The Putin-Era Propaganda State:
Virtual Politics, Postmodernism, Steampunk and More
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Much of the past century has been characterized by modern states’ increasingly sophisticated use of propaganda for the purpose of popular mobilization. In many senses, the USSR exemplified these governing practices until its demise 25 years ago. And despite the fact that Russia broke with its Soviet-era media monopoly and embraced freedom of speech and the press during the early 1990s, official interest in state-run media and messaging has returned with a vengeance—particularly since V. V. Putin’s accession to the presidency in 2000. Recent literature on the subject has focused on his administration’s steady cooption of formerly independent television broadcasting, consolidation of state news agencies, embrace of unconventional approaches to mass mobilization and information warfare, etc.

Although there would seem to be a lot of continuity in this reestablishment of a post-Soviet propaganda state, a number of analysts and commentators have argued since 2012

that Russian state media has entered into the throes of a major transformation, particularly in the realm of patriotic messaging and PR. These observations have become increasingly insistent in the past 18 months in connection with the explosion of the Ukrainian Euromaidan, the fall of President V. F. Yanukovych, the Russian annexation of Crimea and the emergence of a bitter proxy war in the Donbas. This paper surveys some of the most ambitious examples of this literature in order to test its capacity to explain the puzzling new practices of the Putin-era propaganda state. It then provides a case study of a single messaging campaign in order to advance an alternate explanation for the phenomena that have attracted so much attention recently.

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For the purposes of this paper, state-sponsored propaganda is defined as official campaigning designed to advance an agenda or influence public opinion. A definition that emphasizes both ends and means, it distinguishes propaganda from other forms of communication in terms of scale, content and approach, insofar as propaganda is a type of mass messaging that advances its political objectives in a deliberately monological manner through the inculcation of fixed points of view. Propaganda is typically overt, coherent and evocative; it is often paired with covert messaging as well, particularly disinformation (e.g. misdirection, misrepresentation and other “dirty tricks”).

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1 Propaganda differs from other forms of mass communication such as advertising insofar as it typically promotes broad political ideas rather than more discrete goods and services. It differs from more personal forms of communication such as persuasion by advancing a fixed agenda rather than one based on dialogue, negotiation and adaptation. See Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, Propaganda and Persuasion, 5th ed.
Historically, Soviet and post-Soviet propaganda and PR have conformed closely to this model. Indeed, many commentators on the subject regard contemporary Russian propaganda and mass mobilization to be a legacy of the Soviet past. Even those who see Russian state media since 1991 as distinct from its Soviet predecessor generally stress its hegemonic ambitions and monolithic scale.² Timothy Snyder, for instance, outlined a strikingly traditional view of modern Russian propaganda during the opening weeks of the Ukrainian crisis in 2013-2014.³ Months later, Paul Goble likewise cast official Russian messaging as merely an expansion of time-tested Soviet approaches to propaganda and disinformation, triggered by economic stagnation, domestic political instability and the desire for a “good little war.”⁴

Other commentators, however, emphasize major shifts in Russian propaganda and PR that have recently undermined this broad sense of continuity. David Remnick, for instance, advanced such a case in the New Yorker last August. According to Remnick, Putin took office as Russian president in 2000 with a conventional, late-Soviet preference for centralized state power. As a part of his early campaigns against political and oligarchical opposition, Putin prioritized “complete control of the main television channels” and influence over print media. Putin was not an ideologue, however, and apparently allowed his political “technologists” to promote a deliberately eclectic official

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line in the place of an explicitly nationalist, imperialist or revanchist one. This approach to societal mobilization continued until 2011-2012, when popular protest marred Putin’s reelection to a third presidential term. “Feeling betrayed by both the urban middle classes and the West, [Putin] made it plain that he would go on the offensive against any sign of foreign influence, real or imagined. A new and resentful anti-Americanism, unknown since the seventies, suffused Kremlin policy and the state-run airwaves.” So too did a newly xenophobic line stressing “traditional Russian values” grounded in history, national pride and political conservatism. Emotional, erratic and inconsistent, this line differed strongly in Remnick’s mind from the well-organized, rational and calculating campaigns of the preceding decade.5

