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FROM 'PUTIN THE SAVIOUR' TO 'IRREPLACEABLE PUTIN': THE ROLE OF THE 1990s IN THE KREMLIN'S STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The Soviet Union ceased to exist thirty years ago. However, its memory and the memory of the decade of crisis that followed its dissolution, continue to serve the Kremlin. Existing literature claims that Vladimir Putin, helped by the state-controlled media, has manipulated the memory of the Soviet Union and the trauma of the 1990s to justify his regime. This article takes a different approach. By adopting the framework of Strategic Communications, it claims that the Kremlin used the traumatic experience of the 1990s to build strategic narratives intended to justify

Putin's regime within the context of the values held by the majority of the Russian public. On the one hand, it argues that the Kremlin's Strategic Communications are rooted in the past, either by glorifying it (nostalgia for the Soviet Union) or by vilifying it ('the wild nineties'), because this is what resonates best with the Russian people. On the other hand, it suggests that Putin's use of this past, combined with deep understanding of his domestic audience, allowed him to adapt and adjust his strategic narratives to the evolving situation in Russia, justifying his regime in the last two decades and legitimising its potential continuation beyond 2024.

INTRODUCTION

In a special interview broadcast on 5 July 2020, a few days after a successful constitutional referendum, President Putin argued:

> I am absolutely convinced that we are doing the right thing by accepting the amendments to the current constitution. They will strengthen our statehood, [and] create conditions for the progressive development of our country for decades to come.[1]

It is not surprising that Putin justified the constitutional changes that would allow him to stay in power for two more six-year presidential terms. But his argument in support of the change might seem puzzling. In his interview, he referred to Article 26 of the 1922 'Treaty on the Creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' that declared a unilateral right for each republic to leave the Union.[2] Putin argued that the new constitution was intended to protect Russia from this 'time bomb' that migrated from one version of the Soviet constitution to another and had ultimately lead to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.[3] The 1991 Belovezha Accords, which officially initiated the Soviet

1 Vladimir Putin in an interview for 'Moskva. Kremlin. Putin.' [Moscow. The Kremlin. Putin.], *Channel 1*, 5 July 2020, YouTube, (accessed 20 July 2021).
2 'Deklaratsiya i Dogovor ob obrazovanii Soyuza Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik' [Treaty on the Creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics], 30 December 1922, (accessed 20 July 2021).
3 Putin interview for 'Moskva. Kremlin. Putin.'

Union's dissolution, used the 1922 Treaty to justify the status of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus as founding members of the Union.[4] Putin's allusion in 2020 to a poorly written Article in a one-hundred-year-old treaty that established a country that ceased to exist 30 years ago, raises several questions about the Kremlin's communications strategy. After all, according to Putin himself, the main amendments were intended to address the problems of social security,[5] and not to prevent the repetition of the fatal destiny of the Soviet Union.

Understanding Putin's reference to the 1922 Treaty in the context of the 2020 constitutional change requires a broader appreciation of the role and place of the Soviet Union (and most importantly the decade of crisis that followed its dissolution) in the Kremlin's Strategic Communications (SC), which aimed at justifying not only constitutional change, but Putin's regime as a whole. In other words, it is important to understand how the collective perception of the Soviet Union's dissolution and the following decade of crisis, has been used by the Kremlin since Putin's arrival in office more than 20 years ago.

The Soviet Union officially ceased to exist on 26 December 1991, following the declaration by the Supreme Soviet of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.[6] Its disintegration was a result of many long-term processes inherent in how the 'Soviet machine' was built to function.[7] Some Russian political scientists even trace them back to the death of Stalin. After whom, they say, Soviet officialdom 'started to act formulaically', failing to protect the Soviet Union from 'the systematic and purposeful global information war waged against it by the West'.[8] The reasons for the Soviet Union's dissolution present an interesting case for the field of SC. This article, however, focuses on its consequences.

4 'Soglasheniye o sozdanii Sodruzhestva Nezavisimykh Gosudarstv' [Agreement on the Creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States], 8 December 1991, (accessed 20 July 2021).
5 Putin interview for 'Moskva. Kremlin. Putin.'
6 The Supreme Soviet of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 'Declaration Nª 142-Nª' [Russian original], 26 December 1991, (accessed 20 July 2021).
7 Wisla Suraska, *How the Soviet Union Disappeared: An Essay on the Causes of Dissolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).
8 Igor Panarin, *Pervaya mirovaya informatsionnaya voyna: razval SSSR* [The First World Information War: The Dissolution of the U.S.S.R.] (Saint-Petersburg: Piter, 2010), p. 116.

It investigates how the Kremlin has built strategic narratives amid new realities created by the fall of the Soviet Union and how these narratives were integrated into the Kremlin's domestic SC.

While SC entails 'a holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment',[9] it may be argued that SC is conducted by building and maintaining strategic narratives, understood as 'a means for political actors to construct a shared understanding of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors.'[10] With these definitions in mind, this article will examine how the Kremlin under President Putin has instrumentalised a shared understanding (among the Russian public, based on Russian values and interests) of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the crisis of the following decade to achieve the Kremlin's main domestic political objective: the justification and legitimisation of Putin's regime. In other words, following Manuel Castells' maxim that 'social power […] operates primarily by the construction of meaning in the human mind through processes of communication',[11] this article investigates how the Kremlin has used the traumatic experience that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union to create a certain meaning of Putin's regime in the minds of the Russian people and to increase its 'social power' over them.

This article consists of four parts. The first two focus on the context within which the Kremlin's narratives were constructed. The first describes the realities of the 1990s and, more importantly, how the Russian people thought about the situation in which they found themselves immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The second part focuses on Russian political values and sentiments regarding the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since any successful SC should resonate with a target audience's feelings, emotions, and values, these sections offer important

9 Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga, Latvia: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, June 2019), p. 46.
10 Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 2.
11 Manuel Castells, 'A Network Theory of Power', *International Journal of Communication* Volume 5 (2011): 779.

context for further analysis. Moreover, in light of the argument put forward by some researchers that, since his rise to power in 2000, Putin has recreated and manipulated Russian national identity and the memory of the Soviet Union with the help of state-controlled media,[12] these two parts are based exclusively on evidence collected during the 1990s. This approach ensures that the interpretations presented here are as historically accurate as possible.

The third and fourth parts analyse how the trauma of the 1990s has been used to construct the Kremlin's strategic narratives during the last two decades. In the third part the analysis focuses on Putin's first two terms from 2000 to 2008, when the traumatic experience of the 1990s was used as an antithesis to construct the narrative of 'Putin the Saviour'. Since the Kremlin had to provide new ideas to justify Putin's prolonged stay in power after 2012, the fourth part focuses on how the meaning of the 1990s in the Kremlin's SC was recalibrated to support the narrative of 'Irreplaceable Putin'. Finally, the conclusion places the findings of this article in the context of existing literature, raising several questions about the nature of the Kremlin's SC and what it means to the field of SC.

RUSSIAN CONTEXT I: THE REALITY OF 'THE WILD NINETIES'

From the beginning, the dissolution of the Soviet Union was communicated differently by the Russian leadership than in other former Soviet Republics. While the leaders of other former republics framed dissolution as an opportunity for a brighter future shaped by the ability to follow their own independent paths, Russia's leadership had no external actor to blame for the detrimental situation. There was a striking difference between President Boris Yeltsin's 1992 New Year's speech, held a few days after the official dissolution of the Soviet Union, and that of his Ukrainian counterpart in the Belovezha Accords, President Leonid Kravchuk.

12 See Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Miguel Vázquez-Liñán, 'Historical Memory and Political Propaganda in the Russian Federation', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* Volume 50 Nº 2 (2017): 77-86; Anna Geifman and Yuri Teper, 'Russia's New National Identity under Putin's Regime', *BESA Center Perspectives Paper* Volume 279 (29 December 2014), (accessed 20 July 2021).

