

Putin's Chosen People: Theories of Russian Jewish Policy, 2000-2017

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Abstract

Despite support from and for right-wing elements and a deep-seated national history of anti-Semitism, the policies of the Russian government under Vladimir Putin have been markedly devoid of anti-Semitism. Appeals to nationalist, imperialist, and Eurasianist ideologies, pragmatic politics, and foreign policy concerns fail to explain these policies adequately. The biography of Putin himself, which includes influential, positive relationships with Jews, provides a better explanation. The personalized influence of the president on Jewish policy suggests a personalized, hyper-centralized regime generally.

Introduction

The Vladimir Putin government and regime⁷² could be reasonably expected to be officially and virulently anti-Semitic. Both the major regimes that preceded it, the Soviet Union and the Romanov dynasty, were officially anti-Semitic and actively persecuted Jews inside their territory, often singling them out above other minorities for special mistreatment. The Russian population is also widely considered anti-Semitic, thanks in part to the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and libels sometimes peddled by the Russian Orthodox Church. The KGB (along with its successor, the FSB), in which Putin achieved both his first real job and his rise to power, were/are notoriously anti-Semitic. Recent scholarship has uncovered the influence and prevalence of right-wing ideologies in Russia, including among some elements of the political elite, as well as Russian support for far-right politics in the West, especially in Europe. Each of these features independently would suggest an anti-Semitic government.

In reality, however, the Putin government is not officially anti-Semitic, and the unofficial anti-Semitism of some of its officials appears to be limited, and a strictly personal, as opposed to part of government policy. This paper will examine the historical precedent of official state anti-Semitism in Russia, contrast this with the Putin government's policies, and outline possible explanations for those policies using existing research. Several theories are presented and evaluated, including the influence of right-wing ideologies, the Kremlin's propagandistic use of political ideas, the sociological nature

72 For the purposes of this paper, the governments of Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev are inseparable from the regime centered around Vladimir Putin that has undoubtedly emerged in Russia. See Gel'man, *Authoritarian Russia*. The terms "government" and "regime" are used interchangeably.

of contemporary Russian popular anti-Semitism, and finally, the influence of Putin himself. While no explanation is perfect, the influence of the personality of the president on Russian Jewish policy appears decisive. This is likely the case for other policy domains as well.

Historical precedent

Based on the precedent established by nearly all the preceding leaders of Russia, it would be unsurprising if Putin were to support anti-Semitic ideas inside and outside Russia. His pre-Soviet predecessors, the Romanov tsars, embraced stridently anti-Semitic policies, including the Pale of Settlement, state-sanctioned or state-enabled pogroms, and exclusion of Jews from many kinds of business and government.⁷³ Russian officials capped the number of Jewish doctors in the army, limited movement within the Pale of Settlement, placed strict quotas on Jewish placement in universities, and restricted the activities of Jewish lawyers, among numerous other discriminatory actions.⁷⁴ Perhaps most famously, the Russian secret police or Okhrana (Охрана) is believed to have originally fabricated *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.⁷⁵

Many of these policies were adopted under Alexander III, who sought to revise some of his father's reforms and reinstate the first governing ideology of Russia, "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality" ("Православие – Самодержавие – Народность"). The prioritization of Russian ethnic and Orthodox religious supremacy within the empire naturally led to the persecution of minorities, including the Jews.

Anti-Semitism in Russia was so strong, in fact, that even the cataclysm of the Russian Revolution could only temporarily suppress their expression. Many secular Jews rose to great prominence in Lenin's party, including Lev Kamenev, Grigory Zinoviev, and Leon Trotsky. The anti-Semitism of the Lenin era was unique in that it was an unremarkable part of a larger anti-religious, anti-national, universalist revolution.

By the middle of Stalin's reign, however, official anti-Semitism had crept back into the Soviet government.⁷⁶ Notably, the particular ostracizing of Jews returned, along with the requisite ideological tenets, singling out Jews as a particular threat per se worthy of more attention and more opposition than other nationalities and religions.

The open propaganda against Jews jarred with Lenin's heritage and internationalism. For this reason, the Soviet authorities replaced the

73 Aaron Levine, "Russian Jews and the 1917 Revolution," *Primary Source* 4, no. 2.

74 Levine, "Russian Jews."

75 Anti-Defamation League, "A Hoax of Hate: The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion," ADL.org, last modified 2017, accessed November 29, 2017.

76 Vladimir Shlapentokh, "Putin as a Flexible Politician. Does He Imitate Stalin?," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 41 (2008): 206.

term Jews with ‘Zionists’. Since Zionism was a ‘legitimate’ enemy of socialism, it became possible to carry out an anti-Semitic campaign under the guise of the fight against it. The hatred of Jews was so high that the Soviet propaganda tended to describe Zionism as a greater evil than the United States, suggesting that American imperialism was merely a tool used by the Jews to conquer the world.

The anti-Zionist campaigns, which started almost immediately after the Bolshevik victory and intensified in the mid 1920s, were carried out until the final days of the USSR...⁷⁷

Along with the renaissance of ideological anti-Semitism came the return of anti-Semitic policies, effectively barring Jews from the upper levels of government in the Soviet Union and mandating anti-Jewish quotas in education.

Such policies would continue through the next four decades of Soviet history. Official anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union became so engrained and institutionalized, in fact, that it altered or colored the meaning of the term in anti-Semitism Russian (антисемитизм):

Under the Soviet regime, anti-Semitism was a state-sponsored policy, reflected in campaigns in the government-controlled press, arrests of Jewish activists and Hebrew teachers, mass refusal of the right to emigrate and discriminatory quotas on admission to higher education and certain prestigious occupations.

The Russian word *antisemitizm* is therefore understood by many Russian Jews to mean solely the state-sponsored anti-Semitism of the past. When these same people describe anti-Semitic acts committed by non-state actors, they more often than not precede it with the word *bytovoy* (‘day to day’ or ‘street-level’).⁷⁸

Both the Imperial and Soviet history of Russia would tend to support continued anti-Semitism sponsored, endorsed, and enforced by the Russian government, both because of the preexistent ideological templates available to the Kremlin and because of sheer inertia. Surprisingly, official anti-Semitism in Russia is at a multi-century low.

Putin’s relations toward both individual Jews and the Jewish people in Russia has been remarkably warm. Individuals of Jewish background have been among Putin’s closest advisors and allies during his years in power, including Roman Abramovich, Arkady and Boris Rotenberg, Oleg Deripaska, Viktor Vekselberg, and Mikhail Fridman.⁷⁹

77 *Ibid*, 208.

78 Nickolai Butkevich, “The New Face of State-Sponsored Anti-Semitism in Russia,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 32, no. 1 (June 2006): 138.

79 Luke Harding, “The Richer They Come...,” *The Guardian*, last modified July 2, 2007, accessed November 29, 2017.

In particularly stark contrast to the anti-Semitic policies of the Soviet Union, euphemized as “anti-Zionist,” the Russian government under Putin has maintained remarkably close and cooperative relations with Israel. “During Putin’s presidency, Israel has come to play an increasingly significant role in Russia’s Middle East policy. Putin has done more than any other Russian leader to improve economic and strategic ties with Israel.”⁸⁰ As Ilya Bourtmán points out, the areas of cooperation between the Putin government and successive Israeli governments have mostly centered on counterterrorism and energy infrastructure and trade.⁸¹ His analysis perhaps understates the significance of this cooperation: Beyond mere “pragmatism, cynicism, and economic calculations,” energy exports and security – particularly against terrorists – are the cornerstones of Putin’s legitimacy, such as it is. More than any other policies, energy and security determine the fate and true intention of the Putin regime, and their close cooperation with Israel on these matters suggests a sincere respect and affinity that, while not unlimited, would be scandalous for any previous Russian ruler.

