Totalitarian Trends in Putin’s Russia

*The Influence of Aleksandr Dugin*

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For Deda, whose Russian language lessons allowed me to research this thesis and whose moral instruction impelled me to write it.

Thank you, friends and family, who proofread drafts. Each word you approved increased my confidence to submit this thesis.
Abstract:

Analyzing Russia as a totalitarian state is useful because it seems to help explain why Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014. By analyzing Russia as a totalitarian state, this paper rejects and aims to disprove attempts to analyze Russia as either a democratic or authoritarian state, as neither of these frameworks explain Russia’s internal and foreign policy since the ascension of Vladimir Putin to office in a satisfactory way. It is useful for us to see Russia as a totalitarian state that organizes itself domestically and determines its international policy based on ideological and dogmatic principles because doing so may help us more accurately predict Russia’s future international aggression.

This paper begins by unpacking Hannah Arendt’s definition of totalitarianism and paralleling it with Russian domestic policy and institutions of the last ten years in order to see if Russia meets Hannah Arendt’s criteria for a totalitarian state. The most significant component of Hannah Arendt’s definition of totalitarianism is a governing ideology and dogma that organizes society and informs a totalitarian state’s domestic and foreign policy. This paper posits that Russia, a totalitarian state in line with Hannah Arendt’s definition, is governed by the Eurasian ideology of Aleksandr Dugin, a Russian academic and writer, whose textbook *The Foundations of Geopolitics* influenced a generation of young Russian military and civil leaders after the fall of the Soviet Union.

After explaining Dugin’s Eurasian ideology, this paper will attempt to link Dugin’s ideology to Russia’s governing policy by analyzing Putin’s speeches and actions since 2012. It may not be possible to definitively link Putin to Dugin, and this thesis will show that a range of scholars debate Dugin’s influence in Putin’s government. But in the end, this thesis concludes that the similarities between Dugin’s philosophy and Putin’s
actions and rhetoric as President of Russia are so similar as to be more than coincidence, and Dugin’s Eurasian ideology sufficiently meets Hannah Arendt’s criteria for the governing philosophy of an emerging totalitarian society in Russia. By concluding with some of the most current news events in Russia, this paper demonstrates that Russia is continuously and steadily moving toward a totalitarian ideal, not away from it.
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Chapter 1: Russia as a Totalitarian State

I was never a Boy Scout. Instead, I spent my childhood summers on our family dacha in upstate New York, where my grandfather took my friends and me on pochods. These were essentially camping trips like a boy scout troop might conduct, where we learned how to tie knots and follow “clues” in the woods that led us to a preplaced treasure. My father, who grew up surrounded by the red scarf of the Soviet Pioneers and the badges of the Komsomol, the Soviet youth movement, felt pathologically averse to signing me up for Boy Scouts of America, but I didn’t get why. After all, “The Boy Scouts of America is the nation's foremost youth program…[which will] instill in young people lifetime values and develop in them ethical character.”¹ But the Soviet youth movement was a completely different animal, and so are modern Russian youth movements. Over the past 10 years, Russian youth movements like Nashi and Aleksandr Dugin’s Eurasian Youth Union attracted millions of Russian children and continue to resemble the Soviet youth movements that Hannah Arendt describes in The Origins of Totalitarianism (1950). Russia’s modern youth movements—their doctrines and practices—reveal a persistent Russian penchant for ritualistic mass mobilization and indoctrination, institutionalized ideological propaganda, and an earnest desire to unite the totality of public and private life under the banner of a single ideology. Thus, perhaps Russia’s youth movements can serve as a window into the reemergence of totalitarian tendencies in Russia’s foreign and domestic agendas.

¹ Boy Scouts of America Vision Statement, publically available on www.scouting.org
Russian Youth Movements as the foundation for Totalitarian Society

Aleksandr Dugin’s Eurasian Youth Union is a youth movement only in the sense that it recruits students. Otherwise, it claims to have a far broader influence from Russian adults to even panhuman levels. Most of its activities are documented on its website, www.rossia3.ru, a reference to the call for “Eurasian Youth to save Russia by building a third Russian [empire],” and the movement seems to have a physical Moscow address with a phone number and email address as of January 2015. Dugin writes regular blog posts on this website, but the website’s most telling subpage is the “Catechism of the Member of the Eurasian Youth Union,” which does not at all resemble the values of comparable youth organizations in democratic countries, least of all the values statement of The Boy Scouts of America. Dugin’s catechism claims to tell you “your faith, our enemy, our friends, our revolution, our idea, our network, and our hierarchy.” This catechism seems to show that Dugin envisions his Eurasian Youth Union as an all-encompassing way of life that can both indoctrinate and mobilize Russia’s youth in the service of a new Russian and Eurasian empire.

The catechism begins with “you were born a lord. You must be beautiful, proud, and brave. You were born to rule Eurasia.” Right from the start, the stated purpose of this youth organization is to rule Eurasia. But it is not simply a militant club that aims to train soldiers in the service of a national entity. Dugin’s Eurasian Youth Union purports

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3 The Russian word used is Gospodin.
to govern even the most personal and intimate aspects of private life and interpersonal
relations. The next section, entitled, “You’re A Man,” says

therefore, you must be smart and bold, otherwise…you are not capable of
fighting, killing, and dying for high ideals—you are not a man, but shit. You
have no worth, you are garbage…until we see victory we will perpetrate evil.

Victory, in Dugin’s case, means fighting, killing, and dying, for high ideals. In contrast
to Dugin’s description of a man, a woman must be “pretty and tender,” the recipient of
manly gifts and the motivation for men to fight for high ideals.

What makes the “high ideals” of Dugin’s Eurasian Youth Union so similar to the
ideals of archetypal totalitarian youth movements is that they are intended to permeate
every level of human experience and purport to define and govern everything from the
personal definitions of gender roles, to the political ideology in states like Russia, to the
panhuman spirit of global geopolitics. Having explained his vision for what an individual
should look like vis-à-vis gender roles, Dugin continues to expand the scope of his
Eurasian Youth Catechism to the size of the Russian empire.

Our idea [is a] Third Russia⁴…The first Russia…is a caricature of the government
and society that we still need to build…it is a Russia of halfwits, half measures,
corruption, and collapse…The second Russia is “Orange Russia,” with a
bookkeeper-president…We are ready to fight for even the scraps of this country
before the “orange” bulldozer…but not for the sake of serving the interests…of

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⁴ This is different from Dugin’s “Third Russia” in The Foundations of Geopolitics. In his textbook, Dugin
uses “Third Russia,” to refer to the third Russian empire that he hopes to build, which means that the First
Russian Empire was the Tsarist one, and the Soviet Union was the Second Russian Empire. Clearly, here,
he is playing on the same motif by reusing terminology.
the current elite….We will build a new state, Russia-3, Russia-Eurasia, a great
Eurasian Empire from ocean to ocean.

The rhetoric about overcoming both the “orange” democratic forces in Russia and the
bureaucratic realpolitik voices in the government for the sake of a Eurasian empire ruled
by Russia and populated by ideologues is par for the course in Dugin’s writing. But
Dugin’s rhetoric is perhaps all the more alarming when taken out of the context of
scholarly debate and read as a statement of values—a “catechism,” as he puts it— for a
youth movement.

Finally, Dugin’s Eurasian Youth doctrine goes one step beyond the personal and
the Russian to express panhuman and global goals as a natural extension of the personal
and the national ideologies. He articulates the global outlook that his Eurasian Youth
should have in a section called “our enemies.” Dugin’s enemy is, unequivocally, the
United States. “Everything that comes from America is saturated with poison,” he writes
to and for the Eurasian Youth.

Everything that is said there is a lie and a sickness. Everything that they do there
should be broken-off and thrown away. To preserve our identity, we must institute
a strict anti-American culture. This is the first step on the way to the Great War of
the continents: Eurasia against the Atlantic.

It is difficult to find equivalent rhetoric in the doctrines of youth organizations in modern
Western countries. The Boy Scouts of America do not have a defined enemy, and if they
did it might be something like “laziness,” not “Russia and everything for which it
stands.” There is a sense of shrill urgency in Dugin’s youth movement that simply has
not been evident in Europe since Hitler’s Nazi youth or Stalin’s Komsomol.
But who are Dugin’s Eurasian Youth? It seems clear that their doctrine, if implemented and mobilized, could create a generation of Russians that feel a personal duty to act in anti-Western ways, as if every personal act of defiance against the West is a small victory for Russia and humanity. Incidentally, that is exactly how the Komsomol perceived its day-to-day agenda. But as of yet, Dugin’s Eurasian Youth followers seem to be limited in both size and activity. Their Vkontakti (Russian Facebook) page has 10,471 followers as of February 10, 2015—a paltry number considering other youth organizations like The Boy Scouts of America have 324,715 followers on their Facebook. Certainly Facebook is not a conclusive or statistically accurate metric, since many in Russia still do not have internet access, and since The Boy Scouts of America had a confirmed 2,612,955 registered members in 2013. But one might have expected more social media activity from Dugin’s Eurasian Youth Union, so vocal and convinced in its own virtue. The Union’s activities also seem to be limited to gatherings like the Unity of Russia March on November 4th in Irkustsk, consisting of about 100 people, and the occasional summit or conference.  