When Kravchuk argued that 'the dream of many generations has come true', as 'our nation has come up from its knees, becoming the master of its land', and 'from now on, our future destiny is in our hands',[13] Yeltsin complained that 'the inheritance that we got is simply depressing'. He promised to 'stabilise the economy by the autumn' and 'that by the end of the year [1992], people's lives would gradually begin to improve'.[14]

Yeltsin's promises of fast economic recovery, however, were too optimistic. His radical market-oriented reforms led to the contraction of Russia's GDP—an estimated 40% between 1991 and 1998.[15] Culminating in the 1998 Russian financial crisis, the first decade of Russia's independence was 'a decade of extreme macroeconomic turbulence'. Between December 1991 and December 2001 'the ruble's value dropped by more than 99% against the dollar'.[16]

The economic devastation of the 1990s was not the only destructive consequence of the collapse of the Soviet Union. First, in addition to economic chaos, the disintegration of the Soviet Union 'left moral anarchy'. As Anatol Lieven put it, 'corruption, crime and disobedience [were] not simply aspects of the new Russian state […] – they lay at its heart'.[17] Second, Yeltsin's government, associated with economic failure and a high level of corruption, was unable to project effective control over Russia's regions, leading to the First Chechen War from 1994-1996. Still suffering from the trauma of war in Afghanistan, Russians saw this war as Yeltsin's attempt to prove his power, rather than to defend Russian land. Soon the Russian public wanted 'to get rid of both its hapless president and his Caucasian adventure',[18] with 39% of the Russian public directly accusing Yeltsin of the bloodshed in Chechnya. In the same opinion poll of February 1995, only 20% blamed the Chechen separatist leader

13 Leonid Kravchuk, '1992 New Year Speech' [Ukrainian original], 31 December 1991, YouTube, (accessed 20 July 2021).
14 Boris Yeltsin, '1992 New Year Speech' [Russian original], 31 December 1991, YouTube, (accessed 20 July 2021).
15 Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman, 'A Normal Country', *Harvard Institute of Economic Research, Discussion Paper Number 2019* (Cambridge, MA: 23 October 2003), p. 9.
16 Ibid., p. 14.
17 Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 170.
18 Dmitri Trenin and Aleksei Malashenko, *Russia's Restless Frontier: The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004), p. 50.

Dzhokhar Dudayev.[19] The Russian people were simply not ready to fight this war. In January 1995, surveys suggested that 40% of the population preferred a peaceful solution, with a further 24% rejecting any military involvement, and asking to withdraw forces from Chechnya. Moreover, in June 1995, another survey showed that in response to 'What, in your opinion, should be done in relation to Chechnya?' about 38% approved of it leaving the Russian Federation.[20]

Yet Yeltsin persisted in fighting the war, regardless of the fact that 'Russia that went to war in Chechnya in December 1994 was both a weak state and one in the throes of a liberal capitalist revolution'.[21] His public approval, which peaked at 58.67% in the 1993 Russian Government Referendum, fell to a record low of 12% in a 1995 opinion poll.[22] After a brief increase during the 1996 election campaign (which Yeltsin won by enlisting media and business elites, rather than the Russian people),[23] it plunged again to almost single-digits by 1998 with no chance of recovery.[24]

During the 1990s, the Russian people not only experienced economic hardship, rising levels of crime, political corruption, and a bloody war in Chechnya, they no longer believed their leadership capable of improving their lot. Russians describe this decade as the 'wild nineties' [*likhie devinostye*] for a reason. It 'was symbolic of deep pessimism and lack of hope'.[25]

19 Lev Gudkov, 'God chechenskoy voyny v obshchestvennom mnenii Rossii' [A Year of Chechen Way in the Russian Public Opinion], *Druzhba Narodov* 2 (1996), (accessed 20 July 2021).
20 Ibid.
21 Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, p. 150.
22 Percentage is based on the numbers of those who said they 'absolutely trust', 'generally trust', and 'more trust than distrust' their leader. Svetlana Migdisova, Yelena Petrenko, Tat'yana Zakharova, Anna Vorontsova, and Dmitriy Chubukov, 'Yesli god nazad na odnogo doveryayushchego prezidentu prikhodilos' dva nedoveryayushchikh, to seychas – desyat' [If a Year Ago There Were Two Distrustful People for Every One Who Trusted the President, Now There Are Ten], *Fond 'Obshchestvennoye mneniye'* ['Public Opinion' Foundation], 10 March 1995, (accessed 20 July 2021).
23 Matthew Lantz (ed.), *The Russian Elections Compendium* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Strengthening Democratic Institutions (SDI) Project, Harvard University, 1996).
24 Sergey Vasil'tsov and Sergey Obukhov, 'Vozrast kharizmy: Politicheskiy prognoz', [The Charisma's Age: Political Forecast], *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, N° 74 (12548), 3 June 2004, (accessed 20 July 2021).
25 James C. Pearce, *The Use of History in Putin's Russia* (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2020), p. xi.

On the one hand, Gulnaz Sharafutdinova is right in arguing that for many Russian citizens the 1990s were 'a decade of political pluralism, economic opportunity, open borders, cultural creativity, and freedom of political and artistic self-expression'.[26] On the other, this is not how most Russians felt during the period. According to Levada Center opinion polls in 1996, 81% of correspondents agreed (entirely or partially) with the statement that 'the things that are currently happening in Russia make me feel ashamed of it'.[27] From 1992 to 1999 the percentage of Russians who believed that Russian political life was characterised by escalating chaos and anarchy increased from 51% to 62%.[28] When in 1999 Russians were asked to summarise the preceding decade by responding to the question, 'what feelings emerged or became stronger in people around you over the past years?', 52% indicated 'tiredness, indifference', 37% 'bitterness, aggression', 37% 'desperation', and 29% 'fear'. Only 10% chose 'hope', 3% 'self-respect', and 2% 'pride in their nation'.[29] In other words, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the following 'wild nineties' were not, as Sharafutdinova claims, a 'chosen trauma' constructed and manipulated by Putin to advance his political ambitions.[30] Instead, they were a real 'collective trauma', in the context of which Putin had to craft his SC toward the Russian people.

RUSSIAN CONTEXT II: RUSSIAN VALUES AND SENTIMENTS

Since discussing the range and depth of Russian values is beyond the scope of this article, the following analysis will focus on two key aspects: Russian values regarding political power, and sentiments of the Russian people towards their Soviet history in general and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in particular. Importantly, the arguments presented in this analysis will be supported by data collected during the 1990s, before Putin's arrival in the Kremlin. Accordingly, it presents the original

26 Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, p.113.
27 Levada Center, *Russian Public Opinion 2013-2015* (Moscow, 2016), p. 49.
28 Levada Center, *Obshchestvennoye mneniye – Yezhegodnik 2014* [Public Opinion – Yearbook 2014] (Moscow, 2015), p. 41.
29 Levada Center, *Russian Public Opinion 2013-2015*, p. 17.
30 Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, chapter 5.

pattern of values and sentiments that Putin had to work with, rather than something that was, as some researchers claim,[31] constructed by the Kremlin's 'propaganda machine' during Putin's 20 years in power.

The relationship between the Russian people and political power is complex. When Russian political philosophers write about natural freedom inherent in the 'Russian Soul',[32] they do not mean the Western understanding of freedom (human rights based on culturally-inherent individualism), but an entirely Russian interpretation of freedom: 'freedom from earthly worries'.[33] Russians have traditionally sought to achieve this freedom through a transfer of political responsibility to an authority (either a local master, imperial monarch, or communist government), ultimately accepting powerful, even totalitarian, rule as a required precondition to organise a stable society. As a famous Russian proverb says: '[the] Master will come – [and the] master will judge us' [*Vot priyedet barin—barin nas rassudit*].[34]

On the one hand, this lack of responsibility for one's land and life generates a feeling of unlimited personal freedom in the Russian political environment, creating a strong belief that probably [*avos'*], supposedly [*nebos'*], or somehow [*kak-nibud'*] problems will be resolved. Conversely, it creates a strong belief in, and even demand for, a powerful authority that can guide the people and protect them from their own carelessness.[35] In the Russian mind, these two seemingly contradictory characteristics (personal freedom and strong authority) have successfully coexisted.

31 See Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*; Vázquez-Liñán, 'Historical Memory and Political Propaganda'; Geifman and Teper, 'Russia's New National Identity'.
32 Ivan Ilyin, *Sushchnost' i svoyeobraziye Russkoy kul'tury* [The Essence and Peculiarity of Russian Culture] (Moscow: Russkaya Kniga-XXI Vek, 2007); Nikolay Lossky, *Kharakter Russkogo naroda – Kniga 1* [The Character of the Russian people – Book 1] (Frankfurt am Main: Possev-Verlag, 1957); Ivan Solonevich, *Narodnaya Monarkhiya* [People's Monarchy] (Moscow: Algoritm, 2011); Nikolai Berdyaev, *Sud'ba Rossii* [The Destiny of Russia], reprint edition from 1918 publication (Moscow: Filosofskoye Obshchestvo SSSR, 1990).
33 Berdyaev, *Sud'ba Rossii* [The Destiny of Russia], p. 5.
34 This proverb originated from the short poem "Zabytaya derevnya" [Forgotten Village] by Nikolay Nekrasov.
35 Vyacheskav Gubanov, *Russkiy natsional'nyy kharakter v kontekste politicheskoy zhizni Rossiii* [Russian National Character in the Context of the Russian Political Life] (Saint-Petersburg: Izdatel'skiy Tsentr SPbGMGU, 1999), pp. 46-57; Berdyaev, *Sud'ba Rossii* [The Destiny of Russia], pp. 14-15; Ilyin, *Sushchnost' i svoyeobraziye Russkoy kul'tury* [The Essence and peculiarity of Russian Culture], pp. 45-47.

