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The Conspiracy Theory of History as Argument: Vladimir Putin's September 30, 2022, and February 21, 2023, addresses or The Paranoid Style in (Putin's) Russian Politics (with apologies to Richard Hofstadter)

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The Conspiracy Theory of History as Argument

*Vladimir Putin's September 30, 2022, and February 21, 2023, addresses or
The Paranoid Style in (Putin's) Russian Politics (with apologies to Richard
Hofstadter)*

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ABSTRACT: We explore the confluence of conspiracy theory and Vladimir Putin's justifications for war against Ukraine. Elements of conspiracy arguments began to appear in Putin's rhetoric early in his second term, but they became a fundamental feature prior to the start of war in 2022. We analyze Putin's use of conspiracy arguments in the runup to the invasion and as justification for the war amid the growing popular acceptance of conspiracy theories, in general.

KEYWORDS: conspiracy rhetoric, conspiracy theory, Crimea speech, Euromaidan, Munich Security Conference, mythical Russia-of-a-Thousand-Years, narrativity, NATO, Vladimir Putin, war in Ukraine

1. INTRODUCTION

Conspiracy theories have existed for as long as humankind has contemplated its condition. Early Greeks and Romans blamed conspiracies among the Gods for everything from natural disasters to failed wars or marriages. Indeed, few, if any, civilizations have been immune to belief in conspiracies and the inherent blame-shifting they entail.

In the words of Karl Popper (1950, p. 306), conspiracy theory "is the view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the man or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon...and who have conspired to bring it about".

Those who push conspiracy theories trade upon the discontents of the people, the inability of people to understand and adapt to change; this leads, in turn, to a sense of threat,

a feeling that institutions such as family, religion, even morality itself, are in dire peril. The notion of a conspiracy provides a concrete explanation for events and enables the discontented to ascribe their distress to certain persons who have brought this distress into the world through a conspiracy.

It is important to remember that this view of history is never completely false; it always contains elements of truth, which is what makes it so convincing (Young, 1974). In addition, of course, there are real conspiracies that are discovered from time to time; in the United States, for example, there was Watergate and the Iran-Contra Affair. And it is no secret that the Western Alliance and Russia have continued to spy on one another.

One feature of conspiracy argument that makes it attractive is its narrativity (Fisher, 1987). The conspiracy explanation is simply more attractive, more compelling, and seemingly more straightforward than an explanation based on facts, context, and nuance. Its persuasiveness rests on the human need for explanation, the search for “closure,” for the cause of tragedies and upheavals. In a way, its narrative power relies on the story-telling nature of humans, where there is always a narrative arc. Further, the conspiracy narrative is a closed system, one that is capable of subsuming uncomfortable questions and countervailing facts—what Zarefsky has termed the “self-sealing nature of conspiracy argument” (Zarefsky, 1984, p. 74). These features make the conspiratist’s argument non-falsifiable and therefore non-refutable. As a result, conspiracy arguments are almost impossible to overcome because they cannot be dealt with in regular argument forms.

Indeed, the history of the United States is rife with conspiracy claims, beginning with the belief in a Catholic conspiracy, a financial conspiracy, the Jewish conspiracy, and so on. Such ideas reached their apex during the Cold War, especially in the 1940s and 50s, when the belief in a Communist conspiracy dominated American political life. Other than the Communist conspiracy, most such claims have historically been viewed as fringe movements. Now, however, conspiracy arguments seem to have moved into the mainstream and become more salient. The growth of the Internet has provided conspiracy theorists—whom we call conspiratists—a platform for mass distribution of their ideas, regardless of the validity or truthfulness of those ideas or the credentials of their creator. Nevertheless, upon examination, the conspiracies that are promoted today are not materially different from those of times past; the biggest difference seems to be the immediacy of the Internet and the speed with which such ideas spread across social media platforms, which may be what gives them their greater currency.

Richard Hofstadter, in his essay “The paranoid style in American politics,” isolates five elements characteristic of belief that conspiracies are responsible for the ills of the nation/world (Hofstadter, 1965, pp. 29-32).