In Domestic affairs, his overtures to Jews within Russia have been no less unprecedented:

During his stay in the Kremlin, Putin met with rabbis several times. In his last meeting with Russia’s chief rabbi in June 2007, he promised to donate one month’s salary for the construction of a Jewish museum of tolerance. Putin meets regularly with representatives from Russian Jewish Communities and various Western Jewish organizations. In October 2007, he met with a representative of the European Jewish Congress, attended many Jewish religious celebrations (for instance, Hanukkah in 2001) and regularly sent congratulations to the Russian Jews in connection with Rosh Ha-Shanah, the Jewish New Year and Hanukkah. Speaking in Krakow on January 27, 2005, in connection with the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Putin urged other nations to consider the lessons learned from the Holocaust and warned against anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia worldwide. What is more, he also noted the existence of anti-Semitism in Russia, a statement that none of the Soviet leaders after Lenin dared to make...⁸²

While the statements of the president are not always signs of durable and explicit policies positions of the Russian government, it appears that Putin’s friendliness toward Jews is either being encouraged among other government officials or is voluntarily imitated by them, suggesting a more permanent and official status of pro-Semitic⁸³ attitudes within

80 Ilya Bourtmán, “Putin and Russia’s Middle Eastern Policy,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 10, no. 2 (June 2006): 2.

81 *Ibid.*, 2-4.

82 Shlapentokh, “Putin as a Flexible,” 211-212.

83 The term “pro-Semitic” is used advisedly, and merely intends to denote the differences between the Putin government and its predecessors. It is only a relative distinction, and is not meant to provide an *absolute* positive or negative evaluation of the government’s Jewish policies.

the government.

Putin continues to make positive gestures towards Russia's Jewish community by attending major Jewish events, praising the role of Jews in Russia's history and contemporary life, and strongly condemning antisemitism. In many regions, it is no longer uncommon to see a mayor or governor visit a synagogue or congratulate the community on a holiday. These official gestures have helped to create a more confident climate for Jews in Russia, spurring a continued renaissance of Jewish life in Russia, as evidenced by the growing number of synagogues being returned to the community after decades of government ownership, the increasing media coverage of Jewish communal activities and statements by Jewish leaders about domestic and international events, and a rising willingness of Jewish leaders in some parts of the country to stand up publicly for their rights.⁸⁴

However cynical, the Russian government's use of accusations of anti-Semitism to slander its foes also suggests a consistent pro-Semitic self-perception. The annexation of Crimea and proxy war in Donbas following the Euromaidan of 2014 have provided several good examples. "The revolutionary change of power in Kiev prompted the Kremlin to view new Ukrainian values as incompatible with those of Russia and Eurasia. In his press conference, Putin referred to the Ukrainian events as the 'rampage of Nazi, nationalist, and anti-Semitic forces.'"⁸⁵ Referring to the Euromaidan protests, he claimed that "Nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites executed this coup. They continue to set the tone in Ukraine to this day."⁸⁶

Certainly, the Kremlin has also accused others of its own bad behavior, such as interfering in the domestic politics of other countries. Ordinarily, accusations against other countries by the Putin government bear little ontological weight. Indeed, Kremlin endorsement is often a contrary indicator to verisimilitude. However, given the context of the steady continuation of the Kremlin's Jewish policies under Putin, these statements might be viewed in another light – not as arch-cynical accusations, but as a way of defining whomever is conceived to be Russia's enemy as the opposite of Russian. In the Ukrainian case, defining a pro-Western enemy as pro-gay and anti-Semitic (at least relative to Russia) may contain a kernel of truth.⁸⁷

84 Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union (UCSJ), *Antisemitism, Xenophobia and Religious Persecution in Russia's Regions, 2001* (Moscow: UCSJ, 2002), 1-2.

85 Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Last Stand: The Sources of Russia's Ukraine Policy," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 4 (February 4, 2015): 294.

86 Vladimir Putin, "Address by President of the Russian Federation," President of Russia, last modified March 18, 2015, accessed November 29, 2017.

87 Tom Balmforth, "As Ukraine Says 'Farewell Unwashed Russia,' Putin Says Take Care in 'Gay' Europe," RFERL, last modified June 15, 2017, accessed November 29, 2017.

In addition to historical precedent, Putin's Jewish policies should also be evaluated in terms of their political benefits and costs. If, upon assuming the presidency in 1999 (and in his own right in 2000), Putin had decided to adopt more historically congruous, anti-Semitic policies and rhetoric, the costs would likely have been quite low. Clearly, at least in terms of domestic politics, anti-Semitism did not appear to hurt the political prospects or power of any of Putin's predecessors.

Conversely, the all-but-unimpeachable conclusion that Putin holds an unbreakable grip on supreme power in Russia suggests that he could adopt supremely unpopular or otherwise risky positions without encountering a serious threat to his dominance.⁸⁸

There are, of course, natural limits to Putin's power, and his government has granted concessions to opposition forces when it felt it was required. Protests against pension reform in 2005, for instance, prompted the government to double the planned increase in pension payments and reintroduce free public transportation.⁸⁹ After the 2011-2012 Bolotnaya protests in opposition to the suspect 2011 Duma elections and the dubious 2012 reelection of Putin, the Duma amended the constitution to restore local election of regional governors as a democratic compromise.⁹⁰ But neither of these concessions seriously threatened his control. Indeed, many governors have been effectively fired in 2017 as the Kremlin has announced its acceptance of resignations they never sent. Others have resigned at the behest of the Kremlin.⁹¹ In other words, the pro-Semitic policies of Putin's Kremlin cannot be described as political necessities. Putin can, in the long run, adopt any policies he wants – even to the extent that he can de facto change the constitution and rule from the prime minister's office.⁹²

Moreover, anti-Semitism could have been a powerful political weapon for the Kremlin. The issue might have been used as a way to drive a wedge through the opposition, much like the 2013 law “for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values” (“в целях защиты детей от информации, пропагандирующей отрицание традиционных семейных ценностей”) and other measures after the Bolotnaya protests:

First, the Kremlin sensationalised the minor, allegedly sacrilegious performance of the Russian punk band Pussy Riot in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour to bring division into the opposition movement on religious grounds. Second, Russia adopted the so-called Dima Yakovlev Law that banned US citizens from adopting Russian

88 Vladimir Gel'man, *Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Change* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 2.

89 Claire Bigg, “Protests across Russia Force Putin to Double Increase in Pension Payments,” *The Guardian*, January 18, 2005, accessed November 29, 2017.

90 Gel'man, *Authoritarian Russia*, 120.

91 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “Karelia Governor Is Fifth to Resign in Russia in Recent Days,” FRERL, last modified February 15, 2017, accessed November 29, 2017.

92 Gel'man, *Authoritarian Russia*, 41.

orphan children in order to divide the opposition on the grounds of Russian nationalism intrinsically characterised by anti-Americanism. Third, it adopted the anti-LGBT propaganda law officially to protect children from ‘information advocating for a denial of traditional family values’, but essentially to splinter the opposition movement exploiting the divisive LGBT issue.⁹³

Lately, much attention in the academic literature and beyond has focused on the Putin regime’s relationship with far-right nationalist forces, both within Russia and in the West. The influence of thinkers and theorists such as Aleksandr Dugin and Ivan Ilyin, and has been brought to light and debated. (There are other suspected intellectual forbearers of the current Kremlin as well; the four listed here will be discussed further in this paper.) Generally, one would expect to find anti-Semitism follows wherever nationalism goes. In Russia, no less, where the stage seems perfectly set for revanchist nationalism, it is particularly strange to find pro-Semitism mixed with Russian nationalism and/or Eurasianism.

Although, as detailed above, many of Putin’s policies are unusually friendly towards Jews, it is necessary to point out that Putin’s Kremlin has also adopted policies and postures that can be interpreted as anti-Semitic themselves, give aid and comfort to anti-Semites, or both.

Unlike Western leaders, he did not openly stand up against the two greatest anti-Semites of our time the Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and the Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad. In October 2003, Putin attended the meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, during which Mahathir Mohamad talked about the Jews who ruled the world. As Putin’s semiofficial biographer Kolesnikov wrote in his book *Putin Saw Me*, the Russian President said nothing about this rude anti-Semitic tirade, even though he had the opportunity to do so, because he addressed the conference following the Malaysian leader. While chatting with the Russian journalists who attended the conference, Putin did mention that some speeches at the conference were ‘extremist’. What is more, Putin never made critical comments about the appeal of the current [2008] president of Iran to obliterate Israel.⁹⁴

He has also hosted meetings with groups such as Hamas, which are openly anti-Semitic in ways most similar to Ahmadinejad. On a lesser count, Putin’s government has been firm in opposition to returning the library of the Lubavicher Rebbe Menachem

93 Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir*, Fascism & The Far Right Series (New York: Routledge, 2018), 81.