Recognising their reluctance to take responsibility for their actions, the Russian people have demanded strong and even ruthless treatment. The best example of this phenomenon is provided by Russian exiled political philosopher Nikolay Lossky:

> In St. Petersburg in the spring, when the ice on the Niva River started to melt, the ice-crossing of the river became unsafe. The mayor ordered policemen to be placed on the riverbank to stop those crossing the ice. A peasant, despite warning shouts from a policeman, went onto the ice, fell, and began to drown. The policeman saved him from death, but the peasant, instead of being grateful, began to criticise him: "Where have you been?". The policeman answered him: "But I shouted out a warning"—"Shouted?! You had to sock me in the face!", replied the peasant.[36]

Since they are not based on empirical evidence, arguments amongst Russian political philosophers for a culturally innate demand for strong authority may be challenged. Yet numerous opinion polls and sociological and psychological research conducted since the fall of the Soviet Union, suggest a similar picture. According to Levada Center opinion polls in 1996, 69% of respondents gave positive answers to the question, 'Are there situations where the presence of a strong and authoritative leader, a "strong hand", is necessary for the people?'. 37% agreed with the statement that 'our people need a "strong hand" at all times' and 32% agreed that 'there can be situations (like now) where it is necessary to give full power to one person'.[37] A poll in the same year conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation, asked a similar question: 'Do you agree or disagree that bringing order to Russia today requires a regime with a "strong hand"?'. And it revealed similar results: 62% agreed with the statement.[38] Having conducted a mixed method analysis of the image of power in Russia in the early 1990s, which combined surveys with in-depth interviews, political psychologist Elena Shesto-

36 Lossky, *Kharakter Russkogo naroda* [The Character of the Russian people], p.48.
37 Levada Center, *Russian Public Opinion 2013-2015*, p. 70.
38 Anna Petrova and Anna Vorontsova, 'Rastet chislo storonnikov rezhima "zhestkoy ruki"' [The Number of the Supporters of a "Strong Hand" regime Is Growing], *Fond "Obshchestvennoye mneniye"* ["Public Opinion" Foundation], 12 December 1996, (accessed 20 July 2021).

pal concluded that Russians want to see political power to be 'solid, strong, and even ruthless'.[39]

At a time when many in the West were celebrating Russia's transition to democracy,[40] and when President Clinton was arguing that the US sought 'to support the development of democracy and freedom for the people of Russia',[41] Russians did not necessarily subscribe to this freedom. While for many Americans democratic rights and freedoms are integral parts of their self-determination, for Russians these rights have always been 'something external, something that had been awarded by the generous fatherland or a kind master and, at any given moment, can be taken away without reasonable explanations'.[42] It is not surprising that, when faced with unprecedented economic hardship and general lawlessness, Russians were ready to exchange their newly acquired rights and freedoms for order and stability. In 1994, in answer to the question, 'If you had to choose between increasing living standards and preserving democratic rights and freedoms, which would you prefer?', 65% of correspondents preferred 'increasing living standards' with only 18% voting for 'preservation of democratic rights and freedoms'.[43] By the end of the decade, this readiness to trade rights and freedoms for law and order only increased. According to a series of opinion polls conducted by the Levada Center in 1998, 1999, and 2000, when answering the question 'What do you think is more important for Russia now?', an increasing majority chose 'Order, even if it can only be achieved by certain violations of the principles of democracy and restriction of personal freedoms'—73% in 1998, 77% in 1999, and 81% in 2000.[44]

39 Elena Shestopal, 'Obraz vlasti v Rossii: zhelaniya i real'nost' (Politiko-psikhologicheskiy analiz) [The Image of Power in Russia: Aspirations and Reality (Political and psychological analysis)], *Polis. Politicheskiye issledovaniya*, Volume 4 (1995): 9.
40 Alfred B. Evans, 'The Failure of Democratization in Russia: A comparative Perspective', *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Volume 2 (2011): 40-51.
41 William J. Clinton, 'US Support for Russian Democracy', *US Department of State Dispatch*, Volume 4 N° 13 (1993): 177.
42 Iosif Dzyaloshinskiy, 'Kultura, zhurnalistika, tolerantnost' [Culture, Journalism, Tolerance], in Iosif Dzyaloshinskiy and Marina Dzyaloshinskaya, (eds), *Rossiyskiye SMI: kak sozdayetsya obraz vraga* [Russian Mass Media: How the Image of Enemy is Created] (Moscow: Moskovskoe Byuro po Pravam Cheloveka 'Academia', 2007), p. 25.
43 Svetlana Migdisova and Yelena Petrenko, 'Povysheniye urovnya zhizni rossiyane predpochitayut sokhraneniyu demokraticheskikh prav i svobod' [Russians Prefer Improving Living Standards to Preserving Democratic Rights and Freedoms], *Fond "Obshchestvennoye mneniye"* ["Public Opinion" Foundation], 11 November 1994, accessed 20 July 2021.
44 Levada Center, *Russian Public Opinion 2013-2015*, p. 54.

It is not surprising that, as Russians yearned for stronger political power capable of bringing order even at the expense of democratic rights and freedoms, they retained warm feelings towards the old Soviet Union. In 1998, a Levada Center poll showed that the most frequent characteristics accorded Soviet administrations of the late 1970s and early 1980s were: 'with a common touch (congenial)' – 36%, 'legitimate'– 32%, 'habitual, familiar' – 32%, 'strong, durable' – 27%, and 'reputable, respected' – 21%, but also 'bureaucratic' – 30%, and 'short-sighted' – 23%.[45] Throughout the 1990s, the majority of Russian people believed they would be better off without Gorbachev's *Perestroika*. Answering the question 'Do you agree that it would be better if everything in the country remained the same as it was before the start of perestroika?', at least half repeatedly agreed: 53% entirely or partially agreed in 1995, 49% in 1996, 52% in 1997, 51% in 1998, and 50% in 2000.[46]

The argument that post-Soviet nostalgia in Russia originated in the mid-1990s and gained prominence in the early 2000s, as presented by Sharafutdinova in *The Red Mirror*,[47] is not entirely justified. This nostalgia emerged almost immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. According to Levada Center opinion polls, already in March 1992, 66% of respondents regretted the collapse of the Soviet Union, and this number reached 75% by December 2000.[48] Given that more than 70% of Russian citizens voted for the preservation of the Soviet Union in the 1991 Referendum,[49] and that since its dissolution the situation in Russia had only deteriorated, this early appearance of nostalgia for the 'good old days' of the Soviet Union should not be surprising. Already in February 1996, opinion polls showed that the largest proportion of the Russian population (39%) preferred the Soviet political system 'which we had before the 1990s', with 28% voting for Western-style democracy, and only 8% giving priority to the current

45 Ibid, p. 61.
46 Levada Center, *Obshchestvennoye mneniye – Yezhegodnik 2011* [Public Opinion – Yearbook 2011] (Moscow, 2015), p. 234.
47 Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, p. 112.
48 Levada Center, *Russian Public Opinion 2013-2015*, p. 350.
49 'Soobshcheniye Tsentral'noy komissii referenduma SSSR ob itogakh referenduma SSSR, sostoyavshegosya 17 marta 1991 goda' [Report of the Central Commission for the Referendum of the USSR on the Results of the Referendum of the USSR, Held on 17 March 1991], *Pravda*, 27 March 1991.

system.[50] Most Russians recognised that their country had lost its status as a great power. In 1994, an opinion poll showed that only a quarter of respondents believed that Russia was a great power.[51] Yet they never ceased to believe that Russia should have preserved its status. According to Levada Center polls, the share of people who agreed with the statement that 'Russia should preserve its status as a great power' increased from 72% in 1992 to 78% in 1999.[52]

By the end of the 1990s, Russians were ready to exchange their newly acquired freedoms and rights (in which they had little trust anyway) for a strong political leadership that would bring order and stability. They also had become disillusioned with the Western way of life. In 1992, only 13% of respondents agreed with the statement 'Russia is a great nation that has a special purpose in human history' and a large majority (80%) stated that 'Russia is a nation like any other'. By 1999, results were quite different: 57% argued that Russia was a great nation with a special purpose and only 36% saw Russia as a nation among equals.[53] In May 2000, to the question, 'To what extent do you believe that the "Western" (western European, American) type of social order is suitable for Russia?', 68% (entirely or partially) stated that it did not suit Russian conditions.[54] While today many experts accuse Putin of steering Russia off the path toward democratic transition, it seems that by the time of his arrival in the Kremlin, the Russian people were already keen to make this turn.

