

'Patriot's Handbook' May Give Insight Into Putin's Thoughts

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Oleg Makarenko wants to set the story straight and answer the "Russophobes" who he says are trying to split and humiliate Russia.

His website Ruxpert may not command the viewer numbers of Wikipedia which inspired it, but inside Russia it holds a prominent position in what Makarenko calls an information war with the West.

As Vladimir Putin has embraced an increasingly nationalist ideology in his third term as president, evidenced by his seizing of Crimea from Ukraine, Makarenko's anti-Western ideas have become mainstream. His website, designed to be a "Patriot's handbook," has mirrored and presaged Putin's thinking.

Makarenko denies receiving money or support from political groups. But his website fits in to a seemingly well-organized Russian media campaign that has blamed the West for the protests that drove Viktor Yanukovich from power in neighboring Ukraine.

Offering notes on subjects ranging from Crimea and New Russia to liberal myths and sexuality, Ruxpert says it provides "the truth about Russia — without dirty, enemy propaganda and without embellishments." All good background information to equip "Russian patriots" with reliable arguments.

Makarenko, a prominent blogger in Russia under the name Fritz Morgen, said his website and others like it were needed after the collapse of the Soviet Union enabled the U.S. "to swallow countries up like they were nuts, one after the other."

"If we fail to win the information war then it will be easy for the U.S. to get people on to the streets," he said, reflecting mistrust, fanned by Putin, of the West. The danger of instability is a continual refrain.

Makarenko set up Ruxpert in 2007. He says the site runs on contributions from readers and articles are written for free.

"Russia has an ideology of traditional conservatism. People have a choice — on the one hand they see the West, where there is individualism taken to the extreme, tolerance to the extreme, gay parades, the lack of a traditional family," Makarenko said.

"Russia has more traditional values. I cannot say that this is a route of development that offers a brighter future, but it is not the dead-end that Western liberalism faces."

Before, After Crimea

A review of Putin's public comments since he came to power in 2000 shows a consistent emphasis on restoring Russia's pride and its place as a geopolitical power. This has become an even greater priority in his third term as president.

Living through the chaos of the 1990s after returning home from his KGB post in eastern Germany, Putin blamed the West for all but destroying post-Soviet society.

In 2005, he lamented the collapse of the Soviet Union and urged Russia to take its own path.

Last year, he went further, calling for a new and fierce patriotism to save Russia from Western ideology which, he said, was "denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual."

Drawing on at least three schools of thought and contemporary Orthodox beliefs, the former KGB spy has buttressed his ideas with the work of Russian thinkers from the 19th and 20th centuries — a period characterized by debate about Russia's identity.

He has peppered his speeches with references to political philosophers such as Ivan Ilyin who, in the early 20th century, blamed a lack of national pride for allowing the tragedy of the Bolshevik revolution.

Konstantin Leontyev, who was critical of Western consumer society in the late 19th century, also figures, dovetailing with the thinking of a new generation of leaders in the Russian Orthodox Church.

For an answer, Putin has turned to Soviet-era historian Lev Gumilev who contended that Russia was not a European state but a Eurasian one, uniting two continents.

Putin's vision of a Eurasian Union stretching from the Polish frontier to Pacific shores would group together former Soviet states and cement an alternative economic system.

"The Eurasian Union is a project for maintaining the identity of nations in the historical Eurasian space in a new century and in a new world," Putin told visiting journalists last year.

Also among Gumilev's teachings is the theory that nations can become great in the hands of passionate leaders, such as Alexander the Great or Napoleon.

"Russian World"

Today, two academics, Igor Panarin and Alexander Dugin, have played an important role in establishing the idea of a clash of cultures in the popular consciousness. In their lectures they speak of a geopolitical battle between the West and Russia.

Dugin, who supports the unification of Russian-speaking territories, teaches at Moscow State University. Panarin teaches at the Russian Foreign Ministry's school for future diplomats.

A third academic, Olga Vasilyeva, professor of religious thought at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, has delivered lectures to the presidential administration, her institute told Reuters.

Vasilyeva did not respond to a request for comment. Kommersant said she had taken part in a three-day seminar on spiritual ties and conservatism for the Kremlin.

In a speech on March 18 shortly after annexing Crimea, Putin set out his vision of a Greater Russia.

Historian Valery Solovei noted Putin's use of the word "Russky" for Russian instead of the more usual "Rossissky" — a possibly significant linguistic shift suggesting Putin sees himself as leader of all Russians, not just those living within Russia's borders.

"He used the word 'Russky' 27 times. This has never happened before," Solovei said of a word that is used to describe someone by their ethnicity rather than their citizenship. "So the Eurasian Union has been taken over by some kind of vague notion of 'a Russian World.' It is an ideological innovation."

One source close to the political elite said Putin had gone so far off script that even his closest aides were struggling to define his "post-Crimea" ideology. Inadvertently or not, he may have handed conservative forces in the FSB security service a more powerful hand in policy making — something that may prompt rifts with Putin's more liberal aides.

By laying claim to lands outside Russia, Putin may be breaking with a role he has played since he came to power after the chaos of the 1990s — the guarantor of stability.

"We are not talking about the former Soviet Union, but the unification of Russians, like a kind of community. The question is how do you interpret this? Is it cultural, ethnic or biological

even?" Solovei said.

"The other thing is, is the move ideologically entrenched or not? It is a very risky move for Putin."

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