94 Shlapentokh, “Putin as a Flexible,” 214.

Schneerson.⁹⁵ Nonetheless, these policies, consequential as they may be, are deviations from the pro-Semitic norm of the 21st-century Kremlin.

There are several explanations that may account for why Putin's government has pursued such consistent pro-Semitic policies, including the nationalist ideological tenets of his regime (such as they may be), the Putin government's pragmatic use of political ideas as propaganda, foreign policy considerations, and Putin's personal biography.

The ideology hypothesis

The support that Putin's government has given to far-right elements inside and outside Russia would also suggest, *prima facie*, that the regime would support anti-Semitism. After all, in the West, far-right ideas and groups are ubiquitously anti-Semitic (in addition to a host of other bigotries). Upon first glance, it seems to follow naturally that far-right ideologues in Russia would be anti-Semitic as well: They live in a country with a tradition of popular anti-Semitism at least as long and deep as those of other European countries, and they endorse ideas commonly associated with anti-Semitism, including ethnic or national supremacy.

Those who believe that the Putin regime is influenced by far-right ideas, whether because Putin himself endorses them or because other senior members of the government do, have several examples of particular and influential nationalist and/or Eurasianist theorists who did not subscribe to anti-Semitism as evidence to support their claim. While it is possible that some in the highest positions in the government, including Putin himself, subscribe to Eurasianist and similar ideas, the prevalence of anti-Semitism in Eurasianist ideology is still too great to adequately explain the Putin government's Jewish policies.

Aleksandr Dugin

The most prominent face of current Russian far-right thought is Aleksandr Dugin, an autodidact political philosopher and conspiracy theorist with ties to some influential Kremlin figures, including the Academy of the General Staff of the Russian Army. In short, he views the irrepressible tide of world history as a conflict between "water powers" – states that grow up around coastlines, develop naval and merchant cultures and economies, free markets, pluralism, and secularism – and land powers, which grow up on the great Eurasian land mass, especially the enormous steppe running from Eastern Europe to western China, independent of coasts, and develop strong land armies, autocracy, omnipotent states, and conservative, spiritual cultures.⁹⁶

Dugin's conception of Russia is as a dominant cultural and political actor in a larger, united civilization: Eurasia. Eurasia includes, coincidentally, all the former possessions

95 Avital Chizhik, "Putin Refuses to Let the Lubavitcher Rebbe's Library Leave Moscow," Tablet, last modified September 30, 2013, accessed November 29, 2017.

96 Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), xiv.

of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, including the Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Central Asia, parts of the Middle East, and the Russian Far East, plus perhaps more. This massive territory, currently comprised of dozens of countries, he identifies as the Eurasian Heartland.

To the extent that Jews enter into Dugin's thinking at all, they play only a very small role. As a rule of thumb, this suggests he is not an anti-Semite.⁹⁷ Since Jews have lived for centuries in countries and among civilizations belonging to both of Dugin's categories, they do not belong more on either side of Dugin's ledger. They are neither inherent enemies nor inherent allies of Russian Eurasia. In some ways, the epistemological certainty of Dugin's geographical determinism precludes him from sharing the KGB-style anti-Semitism seen in Putin's regime. According to Albats,

KGB people believe in the World Jewish Conspiracy... They do believe that the world is run by Jews, that there is some world government, that there is some conspiratorial money or body. There were several cases when these guys were approaching me and saying, "We understand you have a great connections to the World Jewish Congress," and I was thinking, "Wait a second, you guys don't know what you're talking about."⁹⁸

Conspiracy theories are such a common marker of anti-Semitism that they are almost part of the very definition. The U.S. State Department's webpage "Defining Anti-Semitism" includes: "Making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as a collective—especially but not exclusively, the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions."⁹⁹ By contrast, Dugin's premise that geography is the controlling force of history precludes belief in secret global conspiracies. While not dispositive, this suggests that Dugin's influence is nationalistic and imperialistic, but not specifically anti-Semitic.

The most easily accessible statements of Dugin regarding Jews are from a YouTube interview recorded March 6, 2016.¹⁰⁰ In that interview, Dugin differentiates in two ways between the State of Israel and Jews. First, there is a "natural sympathy" for Israeli Jews among Russians, given the large numbers of Russian-speaking Israeli Jews. This is questionable as it pertains to popular opinion, though more than likely this does accurately represent the position of the Russian government. "Being anti-West, anti-

97 There is a joke which says, "There are two types of people who are obsessed with Jews: Jews and anti-Semites." There is some wisdom in this.

98 Interview with Yevgenia Albats.

99 "Defining Anti-Semitism," U.S. Department of State, last modified January 20, 2017, accessed December 14, 2017.

100 "Dugin on Islamophobia Israel Hezbollah A Caliphate," video file, 15:36, YouTube, posted by 108morris108, March 5, 2016, accessed November 29, 2017.

NATO, we are not against Israel by principle.”¹⁰¹ In other words, there is not innate (geopolitical) reason for Russians and Jews, as manifested by their national states, to be enemies. On the other hand, “when we are polite to the Israelis, that doesn’t mean we are going to betray Hezbollah... We have very good relations with Israel, and we don’t want to make these relations worse, but at the same time, [we are] with Hezbollah now as strategical [sic] allies. It’s very important.”¹⁰² Short-term strategy, he seems to imply, compels Russia to support forces bent on Israel’s destruction. Taken together, these statements seem to suggest that geopolitical, long-term relations between Russians and Jews as nations will not always match short-term relations between Moscow and Jerusalem.

Second, within Israel – or, perhaps, within the whole of world Jewry – Russia and the United States are bound to support different interests.

We have completely different goals. For example, if we [the United States and Russia] support two countries or two movements, always, always, by [sic] geopolitical reasons, we are supporting different poles... For example, we [Russia] are supporting one tendency in Israel; American – completely other... We have good relations with Israel; the United States has good relations with Israel; but there are two Israels. There is the geopolitically Atlanticist sea power Israel, represented by Israeli oligarchy, Israeli racism, [the] pro-American, pro-Western core of Israeli society. But there is Israeli traditions [sic], they are different.¹⁰³

This is the closest statement Dugin makes to anti-Semitism. While he does portray Jews and the evolution of Jewish religion and culture – a process 5000 years in the making – as completely subject to the influences of major outside powers (and, perhaps, teleologically dependent on them as well), he applies this same logic to all peoples, traditions, and histories.

He may easily be called a Russian supremacist and would probably agree that he is a nationalist, but he is not necessarily an anti-Semite because he does not reserve for Jews special fear, hatred, or discrimination. If the Kremlin – or at least one part of it – is truly enamored of Dugin’s theories, it is possible that they could share his imperialist Russian supremacism without anti-Semitism. The problem, however, is how they could so easily accept Dugin while rejecting his influences and intellectual ancestors.

Ivan Ilyin

Ivan Ilyin is one of the clearest examples of a Eurasianist anti-Semite. After the Bolshevik revolution, he was exiled from the country as a “White philosopher” who disfavored

101 *Ibid.*

102 *Ibid.*

103 *Ibid.*

Lenin's revolution – that much was true – and was therefore undesirable. He then taught in Germany, where he was active in the community of exiled, anti-Bolshevik, Russian intellectuals. As an alternative to Bolshevism, he embraced Eurasianism for its spiritual and quasi-religious dimension which Bolshevism lacked.