50 Levada Center, *Russian Public Opinion 2013-2015*, p. 36.
51 Svetlana Migdisova and Yelena Petrenko, 'Kogda govoryat o "velikoy derzhave", tri chetverti vspominayut o Sovetskom Soyuze, i tol'ko chetvert' – o segodnyashney Rossii' [When They Talk about a "Great Power", Three Quarters Think about the Soviet Union, and Only a Quarter - about Today's Russia], *Fond 'Obshchestvennoye mneniye'* ['Public Opinion' Foundation], 29 April 1994, (accessed 20 July 2021).
52 Levada Center, *Obshchestvennoye mneniye – Yezhegodnik 2020* [Public Opinion – Yearbook 2020] (Moscow, 2015), p. 28.
53 Levada Center, 'Dve treti rossiyan ustydilis' razvala SSSR i "vechnoy" bednosti v strane', [Two-thirds of Russians Were Ashamed of the Collapse of the USSR and the "Eternal" Poverty in the Country], 17 January 2019, (accessed 20 July 2021).
54 Levada Center, 'Zapadnyy put' obshchestvennogo ustroystva – dlya Rossii?' [The Western Way of Social Order – For Russia?], 22 June 2011, (accessed 20 July 2021).

PHASE I (1999-2012): 'PUTIN THE SAVIOUR' – THE 1990s AS AN ANTITHESIS

In the late 1990s, a little-known Vladimir Putin was neither the first, nor the obvious choice for the presidency. Gleb Pavlovsky, a political advisor and strategist working for the Kremlin in the late 1990s and 2000s, recalled:

> Putin didn't seem like the best choice for the leading role. Even before, he had been made fun of at meetings. He was awkward and secretive, being either silent, or offering completely absurd ideas. His first appearance in the Duma was a semi-failure, and yet the Duma approved him as a convenient enemy.[55]

However, Putin's appointment as Russia's Prime Minister in August 1999 signalled that he headed Yeltsin's short-list of potential successors. And Pavlovsky was tasked with working on his image as 'a prudent bloke against the background of a departing old man':

> Against the backdrop of a weak Yeltsin, the strong style of the young prime minister stands out more clearly. By the end of the campaign, from a protege of the 'family', the candidate turns into a banner of revenge for all socially disadvantaged in Russia. Defender of the elderly pensioners, the leader of the impoverished army, the idol of educated people and housewives, and the leader of the growing majority. And in the end, with the early resignation of Yeltsin, Putin is already an acting president, that is, the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Armed Forces until the day of the presidential election.[56]

55 Gleb Pavlovsky in 'Preyemnik. Inaya vlast' Otryvok iz knigi razgovorov Gleba Pavlovskogo i Ivana Krasteva "Eksperimental'naya Rodina" o prikhode Putina k vlasti' [Successor. Other power. An excerpt from the book of conversations between Gleb Pavlovsky and Ivan Krastev 'Experimental Homeland' about Putin's coming to power], *Colta.Ru*, 4 July 2018, (accessed 20 July 2021).
56 Ibid.

While the political strategist Pavlovsky was driven by 'electoral potentials' to find a way 'to patch together Putin's coalition and build it up to a majority',[57] for Putin it was about more than winning an election campaign. His actions, as Sharafutdinova accurately described, were built on 'astute and, potentially, sincere understanding of the state of symbolic loss and normative breakdown that Russian citizens experienced after the collapse of the Soviet Union'.[58]

Either intuitively, or due to his personal experience as a KGB officer,[59] or by studying Russian history, Putin understood the power of the Russian people:

> Russia is essentially invincible when facing a foreign adversary. But the same people who successfully defended their country against Napoleon and Hitler, and eventually defeated and destroyed them, brought down their own country twice within a single century: in 1917 and again in 1991.[60]

'He carefully analysed his predecessors, Nicholas II, the last tsar, and Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader', argues Dmitry Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center and well-known critic of the Kremlin. Putin, in the words of Trenin, came to believe that the main recipe for power in Russia 'is to stay in close touch with the bulk of the people'.[61] By the end of the 1990s 'the bulk of the people' in Russia became disillusioned with Western-style democracy, was desperate to be rid of old and weak Yeltsin, and willing to sacrifice its rights in return for a 'strong hand' leadership to bring sorely missed order and stability.

57 Ibid.
58 Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, p. 100.
59 Michel Eltchaninoff, *Inside the Mind of Vladimir Putin* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2018).
60 Dmitri Trenin, 'Putin's Biggest Challenge Is Public Support', *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 15 January 2015, (accessed 20 July 2021).
61 Ibid.

It is important to remember that Post-Soviet nostalgia did not mean the Russian public sought to re-establish the Soviet Union. In 1999, according to Levada Center opinion polls, only 15% wanted to see a future Russia as 'a social state like the USSR'.[62] The majority of Russians perceived the economic hardship, general uncertainty on personal and state levels, criminality, and political corruption of the 1990s as an antithesis to the predictability, stability, and order of the Soviet Union. It was these characteristics that Russians were nostalgic about. And Putin understood it all too well. In a major Q&A television broadcast during his 2000 election campaign he said: 'Anyone who does not miss the Soviet Union has no heart. And anyone who wants it back has no brain'.[63] A few years later, during his 2005 Address to the Federal Assembly, he expressed this sentiment even more candidly: 'First and foremost, it is worth acknowledging that the demise of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century'.[64]

In constructing narratives to justify his arrival in the Kremlin, Putin tried to integrate both nostalgia for a strong leader 'with a common touch' and resentment against weak and untrustworthy leadership of the 1990s. In constructing a shared understanding of Russia's past, present, and future, he did not seek a return to the Soviet system. After all, this was not what the majority of Russia's public wanted. And there was already a party (Russia's Communist Party, re-established in 1993) that promoted exactly that. Instead, Putin sought to justify his arrival in the Kremlin as a promising contrast to the illegitimate and corrupt Yeltsin. In other words, the collective trauma of the 1990s was explicitly built into the strategic narratives intended to justify Putin's regime, since his political identity was constructed as an antithesis to the politics of the 1990s.[65]

62 Levada Center, *Russian Public Opinion 2013-2015*, p. 36.
63 Vladimir Putin in Presidential Executive Office of Russia, 'Ispolnyayushchiy obyazannosti Prezidenta, Predsedatel' Pravitel'stva Vladimir Putin provol "Pryamuyu liniyu" s chitatelyami gazety "Komsomol'skaya Pravda"' [Acting President, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin held a "Direct Line" with the readers of the newspaper "Komsomolskaya Pravda"], 9 February 2000, (accessed 1 July 2021).
64 Vladimir Putin in Presidential Executive Office of Russia, 'Poslaniye Federal'nomu Sobraniyu Rossiyskoy Federatsii' [Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation], 25 April 2005, (accessed 20 July 2021).
65 Olga Malinova, 'Obosnovaniye politiki 2000-kh godov v diskurse V.V. Putina i formirovaniye mifa o "likhikh devyanostykh"' [The Policy Rationale during the 2000s in the Discourse of Vladimir Putin and the Formation of the Myth about the "Wild Nineties"], *Political Science (RU)* Number 3 (2018): 45-69.

As Pavlovsky explains:

> Candidate Putin acted against the backdrop of Yeltsin. […] From a deadly burden for the Kremlin's candidate, Yeltsin turned into an engine of the dramatic plot: as the old man was dissolving, his place was slowly replaced by the young – like an installation of new software. [...] The tenets of Putin's 1999 campaign – decisiveness, youth and sportiness – were based on the [election campaign] staff's narratives "Putin personally leads the country", "Putin is young and strong", and so on. Today they are a part of the dogma of power, but then, they were a novelty.[66]

These narratives, born in antithesis to Yeltsin, have become an integral part of the Kremlin's domestic SC aimed at justifying Putin's leadership. From his first election campaign in 2000 until today, the Kremlin has used any occasion, staged or otherwise, to showcase Putin's health and active lifestyle, to emphasise his personal involvement and decisiveness, and to accentuate his ability to be 'in-touch' with the Russian people.

Probably the easiest narrative to build was around Putin's health, as Daniel Treisman observed: 'Yeltsin – ailing, gaffe-prone, at times visibly inebriated – could hardly have seemed more different from the disciplined, energetic, sober Putin, a former spy and judo black belt.'[67] The idea of a healthy and sporty Putin started with a publicity stunt in the form of the 1999 book *Learning Judo with Vladimir Putin*[68], co-authored by Putin. But soon it was developed into a full-scale strategic narrative. Since 1999, Putin has not only repeatedly demonstrated his judo skills, but has also learnt to play hockey, taken part in different extreme sports, and explored distant parts of Russia on fishing trips during highly publicised vacations. Such public demonstrations of Putin's health should not be surprising.

