

Nationalistic Propaganda as a Strategy for Patriotic Upbringing in Russian Education

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Abstract

This article outlines the radical transformation of educational policies in Russia since 2020, displaying the timing of the individual stages of the rooting of state propaganda in schools, the militarization of school education, and the spread of neo-nationalist ideology among schoolchildren aged 6 to 19. This paper aims to raise awareness of the extreme instrumentalization of historical narratives for state propaganda goals in national education. It also intends to illustrate the extent of the militarization of education and the destructive nature of any propaganda during one's upbringing. Emphasis will be given to the actions made by the Russian government to develop the whole complex of state-build patriotism, which is about militarization, neo-nationalistic propaganda and rewritten history.

Keywords: Historical Politics – Educational Policy – Eastern European Studies – Russia.

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1. Agenda. Trinity of Education Politics in Russia: God. Hate. Guns

With the re-election of Vladimir Putin in 2012, Russia began to report slow but continuously evolving authoritarian trends, with state propaganda penetrating all areas of society¹, above all school education. The first target of state propaganda was humanities and social subjects, especially history. Meanwhile, Putin's government has shown a pronounced interest in the formation of a plan for patriotic education, which includes the militarization of education and the promotion of a militaristic image among schoolchildren exemplifying the true patriots of their country.

The very first attempt to develop an idea of patriotism dates back to the first term of Putin². The concept embedded in Russians' patriotism was initially built on military camouflage and *a learned hatred* of the external enemy represented by a number of Western countries³. This image builds a link with the past, where Russia is presented as the absolute guarantor of justice and truth⁴. The historical narrative is a crucial part of this propaganda discourse because the current leadership considers the 1945 victory as a nation-uniting event. The Second World War affected every family, and everyone had someone either to mourn or to be proud of. Surprisingly, this extreme patriotic idea is hailed by the Russian Orthodox Church, which encourages believers to educate their children in the same way, teaching them to serve the country and God, avoiding "Western values"⁵ that are based on gay-living standards which run counter to nature and God. So, state propaganda also includes a strong anti-LGBTQ+ agenda focused on schoolchildren⁶.

This approach has not only been spreading in schools through militaristic events and religious courses over the past 10 years, but is also conditioned, among other things, by legislation and education development strategies introduced by the Russian president⁷. One striking example of the extreme militarization of school

¹ T.C. Helmus, E. Bodine-Baron, A. Radin, M. Magnuson, J. Mendelsohn, W. Marcellino, A. Bega, Z. Winkelman, *Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe*, RAND Corporation, 2018, 9.

² Concept of Patriotic Education of Citizens of the Russian Federation Approved at a Meeting of the Government Commission on Social Issues of Servicemen, Citizens Dismissed from Military Service and Members of Their Families, Protocol No. 2(12)-P4 of 21 May 2003, base.garant.ru/6148105/.

³ T.P. Gerber, J. Zavisca, *Does Russian Propaganda Work?*, in *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 79-98.

⁴ T. Lykova, *The Strategy of Patriotic Education: Problems, Tasks, Solutions*, in *Actual Issues of Modern Academia*, No. 36, 2014, 18-22 (in Russian).

⁵ P. Christopher, M. Matthews, *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It*, RAND Corporation, 2016; C. Voyles, M. Chilton, *Respect, Protect, and Fulfill-or Reject, Neglect, and Regress? Children's Rights in the Time of the Russian "Gay Propaganda Law"*, in *Health and Human Rights*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2019, 325-330.

⁶ *No Support. Russia's Gay Propaganda, Law Imperils LGBT Youth*, 11 December 2018, [hrw.org/report/2018/12/12/no-support/russias-gay-propaganda-law-imperils-lgbt-youth](https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/12/12/no-support/russias-gay-propaganda-law-imperils-lgbt-youth).

⁷ Presidential Decree No. 808 of 24 December 2014 approved the Fundamentals of State Cultural Policy, kremlin.ru/acts/bank/39208. The Concept of Additional Education for Children was

education as an educational strategy is the involvement of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Defense in the educational processes and the formation of units and training centers of the Youth Army.