For similar reasons, he was a great fan of Mussolini, who he saw as successful in uniting Italians in a deeply historic and spiritually authentic rite of patriotism. When Hitler rose to power in Germany, Ilyin supported him as well (even at one point working for Joseph Goebbels), simultaneously condemning German Jews for opposing him, which he ascribed to uniform support among Jews for Bolshevism.¹⁰⁴

Ilyin argue[d] that the Russian state—by which he meant the old Russian Empire and its geographic descendant, the Soviet Union—is a unique geo-historical entity tied together by the spiritual unity of the Euro-Asiatic nations. In his view, Hitler's National Socialism, Mussolini's fascism, and the Russian White movement were very similar and “spiritually close.” He described them as sharing a “common and united enemy, patriotism, sense of honor, voluntary-sacrificial service, an attraction to dictatorial discipline, to spiritual renewal and the revival/rebirth of their country, and the search for a new social justice.” An opponent of both Soviet communism and Western democracy, Ilyin envisioned a “special” path for Russia, based on the promotion of the Orthodox Church and traditional values that would bring about a spiritual renewal of the Russian people, who at the moment he believed were under the influence of Western political and social constructs.¹⁰⁵

Clearly, Ilyin's passion for fascism has not been inherited by the modern Russian political class. Although some figures marginally associated with the current regime have made use of fascist and Nazi iconography and symbolism, the ideas of fascism and Nazism specifically are utterly lacking from the Kremlin.¹⁰⁶ The lengths to which the current powers go to define their opponents as fascists and Nazis – especially to the domestic population – suggests the enduring enmity and disgust with which fascism and Nazism are regarded. Similarly, despite Ilyin's own Wagnerian anti-Semitism, the intellectual legacy of his theory contributes only indirectly to modern anti-Semitism.

Ilyin introduced into the Russian political vocabulary the term “world backstage” (“мировая закулиса”), by which he meant some secret, Western-dominated, conspiratorial cabal, secretly pulling the strings of world affairs. While he never explicitly

104 T. S. Tsonchev, “The Kremlin's New Ideology,” *The Montréal Review*, last modified January 2007, accessed November 29, 2017.

105 Anton Barbashin and Hannah Thoburn, “Putin's Philosopher,” Hudson Institute, last modified September 20, 2015, accessed November 29, 2017.

106 Clover, *Black Wind*, 153, 155, 158-159, 161, 164-165, 178, 216, 222, 225, 235, 238, 224, 283.

connected the idea with Jews *per se*, the well-known conspiracy theory of the secret world order often includes Jews as its masterminds: “In the broader sense, this term implies that the officially elected leaders of the West are, in fact, puppets of the world’s true rulers: businessmen, Masonic agents, and, often, Jews. These days, that phrase seems omnipresent in Russian discourse and state-controlled media.”

However, the concept is not original to Ilyin. Its occurrence in modern Russian discourse cannot be directly traced to him. Indeed, as Albats indicated, conspiracy theories in Russia, including or especially among the political elite, are so common in part because in Russia they are sometimes true.¹⁰⁷ Both the Bolshevik Revolution and the August Putsch that ended the Soviet Union were the results of conspiracies, planned and carried out by a handful of powerful but little-known men in secret to wrest control of government forcefully away from another leader. Every leader of the Soviet Union in between was selected through a process – not of open competition, debate, and popular selection – but of back-room dealing and secret maneuvers at the very heights of power. Had Ilyin not introduced the concept of the “world backstage,” someone would have needed to invent it just to write the Russian news.

Ilyin is considered to be a particular favorite philosopher of Putin’s: He assigned the regional governors of Russia to read *Our Tasks* (Наши Задачи, also translated *Our Mission*) over the 2014 winter break.¹⁰⁸ It is easy to explain why Putin might revere Ilyin’s work yet not share his anti-Semitism. Ilyin primarily hated Jews because of their connection to – and, he believed, universal support for – Bolshevism. For the former KGB agent who clearly views the U.S.S.R. with nostalgia, this support may be a virtue where for Ilyin it was a vice.

Putin has adopted a related definition of self and enemy in his rhetoric, and he depicts his role as reinvigorating the Russian state and, by extension, its cult of patriotism: “My sacred duty is to bring together the Russian people, unite the people around clear tasks. We have one fatherland, one people and a common future.”¹⁰⁹ That fatherland has, in some of Putin’s explanations, a distinctly Eurasianist character, consisting of not just a nation state but a collection of nations united in one overarching civilization, led and dominated by (ethnic) Russians:

The rod that fastens the fabric of this unique civilization is the Russian people, Russian culture. Our opponents and all kinds of provocateurs will try will all their might to wrest this rod from Russia – through false conversations about the right of Russians to self-determination, about “racial purity,” about the necessity “to finish the business of 1991 and finally destroy the empires seated on the neck

107 Interview with Yevgenia Albats.

108 Barbashin and Thoburn, “Putin’s Philosopher,” Hudson Institute.

109 Parfitt, “Spy Who Came,” *The Guardian*.

of the Russian people.” Ultimately, to force the people to destroy their own Fatherland with their very hands.

(Стержень, скрепляющая ткань этой уникальной цивилизации – русский народ, русская культура. Вот как раз этот стержень разного рода провокаторы и наши противники всеми силами будут пытаться вырвать из России – под насквозь фальшивые разговоры о праве русских на самоопределение, о «расовой чистоте», о необходимости «завершить дело 1991 года и окончательно разрушить империю, сидящую на шее у русского народа». Чтобы в конечном счете – заставить людей своими руками уничтожить собственную Родину.)¹¹⁰

The Jews, to the extent that they facilitate the spread of European institutions (especially economic ones), are targets of ideological attack by Eurasianists, but unlike their position of evil primacy in the ideologies Nazi Germany or Western neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and skinheads, they are not the prime enemy of Russian civilization. They couldn't be the prime enemy, because they don't pose a serious threat. The Jews can't break up the empire. The Jews can't rob Russia of its culture. The Jews can't preach about racial purity. They're only a civilizational, existential threat as the agents of the real enemy: Western, and especially American, global hegemony. Notably, this is directly contradictory to the Soviet-era conception that the West was controlled by a secretive cabal of Jews.

Ultimately, the influence of nationalist and Eurasianist thinking on the Kremlin is helpful but not sufficient in explaining the Kremlin's Jewish policies. The Kremlin, including Putin himself, appear very supportive of Eurasianist and national-imperialist projects. Danilevsky's theory of unique developmental paths, which certainly had influence on later theorists and appears to have some pull on the Kremlin itself, does not require denigration or animosity toward other historico-cultural types. Ilyin's anti-Semitism can be excised from his larger theories as a coincidence of his time and place – the struggle over Bolshevism is long over. Moreover, Ilyin's anti-Semitism is inseparable from his primary critique of Bolshevism, which is its total lack of spirituality. This is a critique that the Putin regime appears to share in some part, as evidenced by its close association with the Russian Orthodox Church. It is also possible for the Kremlin (or some of its elements) to embrace Dugin's ideology and maintain pro-Semitic Jewish policies, as the two are mutually compatible. All of these apparent paradoxes are resolvable – though some more comfortably than others.

The argument that Eurasianist ideology is influential in the Kremlin, and that it allows room for such policies, does not adequately explain the Putin regime's policies. Another explanation is required as to why the Putin government would want to avoid

¹¹⁰ Владимир Путин, “Владимир Путин. Россия: национальная вопрос.” [Vladimir Putin. Russia: National Question.] Независимая газета, January 23, 2012.

anti-Semitism in the first place. The regime's Jewish policies suggest that it is not as ideological as is sometimes believed.

The “syringe” hypothesis

There is considerable debate about the role of ideology, especially Eurasianist ideology, in Putin's regime. Charles Clover has written extensively on the influence of Eurasianist philosophers on the Kremlin in *Black Wind, White Snow*, and gives ample evidence to suggest that many in the highest echelons of power – though not necessarily Putin himself – endorse Eurasianist ideas. Alternatively, Anton Shekhovtsov suggests in *Russia and the Western Far Right* that the Putin regime's only ideology is self-preservation: “It only syringes very specific ideas into the body of the Russian society in order to achieve particular purposes. This is a typical mode of operation for authoritarian, not totalitarian, states that occasionally, rather than permanently, engage in political mobilisation of the society.”¹¹¹

The possibility remains that Putin personally endorses Eurasianist ideas, that his quotes of Ilyin reflect his true thinking, that he endorses their overall worldview without also adopting anti-Semitism. But it's also possible that so much sound and fury signifies nothing. To borrow Shekhovtsov's term, the Kremlin's use of “ideological syringes” allows for other explanations of its simultaneous far-right sympathies and pro-Semitism.

