

Putin's Patriotism Campaign Gathers Momentum

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President Vladimir Putin's focus on Russia's national identity marks a shift from the central themes of his first two terms as president, and observers say his third term could be characterized by a conservative push aimed at uniting society behind him and drawing public attention away from sensitive political issues.

This is the first story in an occasional series.

Just over a year since his re-election as president, Vladimir Putin is putting increasing emphasis on patriotism as a national idea capable of consolidating Russian society and inspiring future generations.

At a ceremony at his Novo-Ogaryovo residence last week, Putin handed out more than 20 state awards to the heads of patriotic organizations, historians and educators for their efforts

to instill respect for Russia's past and immortalize the memory of the country's war dead.

Before delivering the awards, Putin said in a written address to the founding congress of the Russian Military History Society that its members should strive to "preserve Russia's distinctive national character" by extolling its "traditions and roots, its spiritual and cultural heritage."

"We should remember that there are qualities more important than one's political affiliation: patriotism and the sacred duty of defending one's motherland," Putin told the society, which he founded by presidential decree in early January.

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Last week's meeting with members of the Russian Military History Society follows the grand opening of a new headquarters for the Russian Geographical Society that Putin attended in January and the Kremlin-ordered re-establishment of the Russian History Society last year.

Putin has acted as patron for all three groups, granting them federal subsidies and expressing an interest in their work in a drive to raise their status. Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and State Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin have been tapped to head the organizations, which promote research into Russia's natural wonders and historical milestones.

Shaping Russians' views on history has been of particular concern to the president, who expressed support earlier this year for the idea of introducing a single government-approved history textbook to make schoolchildren "respect all pages of our country's past." Last month, a working group was formed so that the book could be written within two years.

The president has also overseen the creation of the Directorate for Social Projects, a body tasked with strengthening "government policies in the field of patriotic upbringing," and backed a bill submitted to the State Duma on March 9 that would increase funding for NGOs engaged in "patriotic education."

Analysts consulted by The Moscow Times differed in their interpretations of Putin's patriotism campaign but agreed it was a tactic to bolster support for the president, who appeared to lose his veneer of invulnerability when the anti-Kremlin protest movement sprung into life in December 2011.

"Putin is playing up the importance of patriotism for strategic reasons. He's really trying to instill respect for authorities so that his approval rating remains stable," said Pavel Salin, an independent analyst.

Salin said Putin didn't have to use patriotism as a mobilizing force during the early years of his rule because he delivered what the public wanted: stability, a strong hand, a state power vertical and rising incomes due to booming oil prices.

But after Dmitry Medvedev began advancing liberal ideas during his 2008-2012 presidency,

educated Russians in large cities started clamoring for increased freedoms. Angered by Putin's decision to seek a third term as president and by alleged violations during the December 2011 parliamentary elections, thousands of Muscovites took to the streets for a series of protests.

Stanislav Belkovsky, formerly a Kremlin insider and now a prominent government critic, dismissed Putin's talk of patriotism as little more than a rhetorical trick and said the president's main focus was containing opposition to his rule.

"Russians feel pride in their country less and less, partly due to the way that corruption has flourished in the past 13 years and partly due to the 'unpatriotic' behavior of officials who stash their assets abroad," Belkovsky said.

"Putin was genuinely scared by the Arab Spring, which deepened his distrust of interference by Western governments, and he is doing everything in his power to ensure that a similar revolution doesn't take place in Russia."

Putin first sketched out the contours of his patriotic project at a September roundtable with culture officials in Krasnodar, and the president's state-of-the-nation address in December served as further evidence that patriotism will be the ideological cornerstone of Putin's third term.

"Russian society today is experiencing an obvious deficit of spiritual bonds," Putin said during the address, adding that his fellow countrymen should draw "inner strength" from their 1,000-year history.

"We must not only develop confidently, but also preserve our national and spiritual identity, not lose ourselves as a nation. To be and remain Russia," Putin said, later quoting Soviet dissident and author Alexander Solzhenitsyn as saying that patriotism is a "natural, organic feeling."

Since his speech to both houses of parliament, Putin has stoked patriotic sentiment by flying to Volgograd for festivities to mark the 70th anniversary of the Soviet victory at the Battle of Stalingrad and renewed calls for the Russian Orthodox Church to "anchor the moral framework of public life and national statehood." He has also supported plans to boost Russians' pride in their country by making 2014 a Year of Culture.

In the last year, authorities have sanctioned patrols by brigades of Cossacks — horsemen known for zealously defending Russia's borders under the tsars — ostensibly to maintain law and order. Pro-Kremlin youth organization Nashi recently announced plans to broaden the scope of its activities to focus more on patriotic initiatives.

Putin has also lashed out at the West, which he accuses of meddling in Russia's domestic politics and diluting its traditional values. He has backed anti-Western measures including a ban on U.S. adoptions and a requirement that foreign-funded NGOs register as "foreign agents." Recent discussions on criminalizing "homosexual propaganda" are colored by the assumption that homosexuality was foisted on Russia from abroad.

Conservative-minded analysts said Putin's efforts to promote patriotism were

the culmination of conservative trends that took hold with Putin's rise to power in 2000 and that such efforts were likely to strike a chord with the bulk of the population.

"Patriotism is absolutely natural for most Russian people, even though the white-ribbon opposition believes Samuel Johnson's famous saying that 'patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel,'" said Vyacheslav Nikonov, a political scientist and a lawmaker with the pro-Putin United Russia party. The white ribbon is a symbol of the anti-Kremlin protest movement.

Looking ahead to Putin's next five years in office, Valery Korovin, director of the Center for Geopolitical Studies, said the president would increasingly embrace conservative values and undo the liberal legacy of his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin.

"Putin gained his reputation as a national leader by rejecting liberalism and saving Russia when it was teetering on the edge of an abyss," Korovin said, adding that Putin had to tread carefully during his first two terms, given that elites surrounding Yeltsin had handed him the levers of power.

But now that Putin has established control over the political system, he could switch to a more paternalistic economic model and even end Russia's fledgling membership in the World Trade Organization, Korovin said.

"Putin is willing to make various ideological concessions — either in favor of liberalism or conservatism — in order to strengthen the Russian state and achieve immediate results. This is what guides his current emphasis on patriotism," he said.

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