The context of these marches, though, is more alarming than the number of participants. Dugin’s Eurasian Union is only one of several “anti-orange” or “anti-democratic” youth organizations that sprung up around 2005 in response to the increased call for democratic reforms in both Russia and Ukraine. Nashi, which means “ours,” in Russian, was found on April 15, 2005 in response to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, which saw youth-led protests bring democratically-minded Prime Minister Viktor

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Yuschenko to power the year before. It is less militant than Dugin’s Eurasian youth, but it is still unabashedly pro-Putin and pro-government. It receives a budget and support from the Federal Ministry of Youth Affairs. What Nashi lacks in radicalism, it makes up for in numbers: between 2005 and 2015, rallies numbering in the tens of thousands were not unusual.

In 2012, Vasily Yakimenko gave a telling interview about the role of Nashi. At the time, he was the Russian Minister of Youth Affairs and former head of Nashi. He explains, “when Nashi was founded in 2005, in its manifesto was written that it will support Putin’s plan, not necessarily Putin the person.” In this way Yakimenko attempts to absolve Nashi of being a cult of Putin-worship, but, in reality, a government-sponsored program that teaches youth to support a political ideology is not any less conducive to totalitarian tendencies.

The directive for youth movements in Russia to provide their members with an ideology stems from the policy of the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs. On their website, they have a page called “Patriotic Education,” which explains that one of the goals of this federal agency and the youth organizations which it manages is “the creation and maintenance of a balanced system of patriotic education...aimed at developing Russian youth patriotic conscience, loyalty to the Fatherland, and readiness to defend the homeland.” This language seems to reflect, in very similar terms, Dugin’s expressed

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8 Ibid.
9 Website for the Federal Agency of Youth Affairs (Russian). All translations are my own.
http://www.fadm.gov.ru/
purpose for creating the Eurasian Youth Union. While it may be possible to dismiss Dugin’s Eurasian Youth Union for its low membership rate, it is difficult to overlook the Dugin-esque values expressed by the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs.

**Hannah Arendt and the Legacies of Russian Totalitarianism**

Totalitarianism is a loaded word, and it should not be used lightly. Popularized in the 1920s, it was originally used in a normative positive way by writers and theoreticians in Italy. They claimed that for a state to operate effectively, the state must permeate every realm of public and private life. They theorized that a society organized hierarchically and governed by scientific principles of management could be more effective and less chaotic than a democratic society governed by the principles of individual liberty. In a totalitarian world, every level of society fits together like a puzzle that the government puts together based on superior vision and total control. As a consequence, though, individuals in a totalitarian system are treated as simply pieces of a puzzle—as atoms that have no individual purpose or meaning except to the extent that they contribute to the whole. This atomization of individuals is vital to the establishment of a totalitarian system, which is why a society in which the horizontal norms amongst individuals are weakened is more ready to accept totalitarian regimes.

Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1950), describes the theory, preconditions, and consequences of totalitarianism as they manifested themselves in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia.¹⁰

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Totalitarian movements are mass organizations of atomized, isolated individuals. Compared with all other parties and movement, their most conspicuous external characteristic is their demand for total, unrestricted, unconditional, and unalterable loyalty of the individual member…its follows from the claim of their ideologies that their organization will encompass, in due course, the entire human race…loyalty can be expected only from the completely isolated human being who, without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades, or even mere acquaintances, derives his sense of having a place in the world only from his belonging to a movement, his membership in a party.\textsuperscript{11}

Today, Russia’s youth movements, consolidated dictatorship, rapidly homogenizing governing ideology, goal-rational logic, and atomized populace with a weak civil society, seem to check many of the same totalitarian boxes that Hannah Arendt laid out in \textit{The Origins of Totalitarianism}. Analyzing modern Russia within the framework of Hannah Arendt’s description of totalitarianism may not conclusively define Russia as a newly totalitarian state, but it can certainly be useful to understanding and categorizing the direction of modern Russian society.

Dugin’s Eurasian Youth Union, \textit{Nashi}, and the openly propagandistic aims of the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs seem to be a shadow of Soviet youth organizations which were one of the underpinnings for Soviet totalitarianism as described by Hannah Arendt. While the modern Russian youth movements are not as pervasive in Russian society, because not compulsory, their statements of value and chartered goals are as strongly ideological, personally invasive, and globally ambitious as the Soviet \textit{Komsomol’s}. Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the role of mass organizations—that

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 323
individuals “without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades, or even mere acquaintances, derives his sense of having a place in the world only from his belonging to a movement, his membership in a party”—describes the appeal and success of some of modern Russia’s more radical youth movements fairly accurately.\textsuperscript{12}

Strongly ideological and government-sponsored youth movements seem popular in Russia because Russia is still a highly atomized society. “A recent study shows [that Russia is] a society atomized along ethnic and economic lines.”\textsuperscript{13} But the type of atomization that Hannah Arendt refers to fractures society at the individual level, not just the political and ethnic level. In Russia today, even at the individual level, there are very few ways for people to unite and advance their causes outside the realms of government organizations (like youth movements) because of Putin’s deliberate and systemized crackdown on Russian civil society.

A recent Foreign Policy Article entitled “Putin’s Assault on Civil Society” describes a Russia where the government is actively snuffing out civil society, and therefore atomizing the individual in Russia. “The message from the government to civil society is simple, says Russian journalist and publisher Sergei Parkhomenko: ‘mine [Putin’s] will be the only hand that feeds you. Otherwise you will starve.’”\textsuperscript{14} The practical steps that Russia takes to condemn certain non-governmental organizations is to compel them to register their foreign affiliates as per a 2012 piece of legislation. A proposed addendum to that legislation “would allow the government to simply place

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
Placing an NGO on a “foreign agent” list is incredibly damaging in a country where the government, media, and popular culture actively preach xenophobia. After all, the government sponsored youth organization is called Nashi, or “ours,” as opposed to “theirs” or “the other.” By putting non-government organizations on a list of “foreign agents,” Putin simultaneously represses the average Russian’s ability and desire to unite in non-government approved civil societies, and reaffirms Russian society’s penchant for organizing along anti-foreign lines within preapproved government movements.

Putin’s power to reshuffle Russian civil society reflects his supreme, near-dictatorial power in Russia. Hannah Arendt explains the function of a leader in totalitarian society.

The supreme task of the Leader is to impersonate the double function characteristic of each layer of the movement—to act as the magic defense of the movement against the outside world; and at the same time, to be the direct bridge by which the movement is connected with it.¹⁶

The way Russian youth movements like Nashi demonstrate fealty to Putin is by supporting his agenda. The way they support Putin as the center of their world and depend on him for protection from the outside world is evident in the statements of Nashi’s former leader, Yakimenko, who said that “Nashi sees Russia as the historical and geographical center of the world,” the freedom of which is threatened by the “unholy

¹⁵ Ibid.
¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, 374.
union of communists, fascists and liberals that is fueled by their common hatred of our president, Vladimir Putin.”

Yakimenko’s words about Russia’s current government-sponsored youth movement’s fanatic allegiance to its leader are almost synonymous with the “suicidal loyalty,” of archetypal totalitarian youth movements described by Hannah Arendt.

The more technical reason for this suicidal loyalty is that succession to the supreme office is not regulated by any inheritance of other laws…it is not the truthfulness of the Leader’s words but the infallibility of his actions which is the basis for the structure. Without it and in the heat of a discussion which presumes fallibility, the whole fictitious world of totalitarianism goes to pieces.

By supporting Putin and Putin’s agenda, Nashi contributes to the cult that Putin carefully crafts around his own infallibility and charisma. While it may be easy to ridicule art exhibits that portray Putin as Hercules and music videos about how great Putin is, songs like “One like Putin,” show that even some of Russia’s popular culture artists have bought into the cult of Putin’s character. Putin has been in charge of Russia for 15 years, essentially, and will likely be in charge for at least 10 more. The music video and art installation is a tasteless reminder that an entire generation of children is being raised in Russia knowing nothing but Putin.

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18 Ibid., 387
Just as fanatical mass-movements consisting of atomized individuals help contribute to Putin’s power, Putin’s totalitarian power helps contribute to the formation of atomized individuals. Hannah Arendt describes this reciprocal relationship.

By pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between them; compared to the condition within its iron band, even the desert of tyranny, insofar as it is still some kind of space, appears like a guarantee of freedom. Totalitarian government does not just curtail liberties or abolish essential freedoms; nor does it…succeed in eradicating the love for freedom from the hearts of man. It destroys the one essential prerequisite of all freedom which is simply the capacity of motion which cannot exist without space.22

Arendt’s slightly mystical explanation of space helps us view Putin as not simply a tyrant who wishes to maintain his power, but as a totalitarian who wants to be the leader of a society organized in a totalitarian fashion. If Putin were a tyrant, according to Arendt’s definition, he would not need to pressure the Russian populace into his preapproved organizations. But seeing Putin as a totalitarian helps us understand his use of terror against powerful oligarchs, journalists, and even average citizens as a tool with which he organizes and defines the totality of Russian space beneath him.

It is not enough to forcibly coerce society into line, because, as Arendt explains, not even coercion can totally “eradicate the love for freedom from the hearts of man.” Therefore, a totalitarian society needs a central fiction, one that gives it a purpose and narrative that explains the lack of freedom in society as a useful means to a desired end. Thus, Dugin’s Eurasian Youth Union, the youth movement component of Dugin’s Eurasian Empire, “translates the propaganda lies of the [Eurasian] movement, woven

22 Hannah Arendt, 466.
around a central fiction—the conspiracy of the [United States and democrats]—into a functioning reality, to build up, even under non-totalitarian circumstances, a society whose members act and react according to the rules of a fictitious world. The war between Russia and the West is mostly one-sided and mostly in the head of ideologues like Dugin. I do not think it is a stretch to say there exists no grand Western conspiracy to subjugate Russia. But Dugin’s youth movement claims that there is one, Putin seems to be buying it, and as a result, many spheres of Russian society are aligning themselves against the United States along the lines of this central fiction which is a hallmark of totalitarian societies.