The “syringe” hypothesis suggests that any idea or ideology that the Kremlin find useful can be injected into the political discourse thanks to the almost total domination of mass media and political speech by state-controlled outlets. If the ideas of long-dead and forgotten minor philosopher like Ilyin could be resurrected, the theory would hold, so then could one of the most successful prejudices in Russian history. This may not be the case.

The first reason anti-Semitism may be of little use to the Kremlin is that, despite the deep historical precedent of official anti-Semitism in Russia, modern, popular or “street” anti-Semitism is not easily connected to politics. Gibson and Howard find that “anti-Jewish prejudice reflects personality characteristics such as dogmatism and xenophobia, and is essentially impervious to influence from perceptions of external economic and political stress.”¹¹²

They propose a number of explanations which suggest that anti-Semitism is an unfit tool for political mobilization.

At least one part of the answer is that not enough Russians are predisposed to believe scurrilous allegations against Jews. Like the ‘race card’ in American politics, if racist predispositions are not

111 Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western*, 80.

112 Gibson and Howard, “Russian Anti-Semitism,” 195.

sufficiently widespread, then the limited response to proffers of racist appeals generates few political benefits. Thus, in some sense our understanding of this problem does indeed rely upon the conclusion that anti-Semitism in Russia is not widespread enough to be mobilized successfully in electoral politics.¹¹³

Another possible explanation is that Jews are not of sufficient salience in Russia to be easily scapegoated.¹¹⁴ This is likely related to the steep decline in the Jewish population of Russia since the mid-20th century. At the time of the first All-Union Population Census in 1926, there were about 567,000 Jews in the Russian Socialist Republic (out of a total of nearly 2.6 million in the Soviet Union).¹¹⁵ The number of Jews in Russia had declined only slightly by 1989, to about 537,00.¹¹⁶ By 2010, that number declined to 230,000 en route to an estimated 110,000 by 2050.¹¹⁷ The fall of the Soviet Union makes the comparison even stronger. A Muscovite comparing the population of Jews in his country (the U.S.S.R. before 1991 and the Russian Federation thereafter) between 1926 and 2010 would have seen a 91 percent drop. In other words, there are fewer than one tenth the Jews in the relevant political entity to exploit for political gain.

Contemporary Russia also appears to be less strongly anti-Semitic than it has been in the past and that it is widely assumed still to be. Gibson and Howard find that:

some research based on multiple indicators has discovered that anti-Semitism seemed to be neither widespread nor virulent. For instance, Gibson and Duch conclude that expressed anti-Semitism among residents of the Moscow oblast ‘is more uncommon in Moscow [in 1990] [sic] than many (including us) had suspected’. Their findings from a comparable survey in 1990 in the European portion of the former Soviet Union support the same conclusion. Moreover, based on his analysis of a survey of Russians conducted in 1992, Furman writes: ‘Thus, no mass anti-Semitism was revealed by the survey (our data agree in this regard with the data of other, analogous surveys), and a Jewish pogrom seems less likely than some sort of “Caucasian” pogrom.’¹¹⁸

113 *Ibid.* 217.

114 *Ibid.* 207.

115 Национальный институт демографических исследований (INED), “Всесоюзная перепись населения 1926 года. Национальный состав населения по республикам СССР.” [Institute of Demography of the National Research University Higher School of Economics], Демоскоп Weekly, last modified December 31, 2011, accessed November 30, 2017.

116 *Ibid.*

117 “Projected Change in the Global Jewish Population,” Pew Research Center, last modified April 2, 2015, accessed November 30, 2017.

118 Gibson and Howard, “Russian Anti-Semitism,” 201.

While Shlapentokh does not go so far, and still considers Russia's levels of popular anti-Semitism alarming, he finds corroborating that evidence that they may be lower than is often thought:

Anti-Semitism in Russia today [2008] is lower than it has been in the last seven decades. Jews in Russia are much less inclined to hide their ethnic origin or their interest in Jewish culture and religion. According to data cited in Ryvkina's comprehensive book, *How Jews Live in Russia*, the proportion of Jews who talked about their involvement in Jewish culture (considered a taboo in Soviet times) increased by three times in 2004 in comparison with 1995. In the same period, the number of Jews who declared themselves as believers in Judaism increased by 50 percent, while the number of regular visitors to synagogue increased by 11 times and the number of members of Jewish organizations increased by almost 5 times. The number of Jews who suffered from anti-Semitism declined from 75 percent to 55 percent.¹¹⁹

More recent data from the Levada Center paints a similar picture – that anti-Semitism is relatively high compared to other European countries (and, of course, compared to the ideal level, which is none) but relatively low compared to historical standards and Weimar comparisons.

Currently, only 8% of Russians are negative about Jews, but experts point out several levels of anti-Semitic aggression: a stable core of anti-Semitism and xenophobia (8-16% of respondents), those who support anti-Semitic and xenophobic clichés (18-35%), those who believe that ethnic Russians should have advantages over others or that the president should be Russian (40-65%). At the same time, anti-Semitism is very marginalized and is concentrated on the periphery of civil and social life, and anti-Semitic stereotypes and clichés have significantly weakened, but do not leave mass consciousness, the report says.

(Сейчас к евреям относятся негативно лишь 8% россиян, но эксперты выделяют несколько уровней антисемитской агрессии: устойчивое ядро антисемитов и ксенофобов (8–16% опрошенных), те, кто поддерживает антисемитские и ксенофобские клише (18–35%), те, кто считает, что русские должны иметь преимущества перед другими или что президент должен быть русским (40–65%). При этом антисемитизм очень маргинализован и концентрируется на периферии гражданской и социальной жизни,

119 Shlapentokh, "Putin as a Flexible," 212-213.

а антисемитские стереотипы и клише существенно ослабли, но не уходят из массового сознания, говорится в докладе.)¹²⁰

Quite simply, there don't appear to be enough committed anti-Semites in Russia to make a significant electoral difference (unless, of course, a direct challenger to Putin for the presidency were Jewish, in which case the popular opposition to a Jewish president would likely make a difference).

Interestingly, the tendency of Russians to believe anti-Semitism conspiracy theories and alternative histories may also be declining. According to a Levada Center survey, respondents indicated Holocaust denial a significantly smaller proportion of the time in May 2015 than in October 2007.¹²¹

A recent study from the World Jewish Congress and the Russian Jewish Congress supports this trend, and suggests plausible explanations for why.

Russia today has one of the lowest levels of anti-Semitism in the world and the lowest in Europe, according to a survey conducted in 2015-2016 by the Russian Jewish Congress ahead of the first Moscow International Conference on Combating anti-Semitism, co-sponsored by the World Jewish Congress.

The survey found that only 8 percent of respondents expressed a negative attitude toward Jews and that 90% of Russians today are aware of the Holocaust. The study found that Gypsies and Chechens evoked the most antipathetic attitude among respondents, as well as xenophobia toward Americans, Arabs and Azerbaijanis.¹²²

The most likely explanation for this dramatic decline in popular anti-Semitism in Russia may be attributed not only to the dramatic decrease in the Jewish population, but also to the abandonment of a coordinated, mass anti-Semitic program by Russian elites. While the *siloviki* likely practice employment discrimination in the Russian government, Russian mass media since the 2000 have been devoid of the kind of large-scale anti-Semitic messages characteristic of the Soviet era, in which “In media, novels and movies, Jews were almost never shown in a positive light. A Jewish name could only appear in a negative context.”¹²³ By contrast:

120 “Антисемитизм не в моде”, [Anti-Semitism is Not in Style], Левада центр last updated November 7, 2016, last accessed November 20, 2017.

121 “Геноцид армянского и еврейского народов.” [Genocide of the Armenian and Jewish Peoples.] Левада центр. Last modified June 15, 2016. Last accessed November 20, 2017.

