He openly likened the culture in Russia to a

garden: Thousands of flowers should blossom, but only the useful plants will be watered. Medinskii understands culture as an “integral part of the Russian national security strategy” and openly advocates a conservative preference of taste (Schmid 2015, 45).

In his doctoral dissertation from 2011, Medinskii dealt with allegedly false or condescending representations of Russia by Western historiographers. He prefaced his dissertation by stating that “the national interests of Russia” create an “absolute standard for the truth and reliability of the historical work” (Medinskii 2011). This scandalous statement was not his only failure to meet basic scientific standards in his academic work. In 2017, an academic committee reviewed Medinskii’s thesis and compiled a comprehensive list of factual errors and conceptual shortcomings. Perhaps, Medinskii’s dismissal as minister of culture in 2020 was a belated consequence of this criticism.

Medinskii further presides over the influential Russian Military Historical Society, which has turned into one of the most active players in the patriotic reshaping of the public space since its foundation in 2013. Medinskii is himself a prolific writer who produces medieval patriotic novels and popular books about the faulty imaginations of Russia in the West.

In Sorokin’s terminology, Medinskii’s conservative discourse clearly represents an ideational truth system. A good example is his reaction to critics of the patriotic movie *Pamfilov’s 28 Men* (2016). This film dramatizes an episode from the defense of Moscow in World War II. The desperate fight of a unit of 28 soldiers against a German tank division had been exposed as a Soviet myth for a long time, but the film reinstates the heroic narrative nevertheless. Medinskii rebuffed the criticism voiced by historians and said that the subject matter constituted for him a “holy legend” that was not to be touched.

Artifacts of the current truth system of Russian cultural politics

In this section, I will present three artifacts that represent the current ideational truth system in Russian cultural politics. The TV and cinema industry in Russia has been keen to pick up historical themes. Several shows reinterpret Russian and Soviet history in a patriotic way, often with clear negligence towards the facts. Melodramatic individual biographies are embedded in a broader historical situation that mirrors the official truth system of a great nation. More precisely, this truth system

comprises three narrative strands: The ongoing war with the West, the spiritual foundation of Russian culture, and finally the all-embracing “presentism” which epitomizes the historical inevitability of the current state.

Since the early 2000s, the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in World War II became the most important historical narrative for the official politics of memory. This event is especially attractive for the Kremlin, since it is the only remaining functioning element of the societal contract between the Soviet and the post-Soviet generations. From this perspective, the Soviet victory in 1945 unites the peoples of the Russian Federation, regardless of age, nation or religion.

A film of questionable aesthetic value made it to the Russian cinemas in 2018 and seemed to suggest to the audience that Russia is still in an ongoing war. The idea for *Tanks* came from Vladimir Medinskii personally. He financed the movie both through the ministry of culture and the Russian Military Historical Society. The historicizing plot of the film refers to the construction and transfer of two prototypes of the T-34 tank in 1940 that eventually became the standard model for the Soviet army. The scenario duly forgets about the Hitler-Stalin pact and presents the Nazis as the worst enemies of the Soviets—the action transpires in 1940! In 2016, the director, Kim Druzhinin, had already produced the movie *Panfilov's 28 Men*.

The film *Tanks* opens with a programmatic intertitle:

Фильм создан по мотивам реальных событий. Некоторые сюжетные линии вымышлены. Любые совпадения не случайны.¹⁰

In this movie, the misrepresentation of history reaches absurd dimensions. On their journey to Moscow, the tank drivers meet an army of Cossacks who had joined the forces of the white general Denikin in the civil war and are still fighting the Bolsheviks in 1940. The tank drivers soon convince the Cossacks that the real enemy is not the Soviets but the Nazis. The chief Nazi villain is likened to a well-known cineastic role model. He looks like the vampire *Nosferatu* in Fritz Murnau's well known silent movie from 1922 (figure 1).

¹⁰ *Tanki* (2018). “The film has been inspired by real events. Some lines of the plot are fictitious. Any similarities are not accidental.”



FIGURE 1: *Tanks* (2018)

At the end of the film, the tank drivers meet Stalin on Red Square and proudly present the new weapon against the aggression from abroad. This final scene is clearly modeled on the pattern of socialist realist propaganda movies from the Stalinist era. Stalin is surrounded by workers, peasants and soldiers and leads the country towards a bright future (figure 2).