Conspiracy as the motive force in history
An uncompromising stance on social conflict
A clear delineation of the enemy
Control of some effective source of power, such as the press
Imitation of the enemy

George Thayer, in his study of conspiracy, provides us another element salient to our investigation (Thayer, 1967, pp. 175-176).¹

Tradition as dead or corrupt

2. CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN RUSSIA

In the remainder of this paper, we examine Putin's move toward conspiratorial interpretations of Russia's situation in the world, culminating in an examination of two of his most recent speeches.

In Russia, there was fertile ground for casting the West, and the United States in particular, as a malevolent enemy. The Cold War was and is a recent memory, where Russia was viewed as the dominant adversary of the West. The deterrence strategy of the two superpowers, whereby each could totally annihilate the other, cannot help but reinforce the contemporary idea that the West would happily destroy Russia, either by conventional or nuclear warfare. The misery of 1990s Russia can be made to provide a believable backdrop to more subversive, if less deadly, means of accomplishing the same end.

Modern-day Russia has proven to be especially susceptible to conspiracy arguments, which provide both a convenient enemy and a convenient scapegoat (Launer & Young, 2023; See also Yablokov, 2018, and Radnitz, 2021). As Putin began articulating his construction of a mythic Russia-of-a-Thousand-Years, he also demonstrated a drift towards belief in the conspiracy theory of recent Russian history.

It is against this background that Putin's move toward paranoia and conspiracy claims is framed. While there has been much commentary about Putin's rewriting of history, particularly history since WWII, the connection of this revision—especially his construction of Russia-of-a-Thousand-Years—to Putin's conspiracy rhetoric has not been fully explored. Yet, the two concepts develop along parallel tracks.

Regardless of Putin's personal beliefs regarding Russian history, he realized that the Russian people needed a unifying theme in order to form a coherent post-Communist identity, which he found in his narrative of the unbroken line of Russian greatness, unity, and perseverance since the days of ancient Rus'. In the early 1990s, Soviet identity—as well as its international standing and respect—were upended when the USSR dissolved and Russia emerged as an independent state. As Russia's leaders sought to find footing in a more democratic form of government, many liberal groups tried to articulate a new Russian idea, with little success, as they could not agree with one another on a way forward. This identity vacuum, exacerbated by the loss of prestige, persisted throughout Yeltsin's time in office, as the make-up of the State Duma consistently resisted many of the reforms necessary to becoming a functioning democracy (Ishiyama et al., 1997; Williams et al., 1997). Taking office in 2000, Putin quickly took advantage of this identity vacuum, melding it to the desire for respect.

Putin had made reference to the thousand-year history of Russia from time to time during his early terms in office (Walker, 2018). In this narrative, "mythic Russia" birthed a spiritually unified Slavic and Orthodox people, whose origins lie in present-day Ukraine.

¹ See also Bunzel, 1967, pp. 46-50.

In 2014, Putin declared “we (Ukrainians and Russians) are one people. Kiev is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus’ is our common source, and we cannot live without each other” (Putin, 2014). Thus, ancient Rus’ is the birthplace of the spiritually unified mythic Russian people.

The idealization of pasts that never existed—accompanied by calls to “restore” that past—is nothing new in political discourse. Kenneth Burke calls such idealizations “Utopias-in-reverse” (Burke, 1974). We have argued for many years that Vladimir Putin creates an idealized, atemporal, transnational mythic Russia in his public discourse, particularly after returning in 2012 for his third term as president. Mythic Russia is not the Russian Federation, nor is it a renamed USSR. Mythic Russia transcends both time and geopolitical states.

Putin’s construction of this mythic Russia became a “Utopia-in-reverse” of the idealized, consubstantial oneness of the Russian people, a projection of perfect harmonious unity in shared national identity that extended over a millennium. The unity envisioned by Putin did not entail dissent—a unified people do not dissent; therefore, all dissent was, of necessity, caused by external forces and had to be suppressed. In fact, neither the term nor the idea of “dissent” is ever mentioned by Putin in any of his Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly.