122 “Russia Has One of Lowest Rates of Anti-Semitism in the World, Survey Conducted by Russian Jewish Congress Finds,” World Jewish Congress, last modified November 3, 2016, accessed November 30, 2017.

123 Shlapentokh, “Putin as a Flexible,” 208.

Putin's close confidant, the famous film director Nikita Mikhalkov, made a movie in 2007 called *12* (a remake of the American movie *12 Angry Men*), which denounces anti-Semitism and other ethnic prejudices in Russia. The screening of such a film would be absolutely impossible not only between the 1940s and the 1980s, but even in Yeltsin's time.¹²⁴

At least some of the credit for the near eradication of anti-Semitism from mass entertainment in Russia could be attributed to Putin, who has exerted direct or indirect control over almost every aspect and outlet of mass information and entertainment in the country since the early 2000s.

It is difficult to conclude the directionality of the regime's Jewish policies and public opinion. According to the "syringe" theory, the government could use its domination of mass information and political discourse to "inject" anti-Semitism into the population at will. It has clearly not done so. If the theory is incorrect, the Kremlin's options of ideological positions are limited based on what the Russian population is prepared and likely to accept. Rather than manipulating political discourse and culture with complete dexterity to meet its needs, the Russian government may find itself in a position much closer to that of a democratic government, fairly tightly constrained to philosophical and ideological positions that the population is prepared to accept. Based on survey data, the Russian population is historically and increasingly resilient to anti-Semitism since the turn of the millennium.

Alternately, if the theory is correct, then the drop in anti-Semitism since the beginning of Putin's first presidential term is directly attributable to policies of his government. Consequently, the observed trends are wholly subject to manipulation and could be reversed at any time. The longevity and stability of the Putin government's pro-Jewish policies therefore requires further explanation. Since Putin took power, the Russian government's economic policy has changed drastically, as have political rights, the Constitution, the judiciary, Russia's foreign policy (including perhaps the underlying goals of foreign policy in addition to the policies themselves), and arguably the nature of the social contract. Rhetorical changes from the president and other Kremlin officials have accompanied each of these shifts. The government's Jewish policies have been one domain of remarkable consistency, which the "syringe" hypothesis cannot explain by itself.

The foreign policy hypothesis

Israel

In contrast to each theory discussed so far, another theory explains Putin's and his government's pro-Semitic policies as facets of a larger foreign policy. Yevgenia Albats

¹²⁴ Shlapentokh, "Putin as a Flexible," 212.

suggests that, to some extent, the Russian government's relationship with its Jewish population is dictated by its geopolitical posture in the Middle East. This proposition is unique among analyses of Putin's Jewish policies, and warrants more research. Its implications, based on what is already known of Russian foreign policy, are significant. As Albats argues, the nature of the Russian-Israeli relationship is multifaceted, and Israel could play any of several different roles in the foreign policy of Putin's government.

The first facet of Russian-Israeli relations is the large number of Russophone Israelis. As of 2016, there were about 1.5 million Russian-speaking Israelis, the vast majority of whom had immigrated from Russia or Ukraine.¹²⁵ According to Agnia Grigas's work on Putin's use of "compatriots" in foreign policy, Russian-speaking Israelis may be a sizeable and important compatriot community.

The present-day concept of the Russian compatriot both stems from and relates to a broader understanding of the Russian nation... The first conception emphasizes the [Soviet] Union (or imperial) identity... According to this conceptualization of Russian nationhood, Russian compatriots would include all former citizens of the USSR and their descendants. A second way to conceptualize the Russian nation is to include the entire community of Eastern Slavs... The third conception of the Russian nation inclines instead to a broader vision, including all who use Russian as their first or habitual language, regardless of their ethnicity.¹²⁶

These conceptions of compatriots, however, apply perfectly well to Russophone Israelis, many of whom were born in the former Soviet Union and use Russian as a first and habitual language. For the purposes of Russian soft power, this makes Russian Jews a potentially useful group. For the purposes of Russian expansionism and neo-imperialism, which Grigas identifies as the primary goals of contemporary Russia compatriot policies, the Russophone Israeli population may play a weaker version of the role played by analogous populations in the former Soviet Republics: They give Russia a reason to claim legitimate political interest in a country or region. While this will likely not lead to military intervention in Israel as in Georgia and Ukraine (and possibly other countries in the future) it may help Russia legitimate a resurgent Middle East policy, making up for its lost Arab allies. As an added benefit, Putin's government may also hope that Russian-speakers in Israel may be a politically malleable voting bloc – an especially useful asset in a country that has historically been one of the closest and most strategically important allies of the United States. Whether or not this is possible has yet to be tested. Given the Russian government's influence campaigns in elections

125 Amanda Borschel-Dan, "25 Years Later, Russian Speakers Still the 'Other' in Israel, Says MK," *Times of Israel*, last modified September 1, 2016, accessed November 30, 2017.

126 Agnia Grigas, *Beyond Crimea* (n.p.: Yale University Press, 2016), 63-64.

in the United States, the cleavage between Russophone and native “Sabra” Israelis may be exactly the kind of social schism open to exploitation.¹²⁷

Courting Russophone Israeli Jews would be significantly harder for a regime that persecuted Jews at home – or, at least, for a regime that gained a reputation for doing so. Putin’s pro-Semitism may be partly motivated by an effort to gain influence with Jews in the Middle East, which is a region of strategic importance in which Russia has lost significant influence in the past quarter century.

The second facet of Russian-Israeli relations that Albats lists appears on its surface less sinister. Russian businessmen and oligarchs – Jews and non-Jews alike – have interests in many wealthy, Western, first-world countries, as do magnates and tycoons the world over. As dissident journalist Vladimir Kara-Murza put it,

They want to rule inside Russia like it’s a third-world dictatorship, violating basic human rights and freedoms, but they themselves want to use the privileges and the opportunities that the Western world offers for themselves and for their families. They want to steal in Russia and spend in the West.¹²⁸

Maintaining the opportunity to flex soft power with Israel’s Russophone minority may be a way to preserve Israel as an outlet for spending and education by the Kremlin elite outside Russia. Israel has one of the most promising Western economies that has not yet passed a Magnitsky Law designed to curtail the ability of Kremlin-linked *siloviki*-cum-oligarchs who have abused human rights to spend money in and travel to Western countries. The United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Estonia, and Lithuania have such laws. While avoidance of Magnitsky sanctions cannot explain Putin’s Jewish policies before 2012, when the American Magnitsky Act was signed, it may explain the continuation of such policies and their relationship to Russia’s close relationship with Israel.

The Western Far-Left

Beyond Russia’s relationship with Israel in particular, there are other blind spots regarding Russia’s foreign policy that warrant further investigation. Péter Krekó’s research regarding the Putin government’s support for and relationships with Western far-left parties and forces suggests that the recent work of Clover, Shokhovtsov, and others warrants equally thorough, complementary work on the other end of the spectrum.

127 Shaun Walker, “Russian Troll Factory Paid US Activists to Help Fund Protests during Election,” *The Guardian*, last modified October 17, 2017, accessed November 30, 2017.

128 Benjamin Parker, “The Other Russia: Poisonings, ‘Accidents,’ and Assassinations,” *The Weekly Standard*, last modified July 24, 2017, accessed November 30, 2017.

The specific opinions and policies of European far-left parties regarding Jews is often difficult to discern. One illustrative example is the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), the most prominent far-left party in Czechia and, according to Krekó, one of the most successful in Europe¹²⁹. The party takes a very critical approach to the Israeli policies regarding the West Bank and Gaza and questions the legitimacy of the State of Israel *per se*, but stops short of further, explicit anti-Semitism¹³⁰.

One of the methods Krekó identifies that the Kremlin uses to elicit sympathy with European far-left parties is anti-fascism:

Just as Putin's regime simultaneously warns of the rise of the far right and supports (and is supported by) far-right parties in Europe, the radical left's anti-fascism is often selective and one-sided... Pablo Iglesias, leader of Podemos, added: "the EU supported the illegal change of power in Ukraine and the coming of a neo-Nazi party to the Ukrainian government. Some European leaders, together with neo-Nazis, took part in public events in Ukraine, and this is too far from European values." But at the same time, a Die Linke delegation went to Eastern Ukraine to have a friendly meeting with notoriously anti-Semitic leaders of the Donetsk Republic¹³¹.