The New Republic’s Joshua Yaffa also noticed a new urgency within the Russian propaganda establishment at about the same time. According to Yaffa, since Putin’s contested return to the presidency in 2012, he’s found it necessary “to assemble a new justification for his rule, based on an amalgamation of conservative values, Russian exceptionalism, and a sense that the country is under threat from the malicious encroachments of the West.” Russian state television, according to Yaffa, played a key role in this agitprop activity. Generalizing on the basis of research on the new media conglomerate Rossiia Segodnia (Russia Today), Yaffa asserted that “since the Maidan protests, and especially after the fall of Yanukovych, Russian television has been engaged in a propaganda onslaught unprecedented in the post-Soviet era, implying or inventing

dark suspicions about Western motives in Ukraine while painting Russia’s own meddling as a heroic answer to the call of justice.”

If Remnick, Yaffa and others have tried to use traditional paradigms to make sense of the newly abrasive, explosive and sometimes incoherent line emanating from Moscow, another group of commentators has begun to offer a completely different analytical framework. As early as 2005, Andrew Wilson contended that post-Soviet politics was best understood as having abandoned conventional Soviet approaches to social mobilization and interest group politics. Instead, political campaigning in Russia now ought to be seen as aspiring to manipulate a politically naïve, pliable electorate through deliberate confusion and misrepresentation. Wilson then proceeded to supply a systematic analysis of what he referred to as “virtual politics,” situating the origins of this phenomenon in the political cynicism of the late Soviet period. This was compounded by the free-for-all period of the 1990s, when political campaigning came to be dominated first by foreign and then domestic political technologists. According to Wilson, it was at this time that most politicians jettisoned the notion of sincere, straightforward, ideological mobilization and instead sought ways of wooing public opinion through the creation of personality cults and various other schemes designed to distract, divide and discredite the opposition. Dissatisfied with merely winning elections and influencing public opinion, they sought to monopolize the political process itself. Within such a cynical environment, the worst elements of modern propaganda became commonplace: selectivity, populism, misdirection, straw men, false flags and other techniques designed to deceive and subdue.

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According to Wilson, by the end of Putin’s first term, virtual politics had taken over not only the Russian public sphere, but the state itself.\(^7\)

Although well received at the time, Wilson’s treatment of post-Soviet Russian media went underappreciated until 2011, when British television producer Peter Pomerantsev offered what he described as a “postmodern” approach to Russian media. In a series of memoiristic vignettes published between 2011 and 2015, Pomerantsev argued that Russian state broadcasters were uniquely suited to the amoral, cynical world of PR. After all, in their youth, they had had to pretend to be communists in order to get ahead; when that world collapsed in the early 1990s, they had had to reinvent themselves as democrats. Now they served as political technologists within Putin’s Ministry of Truth, tasked by government handlers like V. Iu. Surkov and D. K. Kiselev with pacifying their own countrymen with mind-numbing programming.\(^8\)

Although Pomerantsev found the accommodating nature of Russian broadcasters disconcerting, he was more disturbed by the new sort of propaganda state that they served:

> In contemporary Russia, unlike the old USSR or present-day North Korea, the stage is constantly changing: the country is a dictatorship in the morning, a democracy at lunch, an oligarchy by suppertime, while, backstage, oil companies are expropriated, journalists killed, billions siphoned away. Surkov is at the centre of the show, sponsoring nationalist skinheads one moment, backing human rights groups the next. It’s a strategy of power based on keeping any opposition there may be constantly confused, a ceaseless shape-shifting that is unstoppable because it’s indefinable.\(^9\)

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\(^9\) Ibid.
Seconding E. V. Limonov’s appraisal of Surkov as having turned the Russian public sphere “into a wonderful postmodernist theatre,” Pomerantsev suggested that PR was now the name of the state’s media game. And this wasn’t limited to the domestic media market: a similar approach has also apparently come to define Russian bids to woo international audiences via Russia Today and other international outlets:

The Kremlin switches messages at will to its advantage, climbing inside everything: European right-wing nationalists are seduced with an anti-EU message; the Far Left is co-opted with tales of fighting U.S. hegemony; U.S. religious conservatives are convinced by the Kremlin’s fight against homosexuality. And the result is an array of voices, working away at global audiences from different angles, producing a cumulative echo chamber of Kremlin support, all broadcast on RT.