An important feature of the patriotic trend in Russian education is the role of the country's leader as an inspirer. For instance, the idea of creating a unified history textbook under the pretext of combating the falsification of the historical past was voiced by Vladimir Putin (2013)⁸. Subsequently, the need to create centers of military-patriotic education⁹ was urged by the Russian Minister of Defense Shoigu (2016)¹⁰. Finally, the radicalization of propaganda in education during the war against Ukraine came in the wake of a historical-patriotic lesson for gifted children held by Vladimir Putin personally (2022).

There is a clear correlation between the public political performance of State leaders and senior politicians and the transformation of educational practice through new educational standards, the development of "presidential education strategies", and active lawmaking in this area. So, the discussion is exclusively about systemic patriotism, which is being introduced by force and legal pressure on educational institutions, teachers and parents, and children alike.

2. A Unified History Textbook and Historical Policy

The newly re-elected president immediately announced that patriotic education would be developed under State control¹¹. In other words, a basis for ideological propaganda in the field of education was created by means of the Presidential Decree «On Improving State Policy in the Field of Patriotic Education» of 20 October 2012¹². In his Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation

approved by Russian Government Order No. 1726-r of 4 September 2014, base.garant.ru/70733280/. The Fundamentals of State Youth Policy of the Russian Federation for the Period until 2025 was approved by Russian Government Order No. 2403-r of 29 November 2014, government.ru/docs/15965/. The Strategy of Education Development in the Russian Federation for the Period until 2 May 2015 was approved by Russian Government Order No. 996-r of 29 May 2015, fcprc.ru/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2.-Rasporyazhenie-Pravitelstva-RF-ot-29.05.2015-N-996-r.pdf.

⁸ *Putin Ordered the Development of a Unified Textbook on Russian History*, 19 February 2013, informpskov.ru/news/109371.html.

⁹ *The Youth Army Military-Patriotic Movement*, laplandiya.org/deyatelnost/patrioticheskoe-dvizhenie-yunarmiya/.

¹⁰ Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation of 30 December 2015, No. 1493 «On the Programme: Patriotic Education of Citizens of the Russian Federation for 2016-2020», base.garant.ru/71296398/.

¹¹ *Putin: Patriotic Education Should Be Based on Truth*, 12 September 2012, bbc.com/russian/rolling_news/2012/09/120912_rn_putin_patriotism.

¹² Message of the President of the Russian Federation to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation on 12 December 2012, news.kremlin.ru/news/17118.

(the Parliament) on 12th December 2012, President Putin noted that it was necessary to «strengthen the solid spiritual and moral foundation of society»¹³.

The next step in the development of the ideology of patriotic education was the discussion on State educational strategies and the demand for a unified history textbook for schools. Thus, in early 2013, President Putin issued a call to tackle the falsification of the past and to revise the educational standards for history teaching, bringing them to a common denominator¹⁴. And in 2016, the updated history textbooks became the basis for a new curriculum, fulfilling the presidential call for truth-telling¹⁵.

One significant change was the semantic transformation of the discussion about the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War (*i.e.*, the moment when the USSR stepped into the Second World War)¹⁶ and the geopolitical initiatives taken by the Soviet regime¹⁷. In particular, the Polish operation, that is the partition of Poland, was marked in Russian textbooks as an act of liberation of Poland from invaders and the protection of “brotherly peoples”. The Russian government clearly articulated the main purpose of creating a single textbook: to connect with the past, to highlight the great exploits in the Great Patriotic War¹⁸. For its part, the Russian presidential administration emphasized the need for “objective writing of history”, which again meant denying the crimes of the former regime, forbidding criticism of the Soviet army, and changing the course and outcome of the Second World War for the USSR, *i.e.*, rewriting history of the Soviet period in the way of glorification¹⁹.