66 Pavlovsky in 'Preyemnik. Inaya vlast'.' [Successor. Other power.].
67 Daniel Treisman, 'Presidential Popularity in a Hybrid Regime: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin', *American Journal of Political Science* Volume 55, Nº 3 (2011): 593.
68 Vladimir Putin, Vasiliy Shestakov and Aleksey Levitskiy, *Uchimsya dzyudo s Vladimirom Putinym* [Learning Judo with Vladimir Putin] (Moscow: OLMA-PPESS, 1999).

According to Levada Center polls, 85% of Russians consider the 'good physical condition of the president' to be 'important for the country'.[69] The importance placed on Putin's health was best explained by the deputy director of the Levada Center, Aleksey Grazhdankin, in 2012: 'young and energetic Putin replaced incapable Yeltsin and people looked at him, hoping that he, and not an undefined entourage, will rule the country'.[70]

Grazhdankin's observation helps to understand why during his fourth presidency, a more senior Putin still performs carefully staged and nationally broadcast judo exercises.[71] It also connects to the second important strategic narrative evoked to justify Putin's regime: a leader with a 'strong hand' who personally leads the country. From the beginning, Putin had used any opportunity to showcase decisiveness and personal involvement. In 1999, directly after his appointment as Prime Minister, Putin paid tribute to the fallen soldiers during a briefing with Russian generals in Chechnya. The beginning of his remarks followed the usual custom:

> I would like, according to Russian tradition, […] to raise this glass and drink it for the memory of those who have fallen […] We have no right to allow ourselves any moment of weakness, because if we will, then those, who have fallen, died for no reason.

But they took an unexpected turn:

> This is why, I suggest, to put this glass away today. We definitely will drink for them [fallen soldiers], but we will drink later, when the immediate goals of principal character will be solved. This is why, I suggest having a bite and start working.[72]

69 Levada Center, 'Grazhdane Rossii zhelayut sebe zdorovogo Vladimira Putina: Pyataya chast' respondentov "Levada-tsentra" zametila snizheniye aktivnosti prezidenta' [Russian citizens Wish for Healthy Vladimir Putin: A Fifth of the Levada Center Respondents Noticed a Decrease in the President's Activity], 24 December 2012, (accessed 20 July 2021).
70 Ibid.
71 'Putin potrenirovalsya s dzyudoistami v Sochi' [Putin Trained with Judokas in Sochi], *Izvestiya*, 15 February 2019, (accessed 20 July 2021).
72 Vladimir Putin in Vladimir Solovyev, *President* (Moscow: Masterskaya Movie Company, 2015).

The act of firmly placing the glass back on the table symbolised to Russians the decisiveness and power of a leader over his followers. During the 2000 election campaign, Pavlovsky recalled:

> Every single day, Putin summoned those in charge and gave orders in front of the TV camera, glaring at the minister sitting opposite him. The ministers portrayed awe before the "boss", something that at this time was pretty staged.[73]

As time passed, however, and Putin solidified his power, the 'awe before the boss' became more and more genuine. One of the most memorable moments occurred at the beginning of the 2008 Economic Crisis, when, during a visit to RUSAL (the world's second largest aluminium company), he forced Oleg Deripaska (a Russian oligarch and the president of the company) to sign a contract in front of running cameras, while grilling the trembling with fear company's managers: 'I think that you have made thousands of people hostage to your ambitions, unprofessionalism, and maybe just trivial greed … this is absolutely unacceptable.'[74]

Moreover, these narratives of power and personal leadership were not only crafted as an antithesis to Yeltsin's leadership during the 1990s. Their demonstration to the public was in and of itself a reversal of Yeltsin's practices. When Yeltsin was approached by Egor Gaidar, his first prime minister, to establish 'a service that would explain that what you do is right and necessary for Russia', he replied, 'Egor Timurovich, you want to recreate the propaganda section of the CPSU Central Committee? While I am the president, I will not allow that to happen'.[75] Putin, however, quickly realised the importance of filling this communication vacuum between the government and people.

73 Pavlovsky in 'Preyemnik. Inaya vlast'.' [Successor. Other power.].
74 Solovyev, *President*.
75 'Yegor Gaydar o Borise Yel'tsine. Beseda s Ol'goy Romanovoy (2007)' [Yegor Gaidar about Boris Yeltsin. Conversation with Olga Romanova (2007)], *LiveJournal*, 24 July 2007, (video accessed 20 July 2021).

In a 'confidential conversation'[76] with Vitaly Mansky, a Russian filmmaker who produced a series of documentaries in 2001 about Vladimir Putin, Boris Yeltsin, and Mikhail Gorbachev,[77] Putin remarked, 'I must act as I see fit … [however] I believe that I am obliged to explain the motives of my behaviour to absolutely everyone'.[78]

In addition to carefully staged appearances intended to feed the narratives described above, Putin initiated 'Direct Line with Vladimir Putin' – an annual live broadcast and Q&A that has run continuously since 2001 (even during his time as prime minister from 2008 to 2012). Through a series of preselected questions, these carefully staged events allow Putin to showcase his power and directly address the people: from 'explaining' the developments of the past year and newly adopted policies, to 'taking personal responsibility' by addressing grievances and cases of officials' wrongdoings raised by the public.

Sharafutdinova is right to assert that Putin's relationship with the media is often reminiscent of the Soviet propaganda machine.[79] Since Russia's leadership of the 1990s clearly distanced itself from the Soviet leadership style, and Putin sought to construct his leadership in opposition to Yeltsin, it should not be surprising that the result resembles the Soviet original. On the other hand, it is important to remember that a re-creation of the Soviet Union (or its practices) was never Putin's goal. In another 'confidential conversation' with Mansky in 2000, Putin claimed that 'bringing anything back is simply impossible [...] if we try to turn back, we will definitely destroy everything completely'.[80] Instead, feeling that 'the absolute majority [of the Russian public] has a certain nostalgia',[81] Putin shaped his domestic SC as an explicit antithesis to the realities of

76 As Putin was aware of the camera, the conversation was hardly confidential. However, it was a private conversation defined as 'doveritel'nyy razgovor', where Putin appears genuine and relaxed. This conversation was omitted for the original 2001 documentary *Putin.Visokosnyy god 2001* [Putin. Leap Year 2001], and was released only in Mansky's 2018 documentary *Svideteli Putina* [Putin's Witnesses].
77 Vitaly Mansky, *Putin.Visokosnyy god 2001* [Putin. Leap Year 2001], (Moscow: Vertov Studio, 2001); *Yel'tsin. Drugaya zhizn'* [Yeltsin. Another Life], 2 movies, (Moscow: Vertov Studio, 2001); *Gorbachev. Posle imperii* [Gorbachev, After the Empire], 2 movies, (Moscow: Vertov Studio, 2001).
78 Vitaly Mansky, *Svideteli Putina* [Putin's Witnesses], (Latvia, Switzerland, Czech Republic, 2018).
79 Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, pp. 22-23.
80 Mansky, *Svideteli Putina* [Putin's Witnesses].
81 Ibid.

the 1990s, as this narrative resonated best with the values and sentiments of the Russian public in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

It is important to remember that the success of Putin's domestic SC was not only an outcome of well-structured strategic narratives. It was also (and probably even more so) a result of Russia's economic recovery during the 2000s. The export of fossil fuels was exceptionally lucrative during the decade. Building on rising oil and gas revenues, Russian economic growth in the early 2000s was not only substantial, it rapidly reached unprecedented heights.[82] This success had an immediate positive influence on domestic public opinion. Putin was considered a 'saviour of the nation', 'restorer of order', and 'distributor of wealth'.[83]

Meanwhile, as the economic situation improved, the power of framing Putin's regime in opposition to Yeltsin's leadership began to fade. In August 1995, Levada Center opinion polls showed that, when asked to assess the political situation in Russia (on the scale: peaceful-calm-tense-critically explosive), 52% of the public described it as 'tense' and 34% as 'critically explosive'. Only 5% described it as 'calm' and less than 1% as 'peaceful'. However, by the end of the decade, in August 2010, the situation was different—52% described the situation in Russia as 'calm', 4% as 'peaceful', 31% as 'tense' and only 4% as 'critically explosive'.[84] The narrative of 'Putin the Saviour' was rooted in the idea of making Putin's Russia an antithesis of Yeltsin's Russia. The closer this goal came to fulfilment, the less relevant became the narrative, forcing the Kremlin to recalibrate the role and place of the 1990s in its domestic SC.