The dominance of a central fiction or ideology amongst atomized mass movements governed by a single near-mythical man has ramifications on the world scale. A state that meets these parameters uses goal-rational logic to justify seemingly illogical political decisions—illogical by any standards but the prism established by and permitted within the state. According to Hannah Arendt,

> totalitarian rule…defies…all positive laws, even to the extreme of defying those which it has itself established…But it operates neither without guidance of law nor is it arbitrary, for it claims to obey strictly and unequivocally those laws of Nature or History from which all positive laws always have been supposed to spring.

Perhaps this is why Putin so often cites international law and precedent as he violates it, like when he cites the Kosovo Precedent to annex Crimea. But Russia’s invasion of Ukraine makes no sense according to these international standards as it violates the

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23 Ibid., 364  
24 Ibid., 461
Budapest Memorandum, which Russia signed in 1994. Nor does the annexation of Crimea make any sense for Russia, since Russia cannot afford to pay for the development or support of its already existing territories. But the telltale sign of goal-rational logic in a totalitarian society is its warped perception of the world beyond the bounds of its control, and its willingness to drink its own Kool-Aid. The invasion of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea are vital only according to Dugin’s Eurasian ideology, which is why Putin both invaded Ukraine and annexed Crimea, completing the image of Russia as a new imperial and totalitarian state in Europe.
Chapter 2: Russian foreign policy through the lens of totalitarianism.

On Tuesday March 25th, 2014, the Russian Minister of Defense, Sergei Shoigu, awarded the commander of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet, Sergei Aksanov, the inaugural “medal for the return of Crimea.” Shown here, the medal is alarming in what it says, depicts, and represents for several reasons. The large print around the edges of the medal says “Ministry of Defense, Russian Federation,” which would imply that Russia treats Crimea as a military conquest rather than a legal annexation through the supposedly democratic referendum of March 16th, 2014. The two-headed eagle, with a crown, scepter, and orb, is the crest of Russia’s 19th Century Romanov dynasty, and its restoration as Russia’s national symbol, though hotly debated, largely symbolizes Russia’s return to imperialistic ambitions, manifesting itself most recently in the 2014 invasion of Ukrainian territory. The most worrying part of the medal, though, is the timeline, which says that the conquest of Ukraine began on February 20th 2014 and ended on March 18th 2014.

On March 4th, 2014, in the first interview he gave to Russian media after the flight of Ukrainian President Yanukovich, Russian President Vladimir Putin asserted that Russian troops in Crimea were only reacting to what Russia perceived to be the illegal seizure of power by “fascist” forces in Ukraine. But if the seizure in question, and Yanukovich’s consequent flight, occurred on February 21st 2014, then why does Russia’s

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newest military medal for “The Return of Crimea” date from February 20\textsuperscript{th} 2014? The start date that the medal gives makes it seem as if Russia had planned to take advantage of an unstable Ukraine even before the Ukrainian nationalists ever ousted Yanukovich, which would mean that Putin’s invasion was premeditated rather than reactionary or spontaneous.

The fact that the medal shows March 18\textsuperscript{th} 2014 as the end-date for the “return of Crimea” is more easily explainable than the early start date, but is no less revealing about Russia’s perception of itself and Ukraine. At a cursory glance, March 18\textsuperscript{th} makes sense as the end-date for the conflict; Crimea had a referendum on March 16\textsuperscript{th}, wherein 96.77% of ballots cast allegedly voted to accede to Russia,\textsuperscript{27} and Putin signed the decree making Crimea a part of Russia on March 17\textsuperscript{th}. Then, on March 18\textsuperscript{th}, Putin gave a speech to the Crimeans (and indeed, the world) about Russia’s national destiny to possess Crimea.

By choosing to publicly announce March 18\textsuperscript{th} as the end-date to the conflict, Russia seems to be saying that neither the supposedly democratic referendum on March 16\textsuperscript{th} ended the conflict, nor the legalistic signature of the office of the Russian President; but rather, the public word of Putin and the fulfillment of Russian destiny ended the fighting in Crimea. After all, the medal is not for the “liberation of Crimea,” which was perhaps accomplished on March 16\textsuperscript{th} through the referendum. The medal is not for the “union of Crimea with Russia,” which was perhaps accomplished by the signing of legalistic documents on March 17\textsuperscript{th}. Rather, the medal says “return of Crimea,” as if Crimea had always belonged to Russia, and was only now being returned.

\textsuperscript{27} The voter turnout percentage is claimed to be around 80%, an enviable and questionable turnout for any referendum in any democratic country.
The medal for the “return of Crimea” will remain pinned to the chest of Sergei Aksanov, Commander of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet, as a small symbol of Russia’s worldview, governing ideology, and intentions. On a political level, it raises more questions than it answers, demonstrating that Russia is perhaps untrustworthy at the negotiating table. But beyond that, it symbolizes the power Putin has over Russia, and offers a small window into how Putin thinks of Russia within the context of history, ideology, and geopolitics. Above all, the medal impels us to reconsider how we think about and react to Russian foreign policy.

America bases her foreign policy on a set of assumptions about the values, culture, politics, and motives of other states in order to predict how those states will act in the future. During the Cold War, it was America’s assumption that the Soviet Union, with Russia at its focal point, wanted to spread its ideology by swallowing other countries under the flag of communism, and America’s foreign policy reacted accordingly. In a post-Soviet world, American foreign policy assumed that Russia would, like its Western European neighbors, gladly shed its empire as it welcomed liberal democracy, transforming it into a benign (perhaps friendly) nuclear power. However, Russia’s recent military incursions into Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) impel a reevaluation of America’s assumptions regarding Russia’s motives in order to reformulate an accurate and effective foreign policy strategy for Russia in the 21st century.

Some critics of Putin’s regime and foreign policy submit that Putin is a gangster—a petty thug who acts aggressively on an international scale as a means of consolidating and maintaining money, power, and respect for its own end. These critics, therefore, would suggest that America base its foreign policy strategy around the idea of
Putin as an authoritarian with no real motives but to obtain and retain power. Masha Gessen is one of those critics who sees Putin as a thug, or an authoritarian. In her book *The Man without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (2013), Gessen points out that Putin the world leader does not act differently from Putin the schoolboy, who used to react violently at the slightest provocation. Furthermore, Gessen suggests that Putin’s consolidation of power within Russia from 1990 to 2013 reveals a man with symptoms of “pleonexia, the insatiable desire to have what rightfully belongs to others.”

But diagnosing Putin as a pleonexic thug seems incomplete in 2015. Masha Gessen ends her book on the optimistic note that Russians may shake off Putin’s government in the impressive protests leading up to the 2012 Russian Presidential Elections. But those protests ultimately failed, since Putin’s election stood and he is more secure in his position now than he was in any of his previous terms. Putin’s actions and speeches after his 2012 election show a Vladimir Putin who believes he is fulfilling Russia’s destiny by acting on ideological and nationalistic principles. Perhaps Hannah Arendt is correct in explaining that the most overt acts of “totalitarian terror…[are] let loose when all organized opposition has died down and the totalitarian ruler knows that he no longer needs to be afraid. This is particularly true for the Russian development.”

Even Gessen notes that, as far back as in 1994, when Putin was still the right-hand man of Anatoly Sobchak, St. Petersburg’s corrupt mayor, Putin almost felt compelled to place ideology and (what he considered) principle ahead of rational, economic thinking.

It seems clear from Gessen’s book that Putin never fell out-of-love with the Soviet

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29 Ibid., 259
30 Hannah Arendt. xxx
31 Masha Gessen, 133.
Union, but it is not immediately convincing that we can chalk up his beliefs and motives to either purely Soviet nostalgia or run-of-the-mill Russian patriotism. Rather, Putin’s actions and words run remarkably parallel to the Eurasian school of ideological geopolitics, the chief proponent of which is a man named Aleksandr Dugin.

According to Aleksandr Dugin’s *Foundation of Geopolitics* textbook, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is the necessary first step toward realizing the Russian people’s global mission by founding a Eurasian empire. Though it was published in 1997, Dugin’s plan for seizing and dividing Ukraine reads like an operation order from February 20, 2014. Since its publication, this textbook has been taught at the Russian Military Staff Academy, where Dugin is a Professor of Strategy, and at the Moscow State University, where Dugin became the head of the Sociology department in 2008. The rise of Aleksandr Dugin from self-publishing pamphleteer at the fall of the Soviet Union to acclaimed scholar and influential political advisor in 2014 mirrors the rise of Eurasian-centered rhetoric and policy in the Russian government since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Perhaps the reason Eurasianism’s stock seems to be on the rise in Russia is because it offers more than a geopolitical strategy. Dugin’s Eurasian ideology offers Russia the teleological narrative it’s been missing since the fall of the Soviet Union. It tells Russians that they have a special mission on earth as the manifestation of the Roman Empire, and that a strong totalitarian ideological figurehead like Putin can help them reclaim international significance and pride.

