

New National Security Strategy Is a Paranoid's Charter

Russia's new National Strategy regards not just foreign countries as a threat, but the very processes reshaping the modern world.

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Russia's new National Security Strategy is not a revolutionary document, to a considerable extent simply building on its predecessor document from 2015. However, it does mark the progressive shift in the Kremlin's priorities towards paranoia and a worldview that regards not just foreign countries as a threat, but the very processes reshaping the modern world.

The Strategy is meant to be updated every six years, so the document Vladimir Putin gave official force with his [decree](#) 'On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation' of 3 July reflects this process of regular revision.

Much is essentially the same as in the 2015 iteration, but it is the changes which matter. The Strategy is meant to be the ultimate distillation of Russia's national interests, strategic priorities and threat perceptions.

As such, it is both of great and limited importance.

It is a broad planning document, rather than a specific and operational one: clause 40(3) speaks, for example, of the importance of maintaining adequate nuclear deterrence, and clause 56 affirms the necessity of strengthening Russia's sovereignty over its information space, without giving any sense of what the country's force requirements are, or how 'information sovereignty' can be enforced.

On the other hand, as the foundational document on national security — and to the Kremlin, almost everything is seen through the prism of security these days — it is meant to be reflected in all more detailed doctrines and programmes, as well as in the wider conduct of state policy.

What is striking is that the new Strategy paints a more alarming picture about the threats Russia faces from the West and also conceptualizes those threats in wider terms. This is hardly surprising as the task of developing the document falls to the Security Council's secretariat. Although its role is meant largely to be to facilitate the year-long process of drafting consultation and to broker consensus between various stakeholders, in practice that gives the body considerable influence over the process and outcome.

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The final document certainly looks as though it bears the fingerprints of Nikolai Patrushev, the powerful Secretary of the Security Council and in effect the closest thing the Russian system has to a National Security Adviser. One of the more hawkish figures within Putin's inner circle, Patrushev has made no secret of his belief that Russia is in effect already in an undeclared struggle with a West.

Back [in March](#), he told the newspaper *Rossiiskaya gazeta* that “in order to contain Russia,” the West was trying “to destabilize the socio-political situation in the country, to inspire and radicalize the protest movement, and to erode traditional Russian spiritual and moral values.”

The Strategy quickly identifies the threat generated by “the desire of Western countries to preserve their hegemony” (clause 7), with the primary challenges coming from non-military vectors, such as a “desire to isolate the Russian Federation and the use of double standards in international politics” (18) and indeed attempts by “unfriendly countries... to use socio-economic problems in the Russian Federation to destroy its internal unity, instigate and radicalize a protest movement, support marginal groups and divide Russian society” (20).

The last point highlights the increasingly broad notion of 'security' and 'threat' embodied within the Strategy. It is not just about cyberattacks and disinformation, but “attempts deliberately to erode traditional values, distort global history, revise views on Russia's role and place in it, rehabilitate fascism and incite interethnic and inter-confessional conflicts” and even to restrict the use of the Russian language (19).

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Let's be clear: there is much in the Strategy that is either inoffensive or downright positive.

Improving public health and road safety, protecting citizens' rights, encouraging a healthy lifestyle, improving labour productivity, cracking down on monopolies — all of these are admirable goals.

However, we've seen such aspirations before, and yet the Kremlin is putting political considerations above health ones in its [COVID-19 response](#), monopolism and crony capitalism abounds, and the opposition is facing a [crackdown](#) that goes well beyond what even Russian law envisages and permits.

The truth of the matter is that the increasing securitization of everything, and the association of everything the Kremlin fears or dislikes with foreign subversion simply makes this a paranoid's charter. It does not so much permit as demand that political opposition, minority opinions, even alternative lifestyles, be treated as a threat to the state.

After all, there is a whole new focus on “the protection of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values, culture and historical memory.”

The Strategy asserts that “traditional Russian spiritual, moral and cultural-historical values are under active attack by the U.S. and its allies, as well as by transnational corporations, foreign non-profit, non-governmental, religious, extremist and terrorist organizations” (clause 87).

Let's put aside just what 'traditional Russian values' may be — would they include serfdom, the knout and the terem (the social exclusion of women)? Let's put aside the slight of pen that manages to lump the State Department, al Qaeda, Human Rights Watch and Facebook in the same array of hostile forces.

This in effect reclassifies the modern world and all the social and economic revolutions that are reshaping it as a threat.

In 1974, the Soviet authorities — terrified by the thought of the quick and easy flow of information not under its control — introduced draconian laws on the storage, use and management of photocopiers. Today's Kremlin sounds just a few steps away from similarly trying to stand in the face of the juggernaut of progress.

Of course, the question is how much of a difference the Strategy will make. In many ways, it does not chart a new course for the future so much as codify changes which have been taking place in recent years. The attempted poisoning of Alexei Navalny likely reflected a victory for those who argued that he was not a mere opposition politician but actually a [tool of Western subversion](#).

The current campaign of labelling a growing number of bodies as 'foreign agents' or [linked](#) to 'undesirable organizations' reflects not just administrative convenience, but also the genuine belief on the part of at least some at the top of the system that this is the threat they face.

Nonetheless, for the next six years, at least, the paranoid's charter is law.

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