82 Åslund Anders, 'An Assessment of Putin's Economic Policy', *CESifo Forum* Volume 9, Nº 2 (2008): 16-21,
83 Kirill Rogov, 'Sverkhbol'shinstvo dlya sverkhprezidenstva' [Supermajority for Superpresidency], *Pro et Contra* Volume 17, Nº 3-4 (2013): 107.
84 Levada Center, 'Rossiyane o svoyem nastroyenii i material'nom polozhenii, ekonomicheskoy i politicheskoy obstanovke v strane, krizise' [Russians Speak about Their Mood and Financial Situation, the Economic and Political Situation in the Country, the Crisis], 23 May 2012, (accessed 20 July 2021).

PHASE II (2012-PRESENT): 'IRREPLACEABLE PUTIN' – THE 1990s AS A THREAT

'If there is Putin – there is Russia; if there is no Putin – there is no Russia' was the 'key thesis' advocating the position of Putin in Russia, as articulated by the Kremlin's deputy chief of staff Vyacheslav Volodin at the 11th Valdai Club conference in 2014.[85] Indeed, since the annexation of Crimea, the popularity of Putin has skyrocketed, and many Russians have been struggling to imagine Russia without Putin. In the summer of 2017, Levada Center public opinion polls showed that 67% of the public wanted Putin to remain Russia's president beyond 2024. Although this number has been falling since then (54% in 2019 and 48% in 2021), it still represents the largest group of the Russian public. In 2019, 38% opposed the idea of Putin staying beyond 2024 and 8% were undecided. In 2021, 41% were against him staying and 11% were undecided.[86] The strategic narrative of the irreplaceable Putin, however, was neither Volodin's idea, nor introduced by him. As Sharafutdinova rightly argues, it has been consistently constructed in a top-down manner by 'the Kremlin, the Orthodox Church and the cultural elites' since the latter part of the 2000s.[87]

The collective trauma of the 'wild nineties' was used in different ways to construct this narrative. Since it was built as a natural continuation of the initial narrative of Putin-not-Yeltsin, the notion of a 'decade without patriotism'[88] continued to play an explicit role. In his 2008 book *Putin: A Guide for Those Who Are Not Indifferent*, Vladimir Solovyev, a Russian television host, who had risen to the position of one of the Kremlin's principal media mouthpieces by the mid 2010s, wrote:

> Putin, in contrast to Yeltsin, behaves as a true stateman. […] In a certain sense, Putin is Yeltsin's antagonist.

85 'Bez Putina ne budet Rossii – takoye mneniye vyskazal pervyy zamglavy administratsii prezidenta Vyacheslav Volodin' [There Will Be no Russia without Putin - This Opinion Was Expressed by the First Deputy Head of The Presidential Administration Vyacheslav Volodin], *Radio Echo Moskvy*, 23 October 2014, (accessed 20 July 2021).
86 Levada Center, 'Otnosheniye k novomu sroku Vladimira Putina' [Attitudes towards the New Term of Vladimir Putin], 26 February 2012, (accessed 20 July 2021).
87 Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, p. 31.
88 Pearce, *The Use of History in Putin's Russia*, p. xi.

> Putin is probably the most [Russian] national of all presidents we have ever had. Not in the sense that he is of Russian nationality, but in a sense that his feeling of being a citizen of this country and being responsible for graves of its ancestors. He cannot imagine himself apart from Russia.[89]

Likewise, Russian historian Evgeny Anisimov's 2009 book *The History of Russia from Rurik to Putin* (2009) skilfully constructs the strategic narrative of the irreplaceable Putin. The book's thesis not only perfectly connects the past, present, and future of Russia, but also elevates Putin's leadership to that of the great Russian dynasties of the past—the Rurikids and Romanovs.[90] Anisimov's original intention was perhaps nothing more than a catchy title. After all, the book is critical of Putin's achievements during his first two terms. Yet, the potential of his framework for SC was quickly realised by the Russian Orthodox Church, which has been a steadfast supporter of Putin's regime.[91]

Since 1995, the Russian Orthodox Church has organised exhibitions titled 'Orthodox Russia' across cities in Russia. Initially, the main target audience for the exhibitions was the Orthodox community. The focus shifted in the early 2010s with the arrival of Archimandrite Tikhon as the Responsible Secretary of the Patriarch's Council for Culture at the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church. At that time, he was one of the most influential church ministers, labelled by opposition media as Putin's personal confessor.[92] Under his supervision, an entire new series of exhibitions was developed based on the same multimedia format: virtual 3D models, modern displays, touch screens, and specially

89 Vladimir Solovyev, *Putin: putevoditel' dlya neravnodushnykh* [Putin: A Guide for Those Who Are Not Indifferent] (Moscow: Eskimo, 2008), p. 35.
90 Evgeny Anisimov, *Istoriya Rossii ot Ryurika do Putina: Lyudi, Sobytiya, Daty* [The History of Russia from Rurik to Putin: People, Events, Dates] (Saint Petersburg: Piter, 2009).
91 Bozena Iwanowska, 'The Russian Orthodox Church as a Source of the Legitimacy of Putin's Presidential Power', in *Aktual'nyye problemy sovremennykh politiko-psikhologicheskikh fenomenov: teoretiko-metodologicheskiye i prikladnyye aspekty: materialy mezhdunarodnoy nauchno-prakticheskoy konferentsii 10–11 marta 2012 goda* [Actual Problems of Modern Political and Psychological Phenomena: Theoretical, Methodological and Applied Aspects: Proceedings of the International Scientific and Practical Conference on 10-11 March 2012], (Penza, Yerevan, Kolin: Scientific Publishing Centre 'Sociosphere', 2012).
92 Vlad Pushkarev and Sergey Yerzhenkov, 'Kto on — «dukhovnik Putina», chto yego na samom dele svyazyvayet s prezidentom, i kak s yego podachi moglo nachat'sya delo Serebrennikova' [Who Is He – "Putin's confessor", What Actually Connects Him to the President, and How He Could Initiate the Serebrennikov Case], *Dozhd*, 15 November 2017, (accessed 20 July 2021).

commissioned short documentaries. In 2015 the main exhibition 'Russia – My History' [Rossiya – Moya Historiya] opened at the All-Russian Exhibition Centre in Moscow. It consisted of three main expositions: 'Rurikids 862-1598'; 'Romanovs 1630-1917'; and '20th Century'.[93] Since the exhibition did not showcase any artefacts and was based on material that could be easily reproduced, by 2021 identical exhibitions had opened in 24 regional centres across Russia.[94] From the outset, the exhibition had been widely labelled by the community of Russian historians 'not as an historical-educational, but as an agitation-propaganda project'[95] to promote an interpretation of history favourable to the Kremlin. At the entrance, visitors are greeted by a tall stand titled 'History of Russia from Rurik to Putin', listing all the major events in Russian history. Another case in point is the space and attention given to telling Russia's post-Soviet history. The trauma of the 1990s is emphasised, and the narrative highlights the irreplaceable contribution of Putin to Russia's recovery. As Professor of History at the Ural Federal University, Aleksey Mosin, concluded:

> The last halls of the exhibition, dedicated to the post-Soviet period, cannot be substantially analysed, since the materials presented in them mainly consist of well-known slogans and clichés, reflecting a completely unequivocal interpretation of trends in social development: from the "collapse of the USSR" and the "wild nineties" to stability under the conditions of sovereign democracy and rallying the nation under the slogan "We Trust Putin!".[96]

93 Sergey Khazov-Kassia, "'Rossiya – moya istoriya'. Diletanty obratilis' k uchenym, pobedila ideologiya' ["Russia – My History". Amateurs Turned to Scientists, Ideology Won], *Radio Svoboda*, 7 October 2019, (accessed 20 July 2021).
94 Official website of the project, (accessed 20 July 2021).
95 Aleksey Mosin, "'Moya Istoriya" ili "Moya Mifologiya"?' ["My History" or "My Mythology"?], *Istoricheskaya Ekspertiza* Volume 1 N° 14 (2018): 82. See also Adrian Selin, 'O vystavkakh v istoricheskom parke "rossiya — moya istoriya" v Sankt-Peterburge' [On the Expositions at the Historical Park "Russia – My History" in Saint Petersburg], *Istoricheskaya Ekspertiza* Volume 1 N° 14 (2018): 59-77; Andrey Suslov, 'Istoricheskii park "rossiya — moya istoriya" v Permi' [The Historical Park "Russia – My History" in Perm], *Istoricheskaya Ekspertiza* Volume 1 N°14 (2018): 78-81.
96 Mosin, "'Moya Istoriya" ili "Moya Mifologiya"?' ["My History" or "My Mythology"?], p. 90.