Though Putin’s actions and rhetoric reflect Dugin’s writing, we may never be able to tell if Putin really believes Dugin’s ideology or if Putin is simply using it to justify his actions. In the end, it does not matter for the purposes of strategic and political planning
whether Putin is a totalitarian ideologue or simply acts like a totalitarian ideologue because he thinks it is politically expedient. Therefore, when planning our own responses to Russia’s geopolitical action, we should consider Dugin’s Eurasianism as a window into Putin’s brain and Russia’s governing and organizing ideology.

President Putin’s narrative is that Russia must support “any who feels not just an ethnic, but a cultural connection to Russia. Who feel themselves a part of the greater Russian community.”[^32] This narrative is a blank check for Russia’s aggression—it rationalizes Russia’s Chechen wars, its invasion of Georgia in 2008, and its invasion of Ukraine in 2014. It reflects Russia’s 19th century Panslavism, which seized land in the Balkans from the Ottomans under the pretense of protecting all ethnic Slavs. It hearkens even further back to the 17th and 18th Century, when Russia grew and annexed disparate nations in exchange for protecting them from other empires. Similarly, the invasion of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea is vital to Russia’s resurgent national narrative as a hegemonic Eurasian power, with an historic and special “mission on the Eurasian continent.”[^33] But it seems to be more than just a politically expedient narrative. Putin’s rhetoric and actions over the last several years reflect an ideological fervor that is also evident in Russia’s youth movements, and manifests itself in willingness to base state policy on ideology.

Chapter 3: Dugin’s Eurasian Ideology

Putin’s narrative is not a new one. According to Aleksandr Dugin’s *Foundation of Geopolitics* textbook, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is the necessary first step toward realizing the Russian people’s global mission by founding a Eurasian empire. Though it was published in 1997, Dugin’s plan for seizing and dividing Ukraine reads like an operation order from February 20, 2014. Since its publication, this textbook has been taught at the Russian Military Staff Academy, where Dugin is a Professor of Strategy, and at the Moscow State University, where Dugin became the head of the Sociology department in 2008. The rise of Aleksandr Dugin from self-publishing pamphleteer at the fall of the Soviet Union to acclaimed (in Russia) sociological scholar and influential political advisor in 2014 mirrors the rise of Eurasian-centered rhetoric and policy in the Russian government over the last twenty years.

Dugin’s Geopolitics Textbook

In his 1997 textbook, *The Foundations of Geopolitics*, Aleksandr Dugin prescribes what Russia should do about Ukraine, basing his practical strategy in the ideological assertion that “the existence of a ‘sovereign Ukraine,’ represents … a declaration of geopolitical war against Russia…The Ukrainian problem is the main and most serious question which stands before Moscow.” Dugin’s solution to “the

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36 Dugin’s textbook *Основы Гиополитики* (*Foundations of Geopolitics*) is not available in English. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
Ukrainian problem” is to conquer and divide Ukraine into four portions. It cannot be said for certain that Putin read Dugin, but it seems as if Dugin’s 1997 plan found its fulfillment in Putin’s 2014 actions.

First, Russia should separate Crimea and “maximally control it from Moscow,” writes Dugin. Second, Russia should separate and integrate Eastern Ukraine, which for all intents and purposes, is “little Russia.” Third, Middle Ukraine (from the West bank of the Dnieper to Odessa) is too complex to integrate into Russia, but should “absolutely enter the Eurasian geopolitical arrangement.” Finally, Russia should leave Western Ukraine to the Europeans. The only reason Dugin does not advocate conquering Crimea outright in 1997 is because “it will incite negative reactions [amongst the populace], who will make it difficult to integrate the peninsula into the Russian system.” But even as long ago as 1997 Dugin insisted that “Moscow must actively insert itself in the reshaping of Ukrainian space,” a process that he foresaw taking many years, with decades of planning, and ultimately manifesting itself in Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine.

Dugin’s plan for conquering Ukraine is only a small part of his much larger plan for Russia’s “new geopolitical order.” Rallying behind his inflationary cry of “Russia’s war for world domination is not over,” Dugin argues that Russia always was and must continue to be an empire by virtue of the Russian people’s “unique mission.”

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40 Ibid., 378
41 Ibid., 380
42 Ibid., 381
43 Ibid., 380
44 Ibid., 383
45 Ibid., 211
46 Ibid., 212
The Russian nation, without a doubt, belongs to the ranks of messianic people...and has universal, panhuman meaning, which doesn’t simply clash with various national ideals, but also with other forms of civilizational universalism.\footnote{Ibid., 189} Thus, Dugin inextricably links Russia’s geopolitical strategy to a messianic ideology.

Referencing both practical security considerations and ephemeral ideology, Dugin systematically justifies Russia’s claim to a Eurasian empire. Working from the core of Russian civilization outward to the periphery, he begins by stating “the obvious,” that Russia must control North-Eastern Europe as the seat of Russian ethnicity and for the sake of Russian security.\footnote{Ibid., 190} Broadening his gaze to “religious and cultural” affiliations, Dugin claims for Russia’s empire, to use Putin’s words, anyone “who feels not just an ethnic, but a cultural connection to Russia. Who feel themselves a part of the greater Russian community.”\footnote{Corey Flintoff. "Russia's Annexation Of Crimea Worries Baltic Nation Of Latvia." NPR. July 14, 2014. Accessed January 27, 2015.} Dugin then cites Russia’s “messianic mission” as justification for “expansionism...toward even the most disparate cultures and nations...if they contain a specific and special history and culture” conducive to Russian conquest.\footnote{Foundations of Geopolitics, 1997. Page191.} Finally, the Russian empire should not simply seek “living space,” but should also aim to spread throughout the world a particular “Russian-type worldview.”\footnote{Ibid.} It seems, then, that ideology is both the means and the end of Dugin’s proselytizing empire.

*The Foundations of Geopolitics* delves deeper into the means with which Russia could accomplish its empire. After all, Russia had built and lost two empires in its history, so a chapter called “Toward a New Eurasian Empire” highlights some of the
methods Russian leaders might use to build a lasting third Russian empire. Learning from the collapse of the Soviet Union, Dugin stresses that the empire must not be a conglomerate of nation-states, but rather, should evolve as a cohesive singular unit, “as the expression of a special civilizational will.”

Annexing Crimea instead of cooperating with Ukraine, therefore, is logically consistent with Dugin’s prescribed style of empire building.

The popular narrative from the West (Russia, of course, has a different explanation) goes that in February of 2014, Russia invaded and annexed internationally recognized Ukrainian land. Preceding the conflict, in late 2013 Ukraine was preparing to establish a trade agreement with the European Union (E.U.); this would allow Ukraine much easier access to European goods, to the detriment of the manufacturers of more expensive, yet lower quality Russian goods. Russia, wary of losing this 45 million-person market (Russia itself is 150 million), gave Ukraine an ultimatum: access to Russian gas and debt forgiveness, or European goods and membership in the European Union some 10 years down the road. Although the Ukrainian government caved to Russian demands, the people rebelled, forcing the elected president to flee and launching a civil war between factions supporting closer relations with Russia, and factions supporting closer relations with Europe. Russian troops were called in to support the pro-Russian portions of Ukraine, ultimately annexing the Crimea.

But to look at the invasion of Ukraine in purely market or even realpolitik terms is anachronistic today, and leaves more questions than answers about Putin’s motives. Cooperation with Ukraine is both politically and economically advantageous for Russia. Why would Russia feel the need to restrict trade with Ukraine simply because Ukraine

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52 Ibid., 212
joined the European economic union? Why would Russia feel compelled to annex Crimea rather than simply help preserve democracy and order there, in accordance with international law, in order to preserve its most important trade partner? What does it stand to gain, economically or tangibly, from annexation rather than from cooperation? Trying to understand Putin in market terms—as a man who simply wants the best standard of living for his country—is inadequate. If that were all he wanted, he would not have annexed Crimea at the risk of incurring crippling sanctions from the European Union and the United States.

Perhaps the reason Putin might opt for a geopolitical strategy consistent with Dugin’s Eurasianism even at the risk of repercussion is because Dugin’s Eurasian ideology offers Russia the teleological narrative it’s been missing since the fall of the Soviet Union. It tells Russians that they have a special mission on earth as the modern manifestation of the Roman Empire. In one of his first pamphlets, entitled “War of the Continents,” Dugin claims that Russia is the manifestation of “eternal Rome.” Like Rome, Russian civilization developed in a vacuum, growing in strength by keeping other civilizations out, and subsuming weaker ethnic groups with the promise of keeping either the Mongols or the Ottomans or the Poles at bay. Russians, argues Dugin, should therefore focus inward to the Kremlin that defended Russia, upward to the Orthodox Church which sanctifies the Kremlin, and outward to other Eurasian nations which developed in a similarly insular way with strong ties to their land and leaders.⁵³

Dugin’s Fourth Political Theory

A civilization that developed independently of Western civilization needs a governing ideology independent of the three Western governing philosophies of the 20th century—namely, Communism, Fascism, and Liberalism. In his book The Fourth Political Theory, Dugin attempts to craft his alternative, purely Russian governing ideology. The work is self-contradictory at times, but I think The Fourth Political Theory—the governing ideology for Dugin’s Eurasian empire—boils down to four key principles: progress is unnecessary, liberalism is wrong, the individual is meaningless, and chaos is desirable, but only on Russia’s terms. Each of these ideological tenets has practical ramifications in Russia’s foreign policy, and must impel the United States to reconsider its approach toward Russia.