The representation of the war revolving around the historical myth of the victory has a functional load, fulfilling two important goals: the national consolidation of ethnically and value-divided social groups, and the legitimization of power through the reflection of continuity from the victorious Soviet Union. Speaking of *the myth of victory*, it is important to stress that this is not a discussion on the actual outcome of the Second World War, but the creation of a legend about the salvation of humanity and the world²⁰. This would be later actively used in the propaganda

¹³ Transcript of the meeting of the President of the Russian Federation with representatives of the public on patriotic education of youth. Krasnodar, 12 September 2012, president.rf.

¹⁴ *History Textbooks Should Have a Unified Concept*, rg.ru/2013/04/25/uchebnik-anons.html.

¹⁵ *Schoolchildren Will Be Told about the “Sailed Crimea” and the “Anti-Russian Front”*, 25 August 2016, znak.com.

¹⁶ *Putin Instructed the Foreign Ministry to More Actively Communicate the Truth about the Victory over Nazism*, 19 April 2016, tass.ru/obschestvo/3220672.

¹⁷ M.A. Moiseev, *World-Historical Significance of the Victory of Soviet People over Nazi Germany in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945*, in *Pedagogy*, No. 4, 2015, 3-9 (in Russian); N.V. Polyakova, *History of the Great Patriotic War and Patriotic Education of Youth*, in *Higher Education Today*, No. 5, 2009, 56-59 (in Russian).

¹⁸ *Putin Talks about the Need for a Unified History Textbook*, polit.ru/news/2013/04/25/pamyat/.

¹⁹ Naryshkin [Chairman of the Russian's Parliament]: “*In the Concept of History Managed to Find Compromise Wording*”, in *RIA Novosti*, 16 January 2014.

²⁰ O.V. Golovashina, *The Victory of the Image: Identification Risks of Commemorative Practices*, in *Studia Humanitatis*, No. 1, 2017 (in Russian); E.C. Onken, *The Baltic States and Moscow's 9 May Commemoration: Analyzing Memory Politics in Europe*, in *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 1, 2007.

during the war with Ukraine, arguing that the slayers of fascism could not be wrong and that the destruction of the “Ukrainian Nazis” was the right thing to do, a painful but necessary measure to save Russia’s peace and independence.

All geopolitical metamorphoses are immediately reflected in school history curricula. To illustrate, as early as 2014, the Russian president instructed to update textbooks, and to include information about Soviet Crimea²¹, *i.e.*, the heroic return of Crimea to Russia²², justifying the invasion of a neighboring country, the violation of international law, the abuse of violence. In parallel, some pieces of legislation were introduced to regulate the historical narrative and censor academic and public history, prohibiting comparison between Nazi and Soviet regimes, the criticisms made against the USSR, and the accusations concerning war crimes committed by Russia in the past and present²³. In 2020, Vladimir Putin adopted the education law amendment to make the study of World War II compulsory in schools, noting that it was important to foster «a sense of patriotism and citizenship; respect for the memory of defenders of the homeland and the exploits of heroes of the fatherland, for the law and order, for the man of labour and the older generation, mutual respect and a respect for the cultural heritage and traditions»²⁴.

3. The Militarization of School Education: The Youth Army as a Military Reserve

The Youth Army, an organization set up at the initiative of the Russian Defense Minister, Sergei Shoigu, after Putin voiced the need for military-patriotic education for children and young people²⁵, has been actively recruiting children from 7 to 18 years old into its ranks since 2016. Above all, there is an attempt to convince parents that an armed child in uniform is the right and even natural way to raise a patriot. Thus, one of the first measures to take is to award an extra 20 points in the national examination to each member of the Youth Army.

Since these extra points can ensure admission to university, initially the parents and school administration become quite loyal to this militaristic organization. Although in the first 2-3 years public criticisms were raised about arming children and military training for pupils, mainly from the academic community, the

²¹ *Putin Has Ordered the Addition of Chapters on Crimea and Sevastopol to the History Textbook*, in *RIA News*, 2 June 2014, ria.ru/20140602/1010266707.html#14016989856954&message=resize&relto=login&action=removeClass&value=registration.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Federal Law No. 278-FZ of 01 July 2021 «Amending the Federal Law on Commemoration of the Victory of the Soviet People in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945», kremlin.ru/acts/bank/7872; Criminal Code of the Russian Federation of 13 June 1996 No. 63-FZ (rev. of 24 September 2022), Article 354.1, base.garant.ru/10108000/.