The stress that Pomerantsev placed on the intentionality of this programming distinguished his analysis between 2011 and 2014 from much of the rest of the field. After all, at a time when even the most critical Russia-watchers were assuming that official Russian self-representation was little more than “a slightly schizophrenic, ad hoc effort to push back against what comes out of the West,” Pomerantsev contended that there was a discernable method to the madness.

Between 2013 and 2014, as Pomerantsev moved to consolidated his memoiristic writings into a rather fluffy, disappointing book, he was also developing two formal position papers under the auspices of M. B. Khodorkovskii’s New York-based Institute of Modern Russia (IMR). The first, issued under the imprint of London’s Legatum Institute

10 Ibid.
13 Peter Pomerantsev, Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: The Surreal Heart of Modern Russia (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014).
in October 2013, bore the title *Russia: A Postmodern Dictatorship* and reiterated positions that he had been developing since 2011. Putin’s Russia, according to Pomerantsev, was a new sort of tyranny:

If the USSR, or today’s North Korea, were “classic” or “hard” totalitarian regimes that rely on their own institutions and narratives, from the politburo to scientific socialism, 21st century Russia takes a much more “postmodern” approach to control. Postmodern in the sense that it uses many of the techniques associated with postmodern art and philosophy: pastiches of other’s [sic!] narratives, simulacra (i.e. fake) institutions, and a “society of spectacle” with no substance. The regime’s salient feature is a liquid, shape-shifting approach to power. […] It works less by oppressing [sic, suppressing?] narratives than by co-opting them until there is no more space for an opposition to exist, its willfully contradictory slogans taunting any attempts at definition: “conservative modernization”, “managed democracy”, “competition without change”. To try and fit this new type of regime into the classic definitions of political science, “dictatorship” or “totalitarian”, is to miss the point of its trickster nature.\(^\text{14}\)

If in this work, Pomerantsev relied on his now trademark “postmodern” conceit to capture the opportunistic, slippery nature of Russian state media self-representation, a year later, in late October 2014, he offered another, more systematic paper co-written by Michael Weiss, the editor of the IMR’s web project *The Interpreter*. Entitled *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money*, this publication offered a broader and more detailed analysis of how Russian officialdom was reinventing the practice of propaganda. Pomerantsev and Weiss argued that Russian propaganda combined new strategies of information management and control with international efforts to neutralize opposing views through the cooption of foreign authorities and specialists, an array of false flag operations and other dirty tricks. Most

\(^{\text{14}}\) Peter Pomerantsev, *Russia: A Postmodern Dictatorship (Legatum Institute Lecture Series)* (London: Legatum Institute/Institute of Modern Russia, 2013), 4. This paper was previewed at the Legatum Institute on October 9, 2013. This argument has been echoed elsewhere since, e.g. Boris Shumatsky, “Lupenrein Verlogen,” *Die Zeit*, October 1, 2014 (http://www.zeit.de/2014/41/russland-wladimir-putin-politik-luege/komplettansicht, last accessed March 10, 2015).
relevant here was Pomerantsev and Weiss’s bid to demonstrate through interviews and open-source military publications that the Putin administration’s embrace of postmodern communication strategies was both unmistakably deliberate and wholly cynical. Put most bluntly, “the effort [is] not to persuade […] or earn credibility, but to sow confusion via conspiracy theories and proliferate falsehoods.”\(^{15}\)