Dugin takes issue with “progress” as the end-all-be-all of civilization, but he crosses a bridge farther than even the most ardent Western conservative political philosopher, treating change in almost any arena as a detriment to humanity. Thus, we have the first tenet of Dugin’s Fourth Political Theory—that it is neither good nor necessary nor inevitable for “human society [to]…develop, progress, evolve, [and] grow.” On a practical level, this means that the Russian government may be satisfied to pursue its own aims at the expense of its citizenry’s prosperity and growth. As a result, perhaps economic sanctions from Europe and the United States will take longer to stress a Russian government that is content to live without modernization and progress.

55 Ibid., 55
In his *Fourth Political Theory*, Dugin dedicates far more space to discrediting liberalism than he does to Communism and Fascism combined, which makes sense considering he vilifies America and NATO most of all for their global spread of liberalism, a la Francis Fukuyama.\(^{56}\) One may suspect that Dugin mistakenly conflates American foreign policy with the entire history and multi-faceted culture of liberalism in the West. Nevertheless, Dugin writes,

liberalism…may and must…be repudiated. And if behind it, there stands the full might of the inertia of modernity, the spirit of the Enlightenment and the logic of the political and economic history of European humanity of the last centuries, it must be repudiated together [with them all].\(^{57}\)

In other words, Dugin sees a political standoff with the United States as an ideological stance against liberalism and the West, making clear that he is more than ready to throw the baby out with the bathwater if necessary. Russia’s political opposition to the United States can, according to Dugin, be interpreted as a deep-rooted ideological aversion to all things liberal. This means that for the United States to reform its relations with Russia it would need to begin negotiations on the level of ideology, not just politics.

Dugin seems almost personally offended at the liberal hubris that the individual matters. The third tenet of his Fourth Political Theory seems to be that, “we must strike the individual, abolish him, and cast him into periphery of political considerations,”\(^{58}\) which begs the question, who or what, then, is in the center of political considerations in Russia? Dugin discounts the “state” as the center of political considerations when he

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 140. Dugin’s interpretation of Fukuyama is that he offers an “endless end….after the end of history, economic transactions continue to occur…nightclubs shimmer invitingly…computer screens and televisions shine…History is not, but the market and TV are.”

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 154

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 51
nominally rejects Fascism, and he similarly discounts “classes” of people with Communism. In Dugin’s ideal Russia, governed by his Fourth Political Theory, a vague collective national “being” is his main political actor, which is ultimately vital to justifying Russia’s political practice.

On a practical level, this national “being” is comprised of something resembling “political soldiers…(Das politische Soldat),” departing from the Nietzschean definition of a person “who wages wars for the sake of thoughts and their consequences” only because Dugin superciliously (but not contemptuously) dismisses “fascists after 1945 [as] simulacra” (i.e. “fakers”). Dugin’s “political soldiers” must act under the assumption that “there is no barrier between idea and realization. It is the principle of adopting a magical view of the world.” In other words, Dugin calls for a nation run and populated by ideologues.

Another phrase Dugin uses to describe his political actors within his “national being” is “radical subjects,” who are morbidly described as those who remain after the apocalypse. “When everybody is gone,” writes Dugin, “the only thing that remains is those who cannot be gone.” Perhaps the fourth and final principle of Dugin’s Fourth Political theory is a millennial vision of the world’s decay and descent into chaos, for which Russia is the mitigating prescription, and which only Dugin’s “political soldiers” or “radical subjects” can survive.

This last tenet of Dugin’s philosophy is his way of saying “I do not care if the world burns, so long as it burns on Russia’s terms.” After all, Russia has always sold

59 Ibid., 173
60 Ibid., 174
61 Ibid., 182
62 Ibid., 168
itself as an island of order in a chaotic world, especially during the Communist era. Today, it has a vested interest in fabricating chaotic situations on its borders as a means through which to assume leadership in the region and to protect itself from repercussions, if possible. For example, Russia continues to deny its role in the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine, preferring instead to supply, train, and support “Ukrainian rebels.” In the Baltics, Russia continues to escalate political pressure in the Narva region of Estonia, and to instigate tensions between ethnic Russians and ethnic Latvians in Latvia. To Putin, causing chaos is a politically strategic foreign policy move that is ideologically consistent with Aleksandr Dugin’s political philosophy.

Dugin’s political theory seems to be gaining credence as Russia’s raison d’etre—her governing ideology intertwined inextricably with every facet of the government and public life. Dugin lauds a totalitarian state with ideologically driven government and polity as “a deep and differentiated ethno-religious structure for the internal politico-administrative structure,” which ultimately boils down to “revitalizing religious-monarchical formulas…to return to…a Christian worldview.” Since Putin’s reelection as president of Russia in 2012, his rhetoric has increasingly mirrored Dugin’s, indicating that Russia is indeed moving toward a new totalitarian-style state.

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Dugin and Putin

Dugin and Putin seem to share an enemy in the West. Anti-liberalism and anti-Westernism is one of the four main tenets of Dugin’s Fourth Political theory and a trope of Putin’s speeches, especially in recent years. Putin uses anti-Westernism to justify Russia’s actions on a moral level, which is to say that Putin is not just concerned with appearing strong, but with appearing right. He says,

Today, many nations are revising their moral values and ethical norms, eroding ethnic traditions and differences between peoples and cultures. Society is now required not only to recognize everyone’s right to the freedom of consciousness, political views and privacy, but also to accept without question the equality of good and evil, strange as it seems, concepts that are opposite in meaning.\(^{66}\)

In one passage Putin hits on at least three of the key principles of Dugin’s Fourth Political Theory. The anti-Westernism is most notable, for criticism in the passage is aimed at the West. But he also dismisses progress as a means and an end when he questions countries for revising their values. He discounts the sanctity of the individual when he claims that not everyone has a right to consciousness or political views. Most importantly, these words in Putin’s yearly national address are purely ideological.

By demonizing the West’s ideology, Putin aims to unite everyone who opposes the West’s ideology just as Dugin wants to unite disparate ethnic groups on the Eurasian continent along a primarily anti-West axis. In his 2012 national address, Putin said,

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To the rest of the planet, regardless of our ethnicity, we have been and continue to be one people—Tatars, Ukrainians, Georgians, and ethnic Russians of course…As far as the entire world is concerned, we are one people, we are Russians. That was true during the war [WWII], and it has always been true.67 Putin realizes that nothing unites people quite like a common enemy. Beyond that common enemy, though, lays a more profound and lasting link between the Eurasian people, claims Dugin. Perhaps a common enemy could unite all of Eurasia as it once united the Russian empire and then again the Soviet Union, and perhaps Dugin’s ideology could maintain and preserve it. Dugin’s dream of a Eurasian empire once again seems to find political legs in Putin’s rhetoric.

The Eurasian empire starts, claims Dugin, by uniting Russians with their closest relatives—the Belarusians and the Ukrainians. Dugin lays out a plan to conquer the Eurasian continent and turn the Russian empire into a Eurasian empire. He would divvy up Ukraine, as Putin seems to be doing today.68 Belarus, annex altogether.69 In the Caucasus, where Russia fought wars against the Chechens and Georgians since the fall of the Soviet Union, Dugin’s strategy seems to have been fulfilled to the letter. As prescribed, Russia has given its problem-regions of Dagestan and Ingushetia significant autonomy but “under full control of Russia and with a Eurasian orientation.”70 During the 2008 invasion of Georgia, Russia separated Abkhazia from Georgia because “it is

69 Ibid., 375
70 Ibid., 351
important to tie Abkhazia directly to Moscow,” and it seems Russia only stopped short of sending tanks into Tbilisi because of America’s fleet repositioning to the Black Sea.

Putin’s invasion of Ukraine is Dugin’s philosophy in action. In Putin’s speech on March 18, 2014, the day after Crimea was annexed to Russia, Putin spoke strongly about Russia’s heritage and destiny in Crimea.

In people’s hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia. This firm conviction is based on truth and justice and was passed from generation to generation, over time, under any circumstances, despite all the dramatic changes our country went through during the entire 20th century... Back then, it was impossible to imagine that Ukraine and Russia may split up and become two separate states. However, this has happened. It was only when Crimea ended up as part of a different country that Russia realized that it was not simply robbed, it was plundered.

Putin, speaking to his own people, does not try to veil his motives for annexing Crimea behind economic or strategic reasons. His rationale is clear; Crimea always belonged to Russia by virtue of Russian destiny. Taking Crimea is Putin’s first step toward reclaiming what Russia has lost, and toward securing Dugin’s Eurasian mission.

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71 Ibid.
Chapter 4: Dugin in Context. Scholars and Political Scientists debate the influence and danger of Dugin

It is difficult to say whether Dugin developed the Fourth Political Theory to justify his Eurasian empire or if the Fourth Political Theory birthed a Eurasian vision as its logical conclusion. Similarly, though it is clear that Putin’s actions and rhetoric reflect Dugin’s writing, we may never be able to tell if Putin really believes Dugin’s ideology or if Putin simply uses it to justify his actions. Therefore, is vital to consider Dugin’s link to Putin with prudence, and remember that it is inconclusive. In the end, it does not matter for the purposes of strategic and political planning whether Putin is an ideologue or simply acts like an ideologue because he thinks of Eurasianism as politically expedient. Putin’s key speeches and interviews since his most recent election in 2012 reveal a governing ideology consistent with Dugin’s Fourth Political Theory and ambitions that reflect Dugin’s Eurasian empire.