FIGURE 2: *Tanks* (2018)

In the ideational truth system of contemporary Russian cultural politics, the didactic message is clear. The audience of the movie is nudged into assuming that the united Russian nation, having overcome the split be-

tween Red and White, is still engaged in a fight with a dangerous enemy coming from the West. Especially important in this message is the portrayal of an effective political leadership that allegedly enjoys the unanimous support of the people.

The second narrative strand of the current ideational truth system points to the spiritual foundation of Russian culture. Oddly enough, one of the fiercest fighters for atheism, Stalin himself, was chosen as the spiritual leader of the nation in the TV series *Svetlana* (2018). The title hero is Stalin's daughter who venerates her father as a loving and caring man. In several flashbacks, images of a happy childhood surface. In her memories, Svetlana pictures her father spending time and playing with her (figure 3).



FIGURE 3: *Svetlana* (2018)

The scenario pays special attention to Stalin's youth as a student of theology at the seminary in Tbilisi. After Stalin's death, Svetlana inherits her father's copy of the Holy Bible and his Orthodox cross (figure 4). At a certain point in the scenario, Svetlana even considers being baptized (figure 5).

The hidden message in this series points to the potential spirituality that is even inscribed into the most terrible epochs of Soviet history. Stalin himself turns out to be a bearer of Russian spirituality. The series insinuates that the religious basis of Russian culture can be observed everywhere if only the correct perspective is chosen. This is the ultimate message of this TV show that omits the horrors of Stalin's dictatorship

and confines itself to a very private perspective on the tyrant and the totalitarian system he created.



FIGURE 4: *Svetlana* (2018)



FIGURE 5: *Svetlana* (2018)

Finally, current Russian cultural politics embrace a “presentism” as it has been described by Nikolai Koposov who in turn refers to a concept introduced by the French historian François Hartog. Koposov describes the preservation of the status quo as the main political goal of the Kremlin. Every change would be interpreted as a change for the worse. There is no political project for the future that would be different from the present nor can there be one (Koposov 2011, 259).

The “presentism” of Russian cultural politics can be observed distinctly in the novel *Ultranormality* (*Ul'tranormal'nost'*, 2017) by Vladislav Surkov. The novel appeared—just like his previous books—under the rather transparent pseudonym Natan Dubovitskii (his wife’s name is Natasha Dubovitskaia). In *Ultranormality*, Surkov depicts Russia in the year 2024. This year marks the end of Putin’s fourth term in office. At that time, the Russian state is the result of semantic operations, and history itself has come to an end. Russia has tried all possible forms of political organization: the medieval kingdom, the Mongolian yoke, the Tsarist Empire, liberal representative democracy, Soviet authoritarianism and, finally, anarchy under El'tsin. From this point of view, Putin’s political system synthesizes all past models of governance: his regime is not normal, but “ultranormal.” “Ultranormality” is a direct consequence of the Russian “presentism” that swallows both the past and the future.

In his novel, Surkov manages to capture one of the main elements of Putin’s state which implies an idiosyncratic conception of time. The river of history enters the ocean of the present; all forms of Russian statehood are somehow preserved in this grand project. History has come to an end, the current state of affairs must be preserved and cared for.

Conclusion

All the presented cultural artifacts are expressions, or—in Sorokin’s terms—deductions of the ideational truth system of contemporary Russian politics. This is why they do not have anything to do with facts. It does not matter that the Denikin Army did not exist during World War II or that Svetlana Stalina did not ride a bicycle with her father. The deeper truth is much more important. Russia’s spiritual power and its unity against the real enemy let the poor world of facts wither away.

The Russian state, as it exists today in its stage of late Putinism, preserves its own basis by relentlessly producing visual evidence of its

ideational truth system. The visual representation of the Russian state (in both senses of the word) meets the emotional patriotic needs of the citizens who do not enjoy real democratic rights. Even the constitution becomes an instrument in this huge project of stabilizing the Russian state (again in both senses of the word). The political system in Russia relies largely on conservative cultural values, not on legal checks and balances. Since the revision of 2020, these cultural values are defined in the constitution as “historical truths.” The indication that the contemporary Russian culture is “ideational” in Sorokin’s definition has reached a constitutional rank.

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