As Pomerantsev and Weiss began to promote *The Menace of Unreality* in the fall of 2014, Timothy Snyder seconded their argument that deliberate contradiction, confusion and incoherence were now central tenets of the Kremlin’s new propaganda line.\(^{16}\) Stressing the odd, internally inconsistent aspects of Russian attacks on issues such as Ukrainian state- and nationhood, Snyder argued in a speech given first in Chicago in mid-November 2014 that Russian broadcasters such as RT were deliberately muddying the waters of public opinion. At first glance responsible journalism, RT’s effusive coverage of all possible explanations for events such as the downing of Malaysian Airlines MH17 ultimately blunted the psychological impact of such nightmares. “You give these multiple views,” Snyder said, “and in the end, the tragic death of children, women and men—something that really matters—at the end of it, it becomes nothing and you don’t really believe in journalism any more.” Reiterating that such coverage was calculated to


frustrate public curiosity and interest in even the most newsworthy events by undermining confidence in both the investigative authorities and the possibility of ever really knowing the truth, Snyder concluded wryly that “that’s the way this postmodern stuff works.”

In December 2014, Glenn Kates picked up on the argument that Pomerantsev, Weiss and Snyder were advancing—that official messaging on issues such as Russian involvement in Luhansk and Donetsk or the downing of MH17 was deliberately designed to confuse their audiences. Writing for *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, Kates contended that “Russian news agencies have worked to sow doubt by broadcasting a string of easily debunked theories tying the [MH17] disaster to the West and Ukraine. The effort appeared aimed not at convincing casual news viewers that one side or another is responsible for the downing of the plane, but at implanting the idea that it is still an open question.”

This argument received further development last month when Mark Lipovetsky posited that contemporary Russian authorities should be thought of as pursuing a “steampunk” version of political self-fashioning. Invoking Jean Francois Lyotard and his 1970 treatise *The Postmodern Condition*, Lipovetsky noted that Russian leaders today promote traditional “spiritual bonds” and “eternal,” “unshakable” traditionalism through the invocation of “paradoxes, catastrophes, and performance rather than by rationality or

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force.” This, in Lipovetsky’s analysis, deliberately destabilizes the Russian public sphere rather than contributing to it, producing ideological confusion and cynicism instead of inspiration or mobilization. Such an approach to politics intentionally blurs “the borders between fact and fiction, truth and blatant falsification.” In the process, it “excludes any predictability, negates any rationality and downplays as irrelevant any attempts to judge the present from the standpoint of historical experience.” The implication of this argument is that by promoting such a confusing pastiche of conflicting imagery and rhetoric, Russian authorities keep their opponents (and the electorate at large) forever off-balance. This, for Lipovetsky, amounted to a “negative revolution” rather than something more genuinely transformative, even in a conservative sense.19

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As provocative as these discussions of virtual politics, postmodern propaganda, steampunk and “liquid ideology” (Pomerantsev’s term) are at first glance, they don’t stand up very well to sustained inquiry. After all, it is hard to reconcile such a presumably dynamic state media strategy with its clumsy mishmash of incompetently-devised “components.” Take, for instance, some of the slogans, rhetoric and messaging associated with the 2014 information war with Ukraine: “polite people” (везhlivye liudi); the “military surplus store” (военторг); ad-hoc referendums; crowds- and refugees-for-hire; the initially Muscovite-dominated leadership of the Donetsk and Luhansk “people’s

republics”; LifeNews’s July 17, 2014 triumphalism over the downing of what turned out to be MH17; television interviews on satellite imaging and SU-25s featuring amateurish military and civilian “experts”; frequent use of stringer “journalists” like Graham Phillips; etc. Ultimately, only the logic of conspiracy theory can accommodate this cacophony of unprofessional, off-the-cuff commentary and dissembling into a single hegemonic state media campaign (i.e. “nothing happens by accident,” “nothing is as it seems,” “everything is connected,” etc.).

Much more likely is the alternative: that this material is merely the rhetorical debris and flak left over from an array of more conventional but uncoordinated propaganda campaigns oriented around PR and damage control.