Though Die Linke may prove to be an exception, it is possible that Putin's government believes – and perhaps rightly – that notorious, official anti-Semitism may weaken its ability to win support for its causes among the Western far-left. The origins of European unification lie in the conflagration of World War II, including the Holocaust. The European Union and its predecessor organizations were largely formed to prevent another war. For the Kremlin to adopt policies resembling Nazi Germany would severely undercut its ability to label its enemies as fascists and garner support for its international objectives.

Concurrently, it would also hamper the Kremlin's abilities to create symmetry between itself and its European enemies.

For radical left politicians, who have more inhibitions about praising Putin and his regime directly, a typical and more subtle argumentation is to talk about aggressors on both sides. For example, without even mentioning the occupation of Crimea, a statement by the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia called on "the parties" to respect the Helsinki Accords one day before the referendum, as if Ukraine were not occupied only by Russia – but by the EU and the US as well.¹³²

129 Péter Krekó and Lóránt Győri, *Russia and the European Far Left* (n.p.: Political Capital Institute, n.d.), 2.

130 Ing. H. Charfó, DrSc., "Political Opinions," *Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy*, last modified September 11, 2008, accessed November 30, 2017.

131 Krekó and Győri, *Russia and the European*, 8.

132 Péter Krekó and Lóránt Győri, "Don't Ignore the Left! Connections between Europe's

While many far-left parties center their platforms on opposition the Washington consensus of free trade and market capitalism, the Nazi comparison might prove too much for Western far-left parties to associate themselves with Russia.

According to Krekó, the Putin government relies on a modicum of reasonableness to secure support from the European far-left. “The left’s affiliation with the Kremlin is better explained via the ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’ principle, such as selective anti-imperialism, anticapitalism, and anti-Americanism. Likewise, the state-controlled economy, which promises to keep ‘big capital’ in check, is an attractive model for many anti-capitalists.”¹³³ Although some far-left parties may not see anti-Semitism on the part of the Russian government as reason to sever or degrade ties with or support for Russian positions, there may be enough other groups that would choose to disassociate themselves that they could diminish influence with the leftist bloc writ large. It is possible that, if enough far-left parties were to diminish their support for Russian goals, the rest would follow for the sake of bloc unity: “radical left forces are traditionally more willing to cooperate with one another on the international and European level than the far right. This further increases their importance.”¹³⁴ That support is important for the Putin government’s foreign policies, often giving it the sheen of legitimacy that allows its foreign interventions to succeed. “The radical left group European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) in the European Parliament supports the Kremlin with words and votes (in 78% of the cases), in the Council of Europe, and OSCE general assemblies — especially when it comes to issues on Ukraine and Syria.”¹³⁵

Radical left parties in Europe and the West more broadly may be fringe forces for now, but by definition their ultimate purpose is to gain political power. They cannot rely exclusively on Russian support to achieve that goal; eventually they will have to achieve popular support. Anti-Semitism on the part of the Putin government might lose them popular support, which would diminish their utility to the Kremlin either by causing them to pull away from the Kremlin or by diminishing their influence domestically.

These theories are little more than speculation compared to what is now known about the Kremlin’s courtship of the Western far-right. More research regarding the Putin government’s courtship of the far-left will provide a more detailed, full depiction of how Russian policy has been shaped in response to Western institutions and political forces, and how those institutions and forces have in turn responded to Russian policy.

The biographical hypothesis

Putin’s remarkable pro-Semitic policies may be inspired by his own biography, which

Radical Left and Russia,” oDR: Russia and Beyond, last modified June 13, 2016, accessed November 30, 2017.

133 *Ibid.*

134 *Ibid.*

135 *Ibid.*

includes benevolent interventions by many Jews. One example is the Jewish family that shared Putin's communal apartment in St. Petersburg:

An elderly couple shared one room in the apartment; an observant Jewish family, with an older daughter, Hava, shared the other. The younger Vladimir, the only child in the communal home, remembered the elderly couple fondly, and spent as much time with them as with his parents. They became surrogate grandparents, and he knew her as Baba Anya. She, like his mother, possessed deep religious faith.¹³⁶

An early religious experience of Putin's may also have impressed on him that Jews are not a threat to Orthodoxy or Russian culture as he may perceive other religions to be:

As Vladimir would later tell the story, on November 21, when he was seven weeks old, Baba Anya and Maria walked three blocks through the winter chill to the Transfiguration Cathedral, a yellow, eighteenth-century monument built in the neoclassical style of many of the city's churches, and there they secretly baptized the boy.¹³⁷

Another figure who appears to have had a great impact on Putin's life – by his own admission – was his first judo coach: “He talked about his Jewish wrestling coach Anatolii Rakhlin as a person who ‘probably played the crucial role in my life.’ The coach had attracted him to serious sports and drew him away from a dangerous life on the streets.”¹³⁸ The influence of judo, and therefore of Rakhlin, on Putin's life cannot be underestimated:

The discipline and rigor of sambo, and later judo, intrigued the boy [Putin] in a way nothing else had. The martial arts transformed his life, giving him the means of asserting himself against larger, tougher boys. “It was a tool to assert myself in the pack,” he would say. It also brought him a new circle of friends, especially two brothers, Arkady and Boris Rotenberg, who would stick by him throughout his life. The martial arts gave him an orthodoxy he found neither in religion nor in politics. It was more than mere sport, he believed; it was a philosophy.¹³⁹

The influence of sports and the discipline of martial arts on Putin's life can be seen as an influence on Putin's priorities and policies once in office, most significantly the dedicated effort to host the Olympic games in Russia. The seemingly illogical choice of a sub-tropical city for the 2014 Winter Games can be ascribed to Putin's personal

136 Steven Lee Myers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 13.

137 *Ibid.*, 12-13

138 Shlapentokh, “Putin as a Flexible,” 211.

139 *Ibid.*, 15-16

intervention and determination. The city was a favorite of his, perhaps even surpassing that of his native St. Petersburg.¹⁴⁰

On behalf of his beloved Sochi, he vigorously worked to lobby the International Olympic Committee: “‘He was nice,’ Jean-Claude Killy, the French ski champion and a member of the International Olympic Committee, explained after the vote. ‘He spoke French— he never speaks French. He spoke English— he never speaks English. The Putin charisma can explain four votes.’”¹⁴¹ Although Putin learned German as a second language to fluency as a young man, and lived in Dresden as a KGB officer, he had, indeed, never spoken French or English in public (with the exception of some public singing). He most likely learned those sections of his address phonetically, an indicator of his determination to impress the committee and secure the Olympics for his adopted city and his country.

That determination is inseparable from his political aims: “As an avid sportsman and fitness obsessive, a judoka, a skier, and a swimmer, Putin loved the Olympics; as a leader, he saw hosting them as the means to affirm Russia’s return to its rightful place on the world stage.”¹⁴² As is characteristic of Putin’s personalized rule, the status of the country is inextricably linked with the status of its ruler. His priorities are its priorities, and his achievement is its achievement. The Sochi Olympics were to Putin what the Field of the Cloth of Gold was for Francis I (or, perhaps, for Henry): a feat of splendor and athletic prowess intended to impress rivals and display the grandeur of the nation and its sovereign. This is exactly how the event was described by government officials, Putin included, when it was announced that Sochi had been selected:

When [Putin] returned triumphantly to Moscow, he stepped out of his jet and met assembled reporters at the VIP hall of Vnukovo Airport. “It is, beyond any doubt, a judgment of our country,” he declared. Only in a country desperate for affirmation could the choice of an Olympics have loomed so disproportionately large. “Russia has risen from its knees!” German Gref declared in Guatemala City.¹⁴³

The Sochi Olympics, despite their often critical foreign coverage for sub-par accommodations, vast corruption, and the attendant doping scandal, were a feather in Putin’s cap domestically. Immediately after the Olympics, his approval rating inside Russia spiked to 85 percent.¹⁴⁴ (Of course, public opinion surveys in Russia are always subject to skepticism, and the effects of the Olympics alone are almost impossible to separate from the effects of the almost simultaneous invasion and annexation of Crimea within days of the closing ceremonies in February 2014.) In this way, some of Putin’s most notable political success – both the beginning of the serious, focused part

140 Ibid., 243

141 Ibid., 325

142 Ibid., 323.

143 Ibid., 325.

144 Saeed Ahmed, “Vladimir Putin’s Approval Rating? Now at a Whopping 86%,” CNN.com, last modified February 26, 2015, accessed November 29, 2017.

of his life and his greatest international spectacle – are the result of early guidance by a Jew, Rakhlin, whom Putin admires immensely.