²⁴ Meeting on the current situation in the education system from 21 May 2020. Transcript of the meeting, kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63376.

²⁵ Presidential Decree No. 536 of 29 October 2015 «On the Establishment of the Russian Movement of Schoolchildren (main focus – military-patriotic education)», followed later in 2016 by the practical implementation of this initiative in the form of the Youth Army, kremlin.ru/acts/bank/40137.

psychologists' community and a small percentage of parents, the situation is now changing, and most parents view the initiative positively. The only disadvantage that was pointed out is the paid camouflage for a child to join the Youth Army: a parent must provide the child with summer and winter uniforms (40.000 – 50.000 rubles, approximately 830\$ with an average regional salary of 350-400\$).

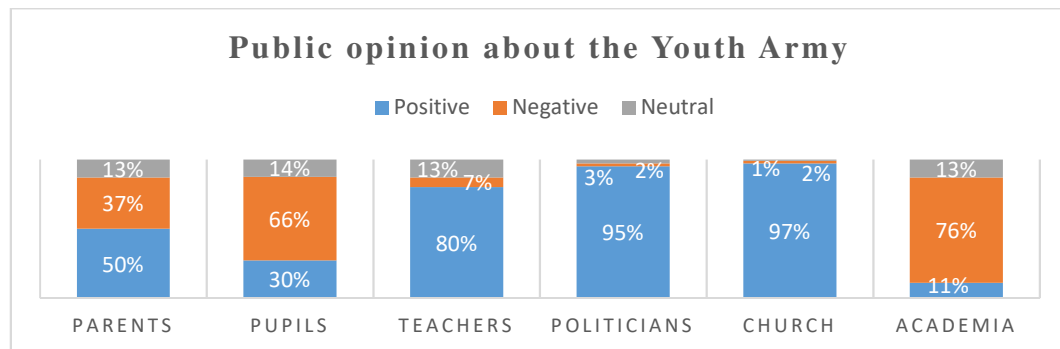


Figure 1. Diagram of Public Opinion towards the Youth Army in 2022, divided to a few social groups²⁶

The main aim of the organization is precisely the military-patriotic education and the forcible involvement of minors in this armed endeavor through pressure from teachers and school administrators. This is the way in which over 600.000 children joined the Youth Army between 2018 and 2020. Members are forced to wear uniforms all the time, take part in military exercises where they have to survive through hardships, eat army food, take part in shootings, including human-shaped targets. Ideologically, it is believed that in this way children and teenagers are trained to defend the homeland. This idea is actively supported by schools and also by the Russian Orthodox Church.

The organization itself notes that in 2021, despite the war and the difficult situation in the Crimean region, the Youth Army in Sevastopol increased its membership by more than 24%. This only underscores the extreme militarization of the region and the state propaganda against school-age children²⁷.

Although at the time of its creation there were public slogans about the revival of the pioneer movement, the ideological orientations and activities of the organization resemble those of the Hitler-Jugend era. Because one of the tasks that is set as a duty for the members of the army is the protection of the Russian culture and State, the value of people is put on the back burner, and it is the State that needs