This leads to another and probably the most important way the 1990s were used to construct the narrative of the irreplaceable Putin. The memory of the collective trauma of the 1990s became an implicit threat to justify Putin's continuous presidency. Since the trauma of the 1990s was firmly linked to the idea of 'Putin the Saviour', Putin and his supporters constructed the following narrative: only Putin could keep Russia on its 'right' course, and without him the 'times of trouble' would soon return.

From the late 2000s, several documentaries made by Putin supporters reinforced his image as a saviour from the 'disastrous' 1990s. The most prominent are Nikita Mikhalkov's documentary *55* (celebrating Putin's fifty-fifth birthday in 2007),[97] Vladimir Solovyev's *President* (released in 2015, a year after the annexation of Crimea),[98] and Andrei Kondrashev's documentary *Putin* (released in 2018, in advance of the presidential elections).[99] All three directors build on the Putin leadership's narratives in their documentaries. They repeatedly acknowledged not only the absence of an alternative to Putin, but also that, due to his experience 'of saving Russia from the 1990s', he should remain in the Kremlin. Just before the release of his documentary in 2007, Mikhalkov co-authored an open letter to Putin, in which he urged him, 'on behalf of all representatives of creative professions in Russia', to stay on for a third consecutive term, as 'thanks to your efforts, social stability and progress have been achieved, [and] the authority of our Motherland has increased enormously across the world'.[100]

97 Nikita Mikhalkov, *55* (Moscow: Russiya-1, 2007).
98 Solovyev, *President*.
99 Andrei Kondrashev, *Putin* (Moscow: Russiya-1, 2018).
100 Zurab Tsereteli, Tahir Salahov, Albert Charkin and Nikita Mikhalkov, 'Pis'mo prezidentu Rossiyskoy Federatsii V.V. Putinu' [Letter to the President of the Russian Federation V. V. Putin], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 16 November 2007, (accessed 20 July 2021).

In March 2020, in answer to a question about a possible Putin presidency after 2024, Mikhalkov unsurprisingly continued in the same vein:

> Tell me who can replace him today? I don't see anyone yet. In any case, I do not see a more experienced person who went through not only political, but also economic experience […] and who knows the country. We need to be driven by the interests of the state, and not just by the rules. I understand that there is a letter of the law, there is a Constitution. I understand everything, but if what may come is worse than it is now, I would not want it.[101]

Andrey Kondrashev, another staunch supporter of Putin, who was appointed as press secretary to Putin's election campaign in 2018 after the release of his documentary, replied to a question on Putin's suitability for the presidency:

> The main slogan of the campaign is "Strong President–Strong Russia". The realities of nowadays require us to move forward, despite all the pressure and restrictions that other countries impose on us. A good base has been created for this. We need very strong-willed decisions, we need a person who can and knows how to do it. It does not seem to me that what we need now is a period of experiments. We need a breakthrough and strong-willed decisions that only Putin can make.[102]

In contrast to Mikhalkov and Kondrashev who celebrated Putin as Russia's 'saviour', Soloviev warned that Russia might return to the '1990s' without Putin's leadership. Referring to rising opposition forces in an episode of his radio show aired a few months before the presidential elections in 2012, he declared:

101 'Nikita Mikhalkov – o Putine, "Metamorfozakh" i koronaviruse' [Nikita Mikhalkov – About Putin, "Metamorphoses" and Coronavirus], *OTV: Sverdlovskoye Oblastnoye Televideniye*, 5 March 2020, (accessed 20 July 2021).
102 'Andrey Kondrashov: Rossii nuzhen ryvok, obespechit' kotoryy mozhet tol'ko Putin' [Andrey Kondrashev: Russia Needs a Breakthrough that only Putin Can Deliver], *Federal'noye Agentstvo Novostey*,14 March 2018, (accessed 20 July 2021).

> The question is simple enough: do you want to return the 1990s? Perhaps you have a hard time remembering them. Let me remind you. […] The 1990s is when bandits felt themselves to be in absolute control […] The 1990s is when Russia's legitimately elected parliament was shot down at the order of the president […] The 1990s is when the president of Russia, Boris Nikolaevich Yeltsin, declared a civil war, sent in troops and bombed the Russian city of Grozny […] Those were the jolly times, if someone does not remember them. So, does anyone want to return to the 1990s? The 1990s, when the state practically did not exist and the word "corruption" did not make sense because there was nothing else but corruption.[103]

Putin himself has frequently used the trauma of the 1990s to justify his policies or threaten that an alternative to his regime would bring back crisis. In 2010 on his *Direct Line* show, he chose to answer a provocative question about the leaders of non-systemic opposition: 'What do Nemtsov, Ryzhkov, Milov and others really want?':

> Money and power, what else do they want?! In their time in the 1990s they had their mess. Together with Berezovsky and others, who are currently in prison and about whom we talked earlier today, they looted many billions. Driven from the manger, running out of money, they want to come back and fill their pockets. However, I think that if we allow them to do this, this time they will not restrict themselves to some billions, they will sell out Russia.[104]

On the same show nine years later, he decided to answer another provocative question ('so that there's no impression that we avoid this type of questions') about the legitimacy of his government.

103 Vladimir Soloviev quoted in Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, pp. 117-118.
104 Vladimir Putin in ' "Razgovor s Vladimirom Putinym. Prodolzheniye". Polnyy tekst programmy' ["Conversation with Vladimir Putin. Continuation". Full Text of the Program], *Vesti*, 16 December 2010, (accessed 20 July 2021).

Responding to, 'Where is this gang of patriots from United Russia taking us?', Putin commented:

> In my opinion, when people take responsibility, including for making decisions that are not very popular but extremely necessary for the country, this means that they are mature people who see their goal, the goal of their life, the goal of their political career – to strengthen the country and improve people's lives in the long run.
>
> I will not call people who were at the helm in the 1990s a gang, but I want to note that during that time, our social sphere, industry, and defence industry completely collapsed—we lost the defence industry, we practically ruined the Armed Forces, brought the country to civil war and bloodshed in the Caucasus, and put the country on the brink of loss of sovereignty and collapse, we must say this directly.[105]

Unsurprisingly, the narrative of 'Irreplaceable Putin' became especially relevant during the Kremlin's campaign for the 2020 Russian Constitutional Referendum, intended to pave the way for Putin to stay in power beyond 2024. The traumatic period of the 1990s played an important role in justifying constitutional change. These changes were framed not as the introduction of something new, but as a means to prevent Russia from returning to the 1990s. In a televised meeting with the leaders of the main factions in the Russian State Duma, Putin eloquently demonstrated how the 1990s have been used as a threat to justify his irreplaceability:

> It is not an accident that the Constitution is called the Basic Law, which should consolidate the entire society. I think that we will succeed to put to the national vote a draft of amendments to the Basic Law that will do exactly that.

105 Vladimir Putin in Presidential Executive Office of Russia, 'Pryamaya liniya s Vladimirom Putinym' [Direct Line with Vladimir Putin], 20 June 2019, (accessed 20 July 2021).

> Things that unite all of us, even politically, can also be found. For example, I have never heard from you that the country should return to the 1990s. Despite all the positives associated with the democratisation of the country, returning to the years of difficult trials for citizens – probably no one wants this for sure.
>
> But it is not enough for us to simply draw a line under a certain stage in the development of our country. We need guarantees of the impossibility of a rollback in the direction in which we do not want to return, the inadmissibility of new attempts to swing the country – no one wants that either. Many of you have witnessed those difficult events. I am sure that nothing of that kind should be repeated in our history, or rather, in our future.[106]

CONCLUSION

It is important to note that the collective trauma of the 1990s was not the only cornerstone used by the Kremlin to construct its SC. During the last two decades, other themes and ideas, words and deeds, have been used by the Kremlin to construct a shared understanding of the past, present, and future. For example, according to Vera Michlin-Shapir, 'national calendars represent a collectively imagined past, projected future, and how societies perceive their present social essence'. She describes the Kremlin's construct of Russia's new 'unified national religious-militarized calendar' as 'a political technology that was meant to recreate a sense of stability in highly volatile late modern circumstances'.[107] Another example is the strategic narrative of subversive 'Information War' (or Hybrid War– '*gibridnaya voyna*') allegedly conducted by the West against Russia. Since 2012, this has been another important part of the Kremlin's domestic SC, helping 'the Russian political leadership to close ranks

106 Vladimir Putin in Presidential Executive Office of Russia, 'Vstrecha s rukovoditelyami fraktsiy Gosudarstvennoy Dumy' [Meeting with the Leaders of the State Duma Fractions], 6 March 2020, (accessed 20 July 2021).
107 Vera Michlin-Shapir, *Fluid Russia: Between the Global and the National in The Post-Soviet Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), pp. 127, 174-175.