The other formative experience in Putin’s life was his career in the KGB, which was made possible by his early study of German. This was encouraged and mentored by Vera Dmitrievna Gurevich and later continued by Mina Yuditskaya (now Mina Yuditskaya Berliner). Berliner is Jewish, and now lives in Tel Aviv in an apartment Putin bought for her as a demonstration of his appreciation for her teaching many years before¹⁴⁵. Putin bought the apartment for her while on a state visit in 2005, although it was not disclosed for some years. The private nature of the gesture (Berliner was the one who revealed it), as well as its substance, indicate the genuineness of the gratitude that motivated it. “She [had] a deep influence on him, and he would remember her decades later with a sentimental fondness.”¹⁴⁶

Many of those personally close and important to Putin are rewarded with expensive gifts, sometimes including multi-billion-dollar businesses, as in the cases of Arkady and Boris Rotenberg, who jointly control SGM group and have over \$1 billion in assets each, thanks to their friendship with Putin stemming from their shared dojo in St. Petersburg.¹⁴⁷ The Rotenbergs are also of Jewish ancestry.¹⁴⁸

While Putin appears to have very close relationships with many Jews and does not appear to discriminate against Jews *per se*, it bears mentioning that the same cannot be said of his administration at every level. Although the scholarship on official state anti-Semitism in Russia has been lacking recently, Evgenia Albats believes the prevalence of siloviki, or to use her term, “epaulettes” in the Russian government has caused some backsliding toward the Soviet-era anti-Semitic policies. This has been especially pronounced during Putin’s third presidential term, and can be attributed to those in Putin’s inner circle who don’t share his pro-Semitic tendencies.¹⁴⁹ For example, Igor Sechin and Sergey Ivanov are both anti-Semites in the KGB tradition, which considers all Jews potential “fifth columnists” and inherently untrustworthy. (These are the opinions of Albats, though detailed evidence is, of course, difficult to find.¹⁵⁰) According to her, “It’s harder for Jews to get into these governmental structures – the Kremlin, the administration, etc. That would be because the most important decision-making sphere of the country are controlled by KGB people.” This makes Putin an exception, having served for years in the KGB and its successor, the FSB, but apparently having not bought into its pervasive anti-Semitism.

145 Cnaan Liphshiz, “When Putin Met His Jewish German Teacher in Israel,” *The Times of Israel*, last modified March 26, 2014, accessed November 29, 2017.

146 Myers, *The New Tsar*, 19.

147 Tom Miles, “U.S. Sanctions Hit Gunvor Co-founder, Rotenberg Brothers,” *Reuters*, last modified March 20, 2014, accessed November 29, 2017.

148 Sheldon Kirshner, “Russia’s New Tsar,” *The Times of Israel*, last modified November 23, 2015, accessed November 29, 2017.

149 Interview with Yevgenia Albats.

150 Haaretz, last modified July 31, 2007, accessed November 29, 2017.

Albats's analysis squares with other theories of power distribution in contemporary Russia, which recognize that the concentration of power in Putin's hands also concentrates power in the hands of those around him, who by necessity have some degree of autonomy – autonomy which has increased, especially regarding the FSB, since Putin's return to the presidency. “In 2008, President Putin could influence a several government organs completely independent from him; his power even encompassed the great and terrible fire supervision authority. But in 2016-2017, president Putin is unable to influence a number of bodies independent from him. (Вот в 2008 году президент Путин мог повлиять на ряд совершенно независимых от него органов, его могущество даже распространялось на великий и ужасный пожарный надзор. А в 2016–2017 годах президент Путин не может повлиять на ряд независимых от него органов.)”¹⁵¹

This followed closely on the heels of the prosecution of director Kirill Serebrennikov, to which Putin expressed his opposition publicly, but which continued and even intensified nonetheless:

Shortly after the initial questioning of Serebrennikov in May, the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, was asked about the incident by an actor at a Kremlin reception. He responded: “Fools”, apparently referring to the investigators. This was seen by some as a sign from the Kremlin to stop the campaign against the director; instead, Russian authorities have intensified it.¹⁵²

If the statements were a true reflection of Putin's policy preferences, this could be another example of subordinate bodies – particularly the FSB – acting against Putin's wishes, potentially embarrassing the president (though in retrospect this seems unlikely, and it's equally possible that Putin was intentionally portraying himself as the good tsar surrounded by bad boyars).

The extent to which Putin's pro-Semitic policies find their foundation in his personal relationships with Jews also necessarily depends on the nature of Putin's rule in general, including the degree of autonomy which he delegates to those around him, how tolerant he is of opposition and dissent within the inner circles of his regime, and the relationship between his personal biography and preferences and his rule. If the most convincing explanation for Putin's pro-Semitism lies in the particular facts of his biography, then it would be reasonable to infer that other aspects of Putin's rule and others of his policies are also inspired by his personal experience, rather than simple managerial pragmatism or deep ideological commitments.

151 Андрей Колесников и Евгения Альбац, “Рособрнадзор и Полтавченко – против Путина?” *Новое время/New Times*, October 2, 2017. Translation is author's own.

152 Shaun Walker, “Arrest of Russian Theatre Director Raises Fears of Clampdown on Dissent,” *The Guardian*, last modified August 22, 2017, accessed November 29, 2017.

Conclusions

No single hypothesis presented above completely explains the Putin regime's Jewish policies. Any satisfactory explanation of the policy choices of a regime such as Putin's must address both personal and institutional causes and contexts. Consequently, a combination of these theories is more likely to be a satisfactory explanation, or at least the beginning of one.

To create a truly robust account of the Russian Jewish policy under Putin – and, indeed, the political context and structure surrounding it – further research is imperative. Biographies of Putin are available in English, and can be quite useful in interpreting his policies, but they are necessarily incomplete. Undoubtedly, Putin warrants further treatment by historians after his death, when his life and effects on Russia can be evaluated wholly, even if the depth of those effects may not be fully realized for years. Many of the works of the Eurasianist philosophers are not available in English, including most notably Ilyin's *Nashi Zadachi*. He and the other philosophers mentioned were prolific, and their work should be made available for political scientists working in English. Their work should also be evaluated for its Jewish-related content, which can further illuminate the debate about the ideological nature of the Putin regime. Lastly, and perhaps most urgently, the relationships between the Russian government and far-left forces and parties in the West should be at least as extensively researched as the corresponding relationship on the right. Péter Krekó is almost alone in pursuing this immensely important facet of international affairs.

The most convincing existing evidence suggests that the Jewish policies of Putin's government are primarily motivated by his personal attitudes toward Jews, based on his biography, which includes several notably influential and positive Jewish friends, mentors, and role models. A fuller explanation of Russian Jewish policies will depend on theories of political organization and influence within the Putin government, which can account for degrees of autonomy granted to high-ranking officials in the ministries, the administration, the Duma, and state-controlled corporations.

Possible future changes in Jewish policy in Russia may help elucidate which theory best explains the Kremlin. A change in Jewish policy – which may already be underway, quietly, unofficially – may shed light on how policies are made, implemented, and changed in the Putin government. They may also support or refute theories about the ideological or pragmatic nature of the Kremlin regime.

Beyond the implications for understanding Russia and similar regimes, evaluating these theories may also shed light on the nature of anti-Semitism itself. Explaining the Putin government's Jewish policies can provide a case study for the relationship between anti-Semitism and politics in other countries. Hopefully, the 21st-century Russia will prove to be a significant example of anti-Semitism being eradicated in the very place in which it recently thrived.

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