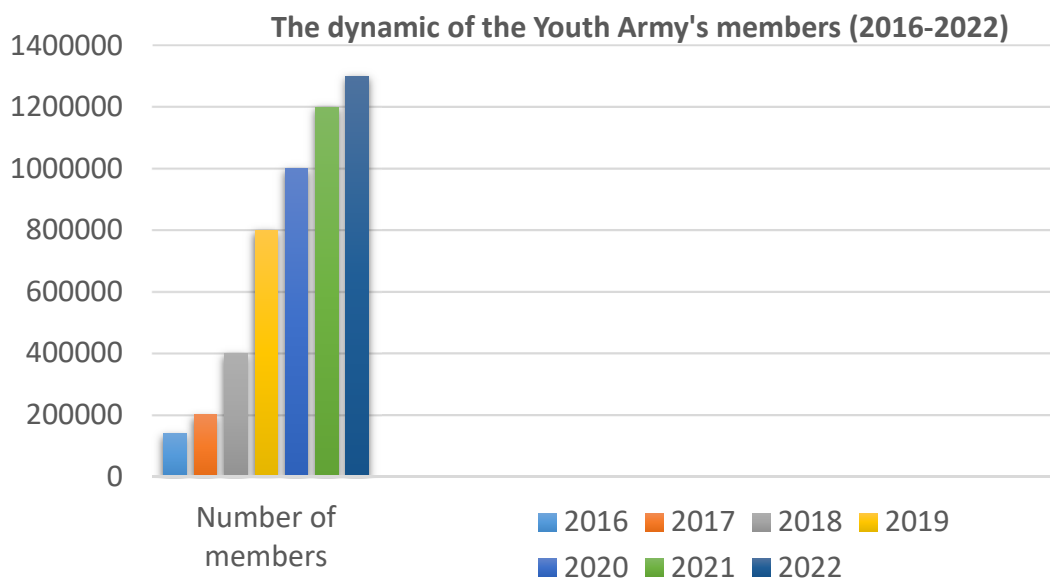
²⁶ The statistical data for this graph has been collected through all kinds of Russian media materials published in 2016-2022 (content noted the Youth Army regulation, society appreciation, and children involving per year), using digital parsing tools based on Python. Among the media pull we can underline a few sources provided by State departments: RIA News, Russia 24, TASS, etc.; as well as non-government media, Meduza, Russian Newspaper, Radio Freedom, etc.

²⁷ Address by the Minister of Defence. YounArmia Information White Paper, No. 1, 2021, (in Russian), yunarmy.ru/upload/iblock/98a/Byulleten-YUnarmiya-_1_2021.pdf.

protection first. Secondly, in Russian there is a fine line between the two adjectives that describe ethnicity and nationality of people living in Russia, so ‘russkiy’ (русский) denotes ethnicity and direct belonging to an ethnic group by blood, while ‘rossiyanin’ (россиянин) determines nationality and can refer to members of different races and ethnicities having Russian citizenship. However, children are brought up in a nationalistic tradition and aim to defend only the first option, ethnically Russian values, culture, and people.

In addition, the practical implementation of membership of the Youth Army implies the involvement of children and adolescents in activities with high levels of potential violence. Furthermore, the promotion of state ideology among young adults and kids can form unrealistic representation of particular historical events, ethnic groups, etc. Yet, the main problem of the extreme militarization is justifying anger and human-harm for kids. For example, military exercises involving shooting trainings, heavy physical exercises, living in difficult conditions are held to anger and toughen up children. Then, children take an exam to obtain a red beret that involves a series of hand-to-hand combat with other members.

Figure 2. Diagram of the increasing dynamic of number of the Youth Army's members²⁸



In interviews, children revealed that they work with firearms all the time. Respondent N. noted that he used to shoot at paper figures of people while a military officer would shout «You must destroy your enemy!». And another participant of the Youth Army reported that they were systematically verbally and physically abused by soldiers and commanders. Thus, this militarist organization is now part

²⁸ The data for the graph has been collected from different sources: RIA News, Russia 24, TASS, Meduza, Russian Newspaper, Radio Freedom, etc.

of the educational system in Russia and serves solely the propaganda purposes of the government, spreading a neo-nationalist ideology among children and teenagers²⁹. The propaganda mostly provides ideas about an external enemy, a heroic past and also states that the members' purpose is defending the homeland associating it with the religious idea of self-sacrificing for the best of their loved ones.