against a new/old enemy, the West, mobilising Russian public opinion and the support of other Russian major political actors'.[108]

Moreover, as many researchers point out, Putin's regime is *de facto* a product of the 1990s—'the country was looking for a group saviour, and Vladimir Putin worked to fit this role'.[109] Therefore, it should not be surprising that the collective trauma experienced by the majority of Russians during that decade, served not only as a foundation for constructing the main strategic narratives of 'Putin the Saviour' or 'Irreplaceable Putin', but also fed other intermediate sub-narratives such as 'Putin is One of Us', 'Putin is Doing It for Us', 'Putin is Crafting a Sense of Us', and 'Putin is Making Us Matter'.[110]

By adopting the conceptual prism of SC, the analysis presented in this article presents certain challenges to the arguments suggested by previous research. One argument frequently put forward is that since his rise to power in 2000, Putin, helped by state-controlled media, has been manipulating the memory of the Soviet Union and the trauma of the 1990s to justify his regime.[111] Indeed, the 1990s were instrumental for the construction of the Kremlin's SC. But accusing Putin of forcefully reinterpreting history to benefit his regime misunderstands the way SC and strategic narratives work. First, it is important to remember that neither post-Soviet nostalgia nor the collective trauma of the 1990s was invented by Putin. Russian public perception of these two issues was formed long before Putin's accession to power. Secondly, Putin doubtlessly instrumentalised collective trauma to structure his strategic narratives. However, collective trauma is too powerful a tool to be excluded from SC. Contemporary history is full of instances of using collective trauma in SC. The Holocaust constitutes an integral part of

108 Ofer Fridman, *Russian 'Hybrid Warfare': Resurgence and Politicisation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 151.
109 Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, p. 101. See also Malinova, 'Obosnovaniye politiki 2000-kh godov v diskurse V.V. Putina i formirovaniye mifa o "likhikh devyanostykh"' [The Policy Rationale during the 2000s in the Discourse of Vladimir Putin and the Formation of the Myth about the "Wild Nineties"]; Mansky, *Svideteli Putina* [Putin's Witnesses].
110 Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, pp. 36-49.
111 See Sharafutdinova, *The Red* Mirror; Vázquez-Liñán, 'Historical Memory and Political Propaganda in the Russian Federation'; Geifman and Teper, 'Russia's New National Identity under Putin's Regime'.

Israel's diplomacy,[112] and the collective trauma of 9/11 'helped facilitate the shift from grief to aggression pursued so successfully by the Bush administration in the aftermath of the attacks'.[113] In other words, if SC is about achieving objectives in a contested environment in the context of values and interests, Putin's use of trauma is a case of well-constructed SC. His objectives might not be to our taste, and we might disapprove of his methods. But if we assess SC based on how well narratives resonate with the majority of a targeted audience (the Russian public), then Putin's strategic communications should be deemed a success.

The Kremlin's representation of history in its SC is also frequently discussed in the literature. Emphasis on both positive nostalgia for the Soviet past and negative memory of the 1990s are seen to hamper constructive conversations about Russia's future.[114] As one Russian journalist put it:

> We "break our spears" and argue until we are blue in the face about the past, about Stalin and Yeltsin, about the 1930s and 1990s, as if there are no other problems in life; we have gone into the past, either been nostalgic about it or condemning it, because we do not see the future in today's Russia.[115]

The future of Russia is ultimately a black box, and if it looks anything like Russia's 20th century history, it will be full of surprises. The Kremlin's emphasis on history rather than on Russia's possible future, should be understood in the context of Russian culture and values. How Russians relate to their past and future was best described by Vasily Klyuchevsky, a leading Russian historian of the late 19th century.

112 Yair Gad and Sharona Odom-Weiss, 'Israeli Diplomacy: The Effects of Cultural Trauma', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* Nº 9 (2014): 1–23; Norman Finkelstein, *Beyond Chutzpah: On the Misuse of Anti-Semitism and the Abuse of History*, second edition (London: Verso, 2008).
113 Alexander Dunst, 'After Trauma: Time and Affect in American Culture Beyond 9/11', *Parallax*, Volume 18, Nº 2 (2012): 56-71.
114 Ilya Kalinin, 'Nostalgic Modernization: the Soviet Past as "Historical Horizon"', *Slavonica* Volume 17, Nº 2 (2011): 156-166; Sergey Medvedev, 'Travmaticheskiy opyt svobody: pochemu u nas tak nenavidyat 90-ye' [The Traumatic Experience of Freedom: Why We Hate the 1990s So Much], *Forbes*, 22 September 2015, (accessed 20 July 2021); Sharafutdinova, *The Red* Mirror, pp. 175-177.
115 Medvedev, 'Travmaticheskiy opyt svobody: pochemu u nas tak nenavidyat 90-ye' [The Traumatic Experience of Freedom: Why We Hate the 1990s So Much].

He characterised Russians as circumspect people with a tendency to dwell on the past rather than to focus on the future: 'everyday adversities and accidents taught him [the Russian] to emphasise the path already travelled, rather than to think of the further one, to gaze back more than to look ahead.'[116] Empirical research conducted by organisational and cultural psychologists at the beginning of the 21st century arrived at the same conclusion. It repeatedly demonstrated that Russian society scored extremely low on the scale of future orientation,[117] understood as 'the extent to which members of a society or an organisation believe that their current actions will influence their future, […] and look far into the future for assessing the effects of their current actions'.[118] Put simply, Russians feel ambivalent about the future, and place greater value on their past. Since 1999, when asked 'what is your first association when you think about your people?', respondents repeatedly chose 'our past, our history'.[119] It is no surprise, then, that the Kremlin's SC dwell on the past, either by glorifying it (nostalgia for the Soviet Union) or by vilifying it ('the wild nineties'). After all, this is what resonates most with the Russian people.

The Kremlin's SC presents an excellent example of strategic narratives crafted to resonate with the values held by the majority of the targeted audience (Russian domestic public). Instead of continuing the painful transformation of Russian traditional values initiated by the fall of the Soviet Union, Putin chose to deliver what the Russian people desired most: a 'solid, strong, and even ruthless' leadership,[120] order, even if at the expense of democratic rights,[121] and a focus on the past rather than visions for the future.[122]

116 Yurii Vasil'ev, 'Identichnost' russkogo naroda v istoricheskoy kontseptsii V. O. Klyuchevskogo' [The Identity of the Russian People in the Historical Concept of V.O. Klyuchevsky], *Vlast'*, N° 7 (2011): 39.
117 Neal Ashjanasy et al., 'Future Orinetation', in *Culture, Leadership, and Organisations: The GLOBE Study of 62 Societies*, edited by Robert J. House et al. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2004); Mikhail V. Grachev, Nikolai G. Rogovsky, and Boris V. Rakitski, 'Leadership and Culture in Russia: The Case of Transitional Economy', in *Culture and Leadership Across the World: The GLOBE Book of In-Depth Studies of 25 Societies*, edited by Jagdeep S. Chhokar, Felix C. Brodbeck and Robert J. House (New York: Routledge, 2008).
118 Ashjanasy et al., 'Future Orientation', p. 285.
119 Levada Center, 'Gordost' i identichnost' [Pride and Identity], 19 October 2020, (accessed 20 July 2021).
120 Shestopal, 'Obraz vlasti v Rossii: zhelaniya i real'nost' [The Image of Power in Russia], p. 91.
121 Levada Center, *Russian Public Opinion 2013-2015*, p. 54.
122 Levada Center, 'Gordost' i identichnost' [Pride and Identity].

Perhaps Putin has rightly been accused of turning Russia away from democratic transition. After all, he made the choice 'to stay in close touch with the bulk of the people,[123] who resisted this transition. Yet values are not set in stone. They can be shifted and changed. Maybe, instead of learning from Nicholas II and Gorbachev,[124] Putin should take lessons from Peter the Great and Joseph Stalin. These leaders sought to build a different Russia, despite the values held by 'the bulk of the people'. On the one hand, such transformations in Russian history have usually been associated with large-scale social distress and suffering, which ultimately overshadowed the leader implementing that change. On the other hand, with the 'old system' having been destroyed under Yeltsin, Putin was free to mould new values into the Russian social fabric without being made responsible for the consequences of the 'wild nineties'.

Looking at this conclusion through the prism of SC raises two important conceptual questions. First, to what extent can strategic communicators challenge a targeted audience's existing framework of values to achieve desired change without losing their legitimacy? The second question is how far they should be allowed to go in their attempts to shape and shift these frameworks according to their own beliefs. Addressing these thought-provoking questions is beyond the scope of this article and must be left for another time.

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123 Trenin, 'Putin's Biggest Challenge Is Public Support'.
124 Ibid.

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