Shared Heroes

Putin does not overtly quote Dugin in his critical interviews and national addresses, but Putin chooses to quote some of Dugin’s stated influences and heroes. In the vast wealth of Russian heroes and quotable people, it is curious that Putin reaches for Dugin’s intellectual teachers. It speaks volumes that both Putin and Dugin look to the same people for inspiration, or to inspire others. Soviet anthropologist Lev Gumilev and Russian political philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev appear in both Dugin’s writing and Putin’s speeches as common denominators, and thus warrant further analysis.
Lev Gumilev was a repressed Soviet scholar who was taken as a child from his mother, famous poet Anna Akhmatova, and held in the Russian prison system in order to keep his mother in check. His work “has been very influential on modern Eurasianism,” and Aleksandr Dugin paraphrases his theories about how Russia’s geography shaped Russia’s ethnic identity, or *ethnos*. This “*ethnos* is…a community of language, religious belief, daily life…as an always-unique means of establishing a relationship with the outside world.” In other words, Dugin expands Gumilev’s idea about the internal workings of the Russian world to encompass the sphere of international relations as well.

Putin cites Gumilev in his 2012 national address (his first since returning to office after a four year stint as prime minister) in order to describe Russia’s pivotal role in the impending worldwide competition for markets and resources. Putin uses Gumilev’s economic writing to contrast Russia’s natural resource abundance and growing economy with the rest of the world’s economic scramble and decline, while Dugin uses Gumilev’s anthropologic tracts to paint Russia as a city on a hill, aloof of the world’s moral corruption. By citing Gumilev, both Putin and Dugin aim to portray Russia specifically as an island of order in the inevitably approaching chaos.

Nikolai Berdyaev was an early 20th Century Russian political philosopher, expelled from Russia in the 1922 for propagating religious revival in Russia at a time when the Soviets were trying to forge an atheistic state. Dugin models some aspects of his perfect world after Berdyaev’s idea of “the New Middle Ages.” Recreating the

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73 *Fourth Political Theory*, Chapter 2 Footnote 45.
74 *Fourth Political Theory*, 47.
75 Vladimir Putin, Address to the Federal Assembly, 2012.
76 *Fourth Political Theory*, 69.
conservative feudal society of the Middle Ages in the 21st Century is not only desirable, according to Dugin, but also possible.

Putin makes all of his regional governors read Berdyaev, and cites him in his 2013 national address.

...our position on defending traditional values that have made up the spiritual and moral foundation of civilization in every nation for thousands of years: the values of traditional families, real human life, including religious life, not just material existence but also spirituality, the values of humanism and global diversity. Of course, this is a conservative position. But speaking in the words of Nikolai Berdyaev, the point of conservatism is not that it prevents movement forward and upward, but that it prevents movement backward and downward, into chaotic darkness and a return to a primitive state. 77

Certainly Putin does not say on national television that he wishes to plunge the world into a “New Middle Age,” and indeed, we cannot conclusively say that he does. But it is clear that Putin admires and seeks to implement the same aspects of Berdyaev’s philosophy that Dugin cites in his Fourth Political Theory as contributing to “the reversibility of political and historical time.” 78 Putin may claim to want “movement forward and upward,” but in the same passage it is clear that he wishes to move toward a Russia of earlier times, when Russia was both more powerful and could also perceive itself to be on the ideologically right side of history.

Perhaps the link between Dugin and Putin through Berdyaev and Gumilev is coincidence, but Russia is still a world where ideas matter, and where the choice of

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78 Fourth Political Theory, 69.
symbols like the Medal for the return of Crimea and national heroes like Berdayev continues to be both controversial and influential. For better or worse, survivors of the Soviet Union remember vividly a time where what you read and who you quote could land you in jail, and the cultural significance attributed to quotations and literature selection continues today. With this in mind, Putin allows Dugin to remain in positions of academic influence, where he produces books and teaches future leaders. After all, says Putin in his 2013 national address, “we need schools that do more than just teach…we also need schools to help our nation’s citizens form their identity, absorbing the nation’s values, history and traditions.”

Scholarship on Dugin and Putin

Dugin’s connection to, and influence over Putin, has been hotly debated amongst Western scholars and Russian analysts. When I cornered Putin’s former financial advisor, Andrei Illarionov, on his way to dinner after delivering a lecture, I asked him outright how much influence Dugin had over Putin. “None at all,” he dismissed, and then said that Putin treats Dugin like a court jester, content to let Dugin say foolish, bombastic things in the classroom and on television (I’m translating and paraphrasing, but not much). While Illarionov’s impromptu answer may be difficult to disprove conclusively, it does not answer why so much of Putin’s rhetoric and action mirrors Dugin’s writing, and why they both quote the same people.

Most other critics on Dugin and Putin range somewhere between Illarionov’s dismissive assertion and my thesis, which inextricably links Dugin with Putin, treats Dugin seriously, and takes Putin at his word. Scholars are not just divided on the

question of Dugin’s influence in Putin’s policymaking, but over what Dugin believes and how dangerous his beliefs really are. If the field of criticism on the matter were portrayed as x and y axes, the x-axis would be a scale of how much Dugin influences Putin’s policy, and the y-axis would be a scale of how dangerous Dugin’s philosophy really is. To put the first two points on the map, Illarionov’s statement would likely reside all the way at the left end of the x-axis, and squarely in the middle of the y-axis, saying, we shouldn’t concern ourselves with how dangerous Dugin’s philosophy is because it holds no sway with Putin. My thesis would be at the very top of the y-axis and toward the right end of the x-axis, to say that Dugin’s philosophy is very dangerous, and it seems to hold a lot of sway over Putin, but we cannot say for certain.

John B. Dunlop, in his article “Dugin's ‘Neo-Eurasian’ Textbook and Dmitrii Trenin's Ambivalent Response” for the Harvard Ukrainian Studies Journal (2001), would disagree with Mr. Illarionov.\textsuperscript{80} He calls Dugin’s *Foundations of Geopolitics* (1997) textbook “neo-fascist.”\textsuperscript{81} Eerily, in 2001, Dunlop realized the implications that Dugin’s 1997 textbook would have for Ukraine if its ideas were implemented, as they were in 2014.

There has perhaps not been another book published in Russia during the post-communist period that has exerted an influence on Russian military, police, and foreign policy elites comparable to that of Aleksandr Dugin's 1997 neo-fascist treatise *Osnovy geopolitiki: Geopoliticheskoe budushchee Rossii* (Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia). The impact of this intended


\textsuperscript{81} Dunlop 91.
"Eurasianist" textbook on key elements among Russian elites testifies to the worrisome rise of fascist ideas and sentiments during the late Yeltsin and the Putin periods. The book's implications for the future of Ukraine can be simply stated: if its ideas were to be implemented, then Ukraine would cease to exist as an independent state and would likely be dismembered.82

Dunlop would certainly consider Dugin’s ideas dangerous, placing him at the top of the y-axis on the imaginary plane of Dugin and Putin scholars. And though in 2001 Dunlop may not have yet had a reason to fear Dugin’s influence over Putin, it is safe, though a bit anachronistic, to put Dunlop on the far right end of the x-axis. Dunlop, writing in 2001, clearly thinks Dugin is a neo-fascist influence in the Russian government.

Dmitry Shlapentokh, in his article “Dugin’s Eurasianism: A Window on the Minds of the Russian Elite or an Intellectual Ploy?” (2007) seems to take a more moderate stance on both Dugin’s dangers and on Dugin’s influence over Putin, perhaps gravitating to the very center of the imaginary axes that portray the field of criticism on the subject.83 To Shlapentokh, “it would be wrong to see Dugin as an intellectual guru at the head of the post-Soviet elite. Still, his views are important, for they indicate the kinds of ideas that circulate in the minds of the Russian elite.”84 However, this might also corroborate the idea that even if Putin does not read Dugin, the fact that they come to similar conclusions and reside in the same world of ideas can still usefully inform the way others analyze Putin’s policy. On the matter of Dugin’s ideology, Shlapentokh takes a similarly neutral stance, saying “it would be equally wrong to dub Dugin as a

82 Ibid.
84 Ibid., 215
"neofascist," plainly because "fascism," "liberalism," and other "isms" taken from the West are mostly irrelevant to the Russian phenomenon that carries their names."85 Thus, Shlapentokh says that Dugin’s philosophy is too complex to pigeonhole as neo-fascist, but he does not seem to define what it is one way or the other.

Perhaps Robert Zubrin, Dugin’s seemingly most vocal and least heeded critic, explains the complexities of Dugin’s ideology best, when he writes

Dugin has developed a new Fourth Political Theory combining all the strongest points of Communism, Nazism, Ecologism, and Traditionalism, thereby allowing it to appeal to the adherents of all of these diverse anti-liberal creeds. He would adopt Communism’s opposition to free enterprise. However, he would drop the Marxist commitment to technological progress, a liberal-derived ideal, in favor of Ecologism’s demagogic appeal to stop the advance of industry and modernity. From Traditionalism, he derives a justification for stopping free thought. All the rest is straight out of Nazism, ranging from legal theories justifying unlimited state power and the elimination of individual rights, to the need for populations “rooted” in the soil, to weird gnostic ideas about the secret origin of the Aryan race in the North Pole.86

This assessment of Dugin’s ideology puts Zubrin on the very top of the y-axis, which measures to what extent a critic feels Dugin’s ideology is dangerous. Zubrin would also likely place himself on the far right end of the x-axis, which measures how much Dugin influences Putin, considering Zubrin’s other articles, like “The Eurasianist Threat,” imply

85 Ibid., 221
that Putin is fulfilling Dugin’s ideology in no uncertain terms.\(^{87}\) However, Zubrin could not find the missing link that most analysts who try to connect Putin to Dugin are still searching for—namely, that explicit love-letter from Putin to Dugin.