In retrospect, there have been a surprising number of official propaganda campaigns in the past 15 years aside from those concerning Ukraine that can illustrate the inconsistent dimensions of Russian state media messaging. An incomplete list might include sloganeering around everything from the promotion of a “Patriotic Upbringing” to “Stability,” the “Power Vertical,” “Managed Democracy,” “Sovereign Democracy,” “Doubling the Gross Domestic Product,” “Strategy 2020,” “Modernization” (“national projects” [natsproekty] such as Skolkovo), “Nanotechnology,” the “Eurasian Economic Union,” the “Dima Iakovlev Law” (which banned international adoptions), “Traditional

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Values” (e.g. the ban on “Homosexual Propaganda”), etc. This paper takes as its case study one of the least appreciated campaigns of the post-Soviet period—official attempts to develop and popularize a Russian “National Idea” for mobilizational purposes.

If the earliest attempts to promote a “usable past” during the post-Soviet period actually date back to B. N. Yeltsin’s near loss of the 1996 presidential elections, this idea assumed center stage four years later when Putin connected the issue to the broader imperative of unifying the country’s fractious political system. In the wake of this announcement, a variety of deferential gestures to Soviet history began to make headlines—the revival of the Red Army battle flag and a sanitized version of the Stalin-era national anthem; the return of a bust of F. E. Dzerzhinskii to the militia headquarters in downtown Moscow; extensive state support and airtime for mass culture’s “normalization” of the Soviet experience; and so on. Most striking amid all this nostalgia was Putin’s own announcement in his April 2005 “State of the State” message to the Federation Council that “the collapse of the USSR was greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century.”


Perhaps the first systematic effort to make something of this ideological hodgepodge focused on the public schools. As early as 2002, the Ministry of Education and Science began to recruit authors to develop a newly patriotic curriculum. According to Putin, his government embarked upon this course out of a sense of frustration with the history textbooks in use in the public schools at that time. “There are virtually no educational materials,” he complained later on, “that depict the contemporary history of our Fatherland in a profound and objective way, nor is there a systematic treatment of the new themes, directions and schools [of thought] that can advance major doctrines and explain contemporary events.”

When nothing came of the 2002 competition, the presidential administration held several further rounds, soliciting submissions from A. O. Chubar’ian and other leading historians. Most important was a bid by Surkov in 2006-2008 to develop the requisite textbook. According to insiders, Surkov wanted to promote a statist, pro-Soviet narrative but also hoped to avoid being accused of rehabilitating the USSR. For that reason, he decided to also commission a parallel “dissident” textbook that would be critical of the Soviet experiment. A. V. Filippov, a Saratov educator affiliated with the National Laboratory on Foreign Policy, was selected to compile the pro-Soviet narrative by N. B. Ivanov, his employer and one of Surkov’s deputies. The second, “dissident” text was to


26 Although Putin blamed much of this ineffectiveness on the poorly conceptualized curriculum, he also spoke menacingly of the influence of historians who receive foreign grants and therefore “dance to the tune that’s required of them.” Sergei Minaev, “Da malo li chego bylo,” Vlast’ 24 (728) (June 25, 2007), 19.

27 Aside from being one of Surkov’s deputies, Ivanov headed the ostensibly independent National Laboratory on Foreign Policy. This organization reportedly had ties to G. O. Pavlovskii’s then pro-Kremlin Foundation for Effective Politics.
be written under the direction of well-known MGIMO historian A. V. Zubov in tandem with A. I. Solzhenitsyn.\textsuperscript{28}

In the end, Surkov’s scheme produced surprisingly inconclusive results. Although Filippov’s team succeeded in releasing a set of teacher’s manuals between 2007-2008, these books proved impossible to endorse, due to their tendentious nature and transparent promotion of etatism instead of a truly patriotic “national idea.” Particularly controversial was the second volume’s defense of the Stalin period\textsuperscript{29} and its celebration of Putin’s “Sovereign Democracy.” In the end, while the manuals would henceforth serve as templates for textbook authors seeking endorsement from the Ministry of Education and Science, they failed to define a “national idea” capable of rallying popular support around the state.\textsuperscript{30}