4. Neo-Nationalist Propaganda in Schools upon the Russian-Ukrainian War

With the beginning of the war in Ukraine, State propaganda in schools reached a new level. Before the war, individual children were involved in militaristic organizations and a single textbook on the history of Russia was compiled for schools including elementary, middle, and high schools. But now, all schools in the country are obligated to hold ideological lessons for children from the first to the eleventh grade³⁰. All materials for this particular course including textbooks, PowerPoint presentations, workbooks and additional materials are supplied directly by the Ministry of Education under the control of Center E (anti-terrorist and anti-extremist department of the Federal Security Service of Russia)³¹.

These lessons are called "Conversations about the important matters" [*Razgovory o vazhnom*], which discuss three main blocks³²: 1. External enemies of Russia; 2. Non-existence of Ukraine as a separate State, and Ukrainians as a separate nation; 3. Fulfillment of duty to the motherland in Ukraine [author's note: *i.e.*, it preventively protects Russia in Ukraine from a possible armed aggression supported by NATO].

As a result, propaganda is carried out in schools to spread the idea that NATO planned to attack Russia, therefore Putin tried to protect the country's borders from an invasion. The lessons also state that the Ukrainians are not a real nation to legitimize military operations on the territory of Ukraine and Russia is trying to save "the lost people". Moreover, to shape the collective opinion of youth, the program includes blocks about 'fake news' and underlines the idea that the international media are lying. As a result, the vast majority of schoolchildren supports the war because it is convinced that Russia is defending itself and fighting the Ukrainian Nazis for the good of the future.

And if teachers or parents try to speak up against these lessons or refuse to participate in them, law enforcement agencies open criminal cases under the article

²⁹ *Eight Myths about the Yunarmiya*, fontanka.ru/2019/04/16/144/.

³⁰ Russian education system has 3 stages: elementary, middle, and high schools. All kids have to start school education at 7 and an obligated level of education is middle school, *i.e.*, 9th grade (15-16 y.o. teenagers). Thus, the pro-war propaganda covering all age kids from 6/7 y.o. up to 18 y.o.

³¹ Main Directorate of the Russian Ministry of the Interior for Countering Extremism, *i.e.*, Centre E; for more details see: xn--b1aew.xn--p1ai/mvd/structure1/Glavnie_upravlenija/Glavnoe_upravlenie_po_protivodejstvu_j.

³² *Talk about Important Things. Academy of the Ministry of Education*, apkpro.ru/razgovory-o-vazhnom/; *Conversations about the Important: What Is It and What is Known about the Program?*, skysmart.ru/articles/useful/razgovory-o-vazhnom.

on discrediting the Russian Armed Forces or threaten to deprive them of parental rights or of their job³³.

5. Conclusions

The dynamics of education policy in Russia over the last 10 years clearly demonstrate the implementation of the strategy for the patriotic education of young people. It is possible to identify the sequence of implementation of the individual steps. The strategy includes political propaganda, militaristic training, and the complex of aggression against gender, sexual, ethnic, racial, religious identities and other minorities through historical myths and the active use of populist rhetoric intoxicated by hatred. On the legislative level, this process usually starts with the leader's speech, then annual addresses and recommendations follow, turning into programs and strategies of education, and then concludes with adopting laws to regulate the approach of upbringing and the standards of history teaching.

To sum up, it is evident that nowadays education in Russia is based on neo-nationalistic values and traditions, spreading and normalizing violence among children. All of this is closely related to the deprivation of the right to vote and freedom of speech of all groups of the population. Since each step of the educational policy was ruled by senior rulers, it reveals one of the main reasons of harsh outcomes of the democratic transition in Russia that mirrors in current politics: lack of lustrations. The old political elites bring the old values that root deeply into the militarism and nationalism of the former regime.

³³ Criminal Code of the Russian Federation dated 13 June 1996 N 63-Federal Law (as amended on 24 September 2022). Criminal Code, Article 280.3: «Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in order to protect the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens, maintain international peace and security, or exercise their powers by State bodies of the Russian Federation for these purposes».