While most of the conversation about Dugin’s philosophy and its influence over Putin circulated in scholarly journals as an academic fascination for the last decade, the invasion of Ukraine in 2014 brought Putin’s motives, and thus Dugin’s philosophy, into the realm of practical political analysis. Articles like “Putin’s Brain: Alexander Dugin and the Philosophy Behind Putin’s Invasion of Crimea” by Anton Barbashin and Hannah Thoburn quickly rose to popularity on the Foreign Affairs website, and their conclusion looks toward the possibility that Russia might adopt Dugin’s philosophy more in the coming years.

Dugin’s ideology has influenced a whole generation of conservative and radical activists and politicians, who, if given the chance, would fight to adapt its core principles as state policy. Considering the shabby state of Russian democracy, and the country’s continued move away from Western ideas and ideals, one might argue that the chances of seeing neo-Eurasianism conquer new ground are increasing. Although Dugin’s form of it is highly theoretical and deeply mystical, it is proving to be a strong contender for the role of Russia’s chief ideology.

Whether Putin can control it as he has controlled so many others is a question that may determine his longevity.\(^{88}\) Putin’s ability to harness Dugin’s philosophy in his policymaking will likely be the chief consideration of Russian political scholars in the coming years. If Putin can successfully

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turn Eurasian philosophy into Eurasian practice, then perhaps Western policymakers will be facing the reality of a Eurasian empire as well.
Chapter 5: The Ramifications of early Totalitarianism in Russia

When United States Secretary of State John Kerry expressed that Russia is “behaving in a 19th century fashion,” he echoed Russian politicians and a Russian populace who have long been encouraging President Putin to rekindle Russian imperialism.89 “Russia was an empire before it was a nation,”90 by which I mean that the Russian state, spanning one-sixth of the world’s landmass, houses a plethora of different ethnic groups. Before the Communist Revolution of 1917, the Tsars held these disparate ethnic groups together by force. During the Soviet era, they were united by a combination of force and ideology. But now, Russia is grasping for a unifying identity that doesn’t really exist, and its outward aggression in Ukraine is a manifestation of this internal confusion.

Immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union, when a large portion of Russia’s empire peeled off, some in the West argued that Russia could join its disparate ethnic groups under the ideological banner of democracy.91 But as Vladimir Putin consolidated political control in Russia, the prospects of democracy grew increasingly unlikely. While Putin’s government has, in recent years, cracked down on political dissent and civil liberties, the open nature of the information age prevents Putin from achieving true, Tsarist-era repression. Thus, lacking both true democracy and effective repression, Russia must conceive a national teleological narrative that allows it to grow as an empire, if it hopes to survive as a state.

90 Lecture delivered by Dr. William Gleason, Washington and Lee University, October 30, 2014
Russia’s root problem is that it cannot seem to entice innovative, driven people to move themselves, their capital, or their companies to Russia. If you are a bright young mind under the age of 30, with a university degree and potential in the fields of business, science, or the arts, why would you take your mind and product to Russia over the United States, Germany, or even China? Embarrassingly, perhaps, even ISIL has an easier time attracting active, young people through its warped PR campaign about “meeting with the sahabah,” or Muslim “companions.”

Certainly Russia has more to offer in terms of a standard of living than ISIL, but Russia lacks a compelling story to distinguish itself on the world stage relative to both other states and non-state groups.

This problem manifests itself in Russia’s demographic crisis, a popular trope of political commentators since Russia’s damaging recession in 1998. Russia’s population has fallen by about 4% since the collapse of the Soviet Union, perhaps the most dangerous type of decline for any state. It is dangerous for Russia to lose its people because, if this trend continues, it will lose its source of labor and revenue, and also its ability to field an adequate army. Moreover, a Russian demographic crisis is dangerous for the rest of the world because such a state, with a shrinking population and revenue but with abundant weapons and military infrastructure, could result in the unpredictable and ill-advised movement of weapons on the world market. One needs only to look at the fall of the Soviet Union, for a worrying example. Lately, Russia’s population seems to have stabilized – it was even lauded in President Putin’s national address on December 12th, 2013. However, although the birth rate might very well have “exceeded mortality in

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94 Ibid.
almost half of Russia’s regions,” as Putin boasted, Russia is far from solving its demographic crisis.

In the same speech, Putin lamented Russia’s inability to attract “educated specialists, who speak Russian and have an affinity for our culture to come to work in Russia.” Though Russian industry—with booming energy sectors—may seem attractive, living in Russia (especially anywhere outside of the glossy capital of Moscow) is decidedly less so. Oddly enough, this stands in contrast to several limited, but striking, examples of Russia’s economic climate circa 1932. During this time, many skilled laborers immigrated to then-Soviet Russia thanks to the wave of optimism surrounding the National Bolshevik narrative. John Scott, a steelworker who emigrated from the United States, wrote about his experiences as a laborer in the new industrial city of Magnitogorsk in *Behind the Urals*. He describes persevering in the miserable Ural climate not out of compulsion, but out of belief in the project and this new country—shedding his own blood and sweat for, "the foundations for a new society farther along the road of human progress than anything in the West; a society which would guarantee its people not only personal freedom but absolute economic security.” I doubt that Russia can attract similarly enthusiastic and innovative professionals today, no matter the salary they are offered by Gazprom. Putin, at last, is learning the limits of what Michael Ignatieff calls authoritarian capitalism - the idea that capitalism can be manipulated to serve the ends of an authoritarian regime.

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95 Vladimir Putin, “Presidential address to the federal assembly.” 2013.
Not only does Russia fail to attract smart, passionate immigrants, its demographic crisis is exacerbated by a revolving exit door—a brain-and-capital drain. In the same 2013 address, Putin revealed that “last year, [2012], according to expert assessments, $111 billion worth of Russian goods passed through offshores and partial offshores—that’s 20% of our exports. Half of the $50 billion of Russian investments abroad also went to offshores. These figures represent the withdrawal of capital that should be working in Russia and direct losses to the nation’s budget.”98 It seems that not even Russia’s 13% flat tax, nominally a business’ dream, is enough to entice Russians to keep their savings in Russia.

Putin himself recognizes that Russia’s demographic crisis stems not from Russia’s economic climate, but from a cultural and spiritual malaise that economic policies alone cannot seem to fix. Putin says, in a 2012 national address,

In the 21st century...We should not just develop with confidence, but also preserve our national and spiritual identity, not lose our sense of national unity. We must be and remain Russian. After 70 years of the Soviet period, Russian people went through a period when the importance of their private interests regained its relevance. That was a necessary and natural stage. However, working for one’s own interests has its limits. Prosperity cannot be achieved if chaos, disorder and insecurity reign beyond the walls of your house. You cannot live without having regard for others, without helping the weak, without extending your responsibility beyond the responsibility of your family or profession.99

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Putin’s 2012 assessment of Russia boils down to the fact that in the post-Soviet world, people don’t know what it means to be Russian. Russia’s real demographic problem is that, over the course of the last 20 years, the Russian demos, or people, do not know who they are or what they stand for.

**The Failure of Democracy**

When Boris Yeltsin stood atop a tank in front of the Russian Parliament Building on August 19th, 1991 to defy a communist coup, it seemed to many that Democracy had arrived in Russia—that Russia would now finally identify and unite as a democratic country. “The democratic process in the country is acquiring an increasingly broad sweep and an irreversible character,” proclaimed Yeltsin from the tank, just two months after Russia’s first-ever, free elections ousted the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and made him president. Fast forward 20 years, to the Fall of 2011 and the Winter of 2012—somewhere between 25,000 (per police) and 150,000 (per participants) protesters gathered on multiple occasions under the banner of “For Free Elections.” About 1,000 of those protesters were detained or arrested for peacefully demanding political liberties and democracy, throwing Yeltsin’s proclamation of a Russian democracy into question.

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The protests intensified after Vladimir Putin won a 3rd term in the Kremlin with 63.6% of the vote on March 4, 2012.\(^{104}\) A European election oversight organization, The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) confirmed what thousands of protesters suspected. “The point of elections is that the outcome should be uncertain. This was not the case in Russia…There was no real competition and abuse of government resources ensured that the ultimate winner of the election was never in doubt.”\(^{105}\)

The lack of competition in elections extends to Russia’s legislative body, the Duma. As of the 2011 elections, Putin’s party—United Russia—controls 238 of the 450 Duma seats and three other parties split the remaining seats, but largely unite in support of Putin’s agenda and policies. In Russia’s political sphere, as of 2014, the competition is disingenuous.

Since Putin’s reelection in 2012, the Russian government has extended its suppression of political liberties to the private and civic spheres. The high-profile arrest of the feminist Punk-Rock group Pussy Riot for “hooliganism,” between March 3rd and March 16th of 2012,\(^{106}\) hearkens back to Soviet-era censorship. The long-standing de facto persecution of LGBT people in Russia seemed to find de jure sanction in the 2013 anti-gay legislation, which made it illegal to spread “propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations among minors.”\(^{107}\) But just when some Western countries seemed ready to boycott the Sochi Olympics over Russia’s anti-gay discriminatory actions, Putin released his longtime prisoner, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, as a show of good faith.