After D. A. Medvedev assumed the Russian presidency in 2008, his administration returned to Putin’s search for a usable past. Particularly eye catching in this regard was the 2009-2013 campaign surrounding the blue-ribbon Presidential Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History at the Expense of Russian Interests. Founded by presidential decree, the commission inspired considerable debate in the press. Some saw it as an organ of state censorship designed either to enforce Filippov’s new historical line

\textsuperscript{28} When the “dissident” editorial team couldn’t agree on its approach, Solzhenitsyn quit the project, leaving Zubov to publish the textbook privately as \textit{Istoriia Rossii. XX vek. V 2-kh tomakh} (Moscow: AST, 2010). The author is grateful to Filippov and Diukov for their insight into this affair. Zubov refused the author’s invitation to share his version of the events in question well before his spectacular 2014 fall from grace for publically comparing the Crimean annexation to Hitler’s prewar revanchism. See Zubov, “Eto uzhe bylo,” \textit{Vedomosti}, March 20, 2014 (http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2014/03/01/andrey-zubov-eto-uzhe-bylo, last accessed March 10, 2015)

\textsuperscript{29} Note that neither manual invoked the “effective manager” moniker traditionally attributed to them.

or curtail embarrassing archival revelations. Others linked the initiative to the more general need to combat historical revisionism both at home and abroad. Still others connected the commission to the defense of the Soviet Union’s World War II reputation in the run-up to the sixty-fifth anniversary of VE day.31

In the end, however, the commission turned out to be little more than a paper tiger, meeting only half a dozen times and issuing little aside from press releases. True, its mandate appears to have inspired Rosarkhiv, the Russian archival agency, to become more proactive about defending the country’s Soviet legacy, particularly against charges of Ukrainian and Polish genocide.32 The commission’s popularization of the threat posed by historical falsification also appears to have provoked a tightening of archival access on the regional level in several places and at least one legal scandal (concerning the Murmansk historian M. V. Suprun). But the task of defining what precisely historical falsification was and how it was to be countered proved elusive and the commission was quietly dissolved in 2013, having failed to popularize the defense of the Russian historical record.33

2012—officially dubbed the “year of Russian history”—saw still more new initiatives connected to the state’s search for a usable past. Putin returned to his fixation with textbooks, noted during his run for a third presidential term that public school history instruction remained inadequate. “In history textbooks,” he told a forum in Kurgan,

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33 See Brandenberger, “Promotion of a Usable Past,” 201-205.
“things are described in such a way that it makes your hair stand on end.” He then returned to the subject of deficient public school instruction in February 2013 after weathering months of popular protest in order to announce that the time had come for the adoption of a single textbook to promote a standardized narrative on the past. Such a text would finally provide the country with a galvanizing “national idea” that would calm societal restiveness and interethnic tension and promote an all-Russian sense of patriotism and loyalty.

Although Putin’s populist demand for a unified patriotic curriculum found immediate support in public opinion polling, the commission tasked with assembling a suitable outline for the new narrative struggled to produce results. It took this group months to compile even a preliminary draft, which was accompanied by a long list of controversial issues in need of further work. Public outcry drove the commission to return to work during the summer of 2013, delaying the release of a reworked outline and a somewhat shorter list of unresolved issues until September. Perhaps most striking about these outlines is the fact that they combined an overwhelming amount of factual information with a lack of a central red thread, aside from the predictable emphasis on etatism and the “power vertical” (the term “sovereign democracy” having faded from fashion during Medvedev’s presidency). Ultimately, it is rather surprising that the second outline was

34 Andrei Sidorchuk, “Proshloe v tumane: kakim budet edinyi uchebnik istorii,” Argumenty i fakty, June 18, 2013 (http://www.aif.ru/society_education/trend/44364, last accessed March 10, 2015). It is unclear what Putin was referring to, inasmuch as there was little variety in the 2012 textbook market.

ratified on October 31, 2013, inasmuch as it seemed more appropriate for structuring a historical almanac than an inspiring new vision of the usable past.36