\(^{105}\) Ellen Barry and Michael Schwartz.
In 2003, Russian prosecutors brought criminal charges for fraud and tax evasion against Khodorkovsky, then the wealthiest man in Russia, after his public, vocal, and popular criticism of corruption in Putin’s government. After Khodorkovsky’s 8-year prison sentence, prosecutors opened a new case against him for allegedly embezzling oil and oil money through his Siberian oil company. The European Court of Human Rights found Khodorkovsky’s imprisonment in line with Russia’s legal and rational laws, but admitted Khodorkovsky’s imprisonment was “unlawful, as it had been made with a purpose different from the one expressed.”

As a result, Khodorkovsky developed into a national and international symbol for Russia’s political centrality and Putin’s abuse of legalistic systems to achieve political ends. Putin’s pardon of Khodorkovsky was intended to show the world a sign of Russia’s liberalism, but it mostly showed how Putin has the first and final say in matters of legality—“Putin giveth and Putin taketh away.”

Imprisonment for “tax evasion” is a popular trope in Putin’s Russia. Sergei Magnitsky, after whom the United States named the Magnitsky Law, which freezes the assets of certain Russian officials, died in prison in 2009 after he revealed that high-level Russian officials had robbed the investment group Hermitage Capitol of 230 Million USD. He was arrested in November 2008 for “tax evasion,” then imprisoned in Moscow’s notorious Butyrka Prison without medical aid or care until he died of malnutrition and pancreatitis. To this day, those officials he named as thieves have not

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been tried. Instead, on July 11, 2013, Russia convicted Magnitsky of tax evasion in Russia’s first-ever posthumous trial.\footnote{Jim Heintz, “Dead Russian Lawyer Magnitsky found Guilty.” \textit{Associated Press.} July 11, 2013, Accessed January 4, 2015.}

Alexei Navalny serves as yet another example of Putin’s repressive, authoritarian policies. The vocal blogger-turned-activist, turned-Moscow politician, gained popularity for condemning Putin’s Party (One Russia) as “the party of crooks and thieves.” Although his activism against Putin’s regime catapulted him to the 2013 Moscow mayoral elections, he also spent time in Russian prison for “embezzlement and tax fraud.” As Russian law bars anyone who has spent time in prison from running for political office, Navalny’s political life is now limited to public protests, where he continues to be arrested for “disturbing the public order.”\footnote{Viktoria Vladimirovna, “Депутаты готовы отменить запрет избираться осужденным.” \textit{Slon.ru}, October 24, 2013. Accessed January 4, 2015.}

Khodakovsky’s, Magnitsky’s, and Navalny’s time in jail reveals a Russia that is a far cry from the liberal democracy proclaimed by Boris Yeltsin, from his perch atop a tank in 1991. It is clear from the unchanging party structure of the Russian government since Putin’s election in 2000, Russia’s increasing infringement on free press and protest, and from the public’s perception of Putin as the manifestation of all Russian authority, that Putin is the man in charge of Russia. Russia’s national narrative, therefore, cannot come from the integration and cooperation of a plurality of voices through a liberal democracy; Putin has set up a system where he must write the national story himself, since he is the only one with the power to do so.

Dugin’s teleological narrative in the form of his Eurasian ideology gives Putin the answer that he requires to cure Russia’s demographic malaise. Dugin’s ideology
rationalizes Putin’s foreign aggression as the fulfillment of Russian destiny on the Eurasian continent and it explains domestic Russian political imprisonments, media and civil society censorship, and diminished quality of life as a virtuous consequence of the struggle with The West. In Dugin’s ideology, Putin finds a politically expedient dogma, and perhaps the West has found its explanation for the organization, mentality, and actions of 21st century Russia.
Afterword: A Bleak Future

Had I written this afterword when I finished the research for this thesis, it would have been an optimistic afterword. I finished most of my research in early February of 2015, but decided to wait until the last minute possible to write about my projections for the future of Russia because the future of Russia is constantly uncertain. When I suggested to my advisor that I wait to write my conclusion I joked, “maybe Putin will die and my thesis will be obsolete.” Ironically, the 10 days in March of 2015 when there was wild speculation about Putin’s absence were anxious days for me. On the one hand, I was happy to believe that maybe democratic forces had chased Putin out of the country, but I was also nervous because that would make my entire thesis outdated before anyone could ever read it. It turns out Putin probably just had a Botox accident and his vanity prevented him from appearing in public. Putin’s reemergence saved my thesis, but doomed Russia.

Looking back on the most recent events in Russian politics, I am glad I waited until the final minute to write this afterword and I cannot apologize for having a pessimistic projection for the future of Russia. On Sunday, March 1, 2015, I was drinking coffee at a cheap motel in southern Florida and reconnecting to the world’s news after spending a week in a kayak in the Everglades. The first thing I saw when I turned on the news that morning were reports of the assassination of Boris Nemtzov, and I knew there was no more hope for democracy in Russia while Putin remains in power.

Some may say that I am being too hard on Russia—that if the Soviet Union could democratize, then certainly Russia could as well. What about all the mothers whose sons get sent back in caskets from a war that Russia is supposedly not fighting in Ukraine?
Surely they can bring about change, like the women waiting for bread in St. Petersburg, whose spontaneous outcry sparked the Russian Revolution. What about the millions of people who did protest Putin’s fraudulent elections, who continue to write for opposition newspapers, and who—in an alarmingly increasing number of cases—sacrifice their lives for the dream of liberty and justice in Russia? Surely the Khodorokovskys, Navalnys, and Magnitskys of Russia were not imprisoned in vain.

While it may be true that there are people in Russia who still fight for democracy, it is shocking to me that, despite the efforts of all these people, so many Russians are still remarkably resistant to democracy and uncannily comfortable with a new totalitarian society headed by Putin. Perhaps it is true that Putin, by employing the philosophy of Dugin, gives new meaning to the Russian project. When given the choice between Western democracy and a unique identity, destiny, and purpose, many Russians choose to sacrifice their liberty for the sake of feeling like they matter in the world.

Dugin provides that meaning which Russia has lacked since the fall of the Soviet Union. When a group of students at the Moscow State University got Dugin temporarily fired from his professorial position in June of 2014, I thought at least some Russians stood up to the tyranny of ideology. But Dugin has always bounced around the upper echelons of Russia’s leadership. Even if he is not still teaching at the most prestigious university in Russia, he continues to work as a news show pundit and political advisor. When it comes to influence, prestige, and audience, Dugin’s dismissal from the university post is not a demotion—just a move laterally, if not a promotion.

In the end, there is not proof but only conjecture as to what goes on in Putin’s mind. There is certainly no direct proof that he reads Dugin. But this paper has shown
that thinking about Russia in a Dugin frame is useful to predicting and understanding Russia. Conversely, speaking about Russia as a post-totalitarian state is unhelpful, for it engenders false hope and solicits poor policy. Russia is a pre-totalitarian state, showing signs of totalitarianism, but still nominally democratic. The most alarming and puzzling observation, however, seems to be that many Russians are OK with Russia’s new direction under Vladimir Putin. Perhaps Hannah Arendt, writing in 1950, understood the Russian penchant for nondemocratic regimes better than many do today. She writes about panslavism, but it could easily refer to “communism” or “Eurasianism” as well. For our purposes, we will say, Dugin and Putin “did not have to invent a new ideology to suit the needs of the Slavic soul and its movement, but could interpret—and make a mystery of Czarism as the anti-Western, anticonstitutional, antistate expression of the movement itself.”

This mystification of anarchic power inspired Pan-slavism [and communism and Eurasianism] with its most pernicious theories about the transcendent nature and inherent goodness of all power. Power was conceived as a divine emanation pervading all natural and human activity. It was no longer a means to achieve something: it simply existed, men were dedicated to its service for the love of God, and any law that might regulate or restrain its ‘limitless and terrible strength’ was clearly sacrilege. In its complete arbitrariness, power as such was held to be holy, whether it was the power of the Czar or the power of sex. Laws were not only incompatible with it, they were sinful, man-made “snares” that prevented the full development of the ‘divine.’  

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112 Hannah Arendt 248.
Dugin’s Eurasianism and Putin’s cult of power are not new phenomena in Russia. They are variations on a timeless Russian motif that celebrates power for its own sake. It almost seems as if the harsher Putin gets, the more his people like him.

A few days after I got back home from that trip to Florida where I found out that Boris Nemtsov, one of Russia’s only real democratic voices, had been assassinated, I began trying to understand why Putin might kill Nemtsov. Of course, two Chechen teenagers magically confessed to the assassination of Nemtsov in a style reminiscent of Soviet-era confessions. But just as everyone sort of knew that most of the people who were executed during Stalin’s times were not guilty of the espionage to which they “confessed,” even if these Chechen teenagers did pull the physical triggers, everyone sort of seems to know that Putin is ultimately behind the death of Nemtsov. But why might Putin indirectly kill Nemtsov? After all, Nemtsov was able to rally supporters for democracy, but he did not pose any significant threat to Putin’s fully consolidated regime.

No one can say for certain what goes on in Putin’s mind, but judging by his character and actions in the past, I think Putin could have killed Nemtsov over nothing more than an insult. Nemtsov’s last interviews were particularly harsh on Putin, to the point of vulgarity. Putin can tolerate political opposition if it remains ephemeral and does not pose a significant threat to his rule, but he cannot endure personal insults and attacks aimed at the cult of personality he cultivates so well. To put it in Hannah Arendt’s terms, Putin sees an attack on his power as “sinful,” and therefore, unforgivable. I wanted to write an optimistic prediction for the future of Russia, but as of April 17,
2015, Putin, Dugin, and totalitarianism thrive in Russia, Nemtzov and Russian democracy have been shot, and the future of Russia is bleak indeed.
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