According to official plans, this ratified outline was to provide the framework for a textbook competition that was to be staged in 2014 in order to identify the central text for a unified national public school history curriculum. These plans stalled, however, amid the political drama surrounding first the Euromaidan crisis and then Yanukovych’s fall, the annexation of Crimea and the emergence of a Russian-Ukrainian proxy war in the Donbas. By the fall of 2014, Russian minister of education and science D. V. Livanov was in retreat, suggesting that the idea of a public competition to identify a single new history narrative had been replaced by plans to officially endorse a variety of textbooks. Livanov’s disclosure, however, was then immediately called into question by both Putin and Chubar’ian, who hinted that the government remained committed to the idea of a single canonical textbook. Confusion over this process reigns to the present day. If one or more textbooks based on the ratified outline are eventually released, they’ll likely differ little from what is in circulation today, celebrating the power vertical rather than a truly “national idea.”37

The fact that this official search for a usable past has been eclipsed by the Ukrainian crisis and hallelujahs surrounding the annexation of Crimea should actually come as no

37 See Brandenberger, “Promotion of a Usable Past,” 210-212.
surprise. In retrospect, it appears likely that the presidential administration, frustrated by its ongoing quest for an evocative, unproblematic, thousand-year “national idea,” suddenly realized in mid-2014 that the Crimean drama offered a much more convenient usable past (at least in the near term)—a story of homecoming replete with parables celebrating loyalty, steadfastness, opposition to non-Russian national fascism and the righting of historical wrongs. Quickly, ranking institutions such as the Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Russian History were drafted to develop accessible histories of this event for mass consumption. In the end, the convenience of this shift in focus, taking place as yet another textbook project ground to a halt, indicates how opportunistic the politicization of history as mobilizational propaganda has become since 2000.

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Ultimately, this paper argues that the contemporary Russian propaganda state is much weaker than generally assumed, unable to mount a coherent, compelling mobilizational campaign around shared values and priorities (aside, perhaps, from anti-Maidan and “Krymnash” jingoism or conspiracy theories revolving around a US-NATO axis).

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38 It is interesting to note the degree to which the Crimean drama has been rewritten in the past year from an ad hoc process into manifest destiny. The crisis began with Putin’s lack of interest in the region and mounted with concern over the fate of Yanukovych and Russian military bases; official denials concerning the quick deployment of unmarked troops; and a hurried, amateurish referendum. A year later, these events have been recast as a carefully-planned Russian operation to protect co-nationals and facilitate a democratic process of self determination.


40 Pragmatism and exigency also likely explain the briefness of Russian state media’s 2014 flirtation with “Novorossiia,” which despite mention in several Putin speeches and photo ops quickly faded from the headlines as the costs of this geopolitical adventure became clear.
Although this paper has focused on the propaganda state’s repeated failures to identify and popularize a “national idea,” similar failures could be identified regarding efforts to stimulate popular interest in patriotism, modernization, “sovereign democracy,” nanotechnology, domestic adoption or Eurasianism.

Part of the credit for these failures lies with the Russian constitution’s guarantees of the freedoms of speech and the press, which even in their present, limited form deny state propagandists and media executives unopposed, monopolistic control over the public sphere. Credit for this weakness is also owed to the political technologists, propagandists, PR specialists and court historians, who appear incapable of developing rousing, inclusive campaigns on their own, despite massive administrative support. Lastly, credit for this weakness should be given to the presidential administration itself, which has proven unable to reconcile its desire for a patriotic message with its need for an etatist one. The end result of this weakness has been a series of stillborn mobilizational campaigns, confusing, inconsistent rhetoric and a disorganized cacophony of negative propaganda, disinformation and background noise. And while it is understandable why analysts like Wilson, Pomerantsev and Weiss have understood this flak to be part of a single, coordinated, postmodern approach to managing public opinion, it is better to see it as the flotsam and jetsam of an array of uncoordinated, lackluster campaigns conducted by a rather conventional propaganda state.41

41 Another explanation for the unconventional form that Russian state propaganda has taken in the past years—the launch of a psychological war—is no more likely than the postmodern steampunk hypothesis. No evidence of sophisticated coordination has surfaced to offset the ample signs of chaos and incompetence.