In the wake of the Crimea invasion in 2014 his vision of “Mythic Russia” began to crystalize: “We are one people....” At the same time, Putin began to focus more on conspiracy theories. Simply put, if a unified people who had existed for a thousand years—overcoming challenges that were real and often existential—were now living in chaos, there had to be a reason and the reason had to be external to Russian society. Russia had accepted democracy; it had adopted a market economy. If prosperity did not follow, as people had been promised, there had to be a cause; clearly, there are forces that were intervening and preventing progress, thwarting the rebirth of Russia and the restoration of international influence.

This notion initially appeared in 2007, when, at the Munich Security Conference, Putin launched a verbal attack on the West, specifically the United States, for seeking to impose a “unipolar order” on the world, with the US as the only pole. Prior to this speech, Putin (2007) had mentioned unipolarity only briefly. Yet here he claims:

We are seeing a greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law. One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way.

The speech quickly becomes a litany of grievances, as he refers to a legacy of “ideological stereotypes, double standards, and other typical aspects of Cold War bloc thinking.” Clearly, Putin is referring to what he perceives as prejudice against Russia left over from the Cold War. In his view, these stereotypes did not allow Russia to fully develop into a “mature” state, as they resulted in asymmetrical relationships that effectively kept Russia as a client state. Further, this retrograde thinking fostered a patronizing attitude towards Russia, in the form of frequent “schooling” of the country on democracy by nations that do not themselves always follow its tenets (Launer & Young, 2023).

Putin sees this movement toward greater hegemony (through “unipolarity”) in American efforts to strengthen military resources in Europe, particularly the placement of missile defense installations in Eastern Europe, in countries formerly controlled by the

Soviet Union. To this end, he argues that the expansion of NATO to include former Warsaw Pact nations is an aggressive move, openly encroaching on territory that was traditionally in Russia's "sphere of influence," thereby bringing Western military forces to the border of the Russian Federation.

Putin weaves a narrative critical of NATO's plan to install missile defense facilities in the Czech Republic and Romania, ignoring the fact that these countries are not actually contiguous with Russia—to say nothing about the fact that they sought protection from Russia by applying for NATO membership as soon as they were eligible. In so doing, Putin constructs a conspiracy explanation centering on Western thirst for hegemony, with Western-style democracy the only acceptable form of government and American military might (with strings attached) the only guarantor of peace. This narrative casts all NATO members as "vassal"—as opposed to "sovereign"—states; thus, he sees Russia squarely in the crosshairs of Western ambition (Jaroszynsky et al., 2023).

Clearly, Putin began to perceive Western Europe's embrace of countries formerly in the Warsaw Pact as a threat to the future of Russia itself. In this context, his concerns about NATO encroachment close to Russia's borders can be seen as a premise for his belief in and later claims regarding spheres of influence. For Putin, that sphere would include much, if not all, of Eastern Europe.

Thus, Putin's goal, we believe, was a new narrative casting Russia as victim and the United States as villain. At this point, we can begin to see a second goal for the new narrative, one aimed at the Russian public as well as those in his immediate audience. Abandoning the idea of an anti-terrorism partnership with the United States and full rapprochement with Europe, Putin turned to a familiar strategy: the common enemy. Reorienting the relationship in this way, in front of a Western audience, is far more powerful for those watching in Russia than giving a similar speech at home.

The Munich speech came at the end of Putin's second term in office, constitutionally his last, before running again in 2012. He stepped aside in 2008, swapping places with Dmitri Medvedev, the Prime Minister. During the four years of Medvedev's term as President, Putin apparently developed further his notion of the thousand-year history of Russia along with his growing sense of a Western conspiracy against Russian sovereignty.

Returning to the Presidency in 2012, Putin faced mass demonstrations opposing his election, as well as demonstrations against the rigged Duma elections of 2011 (protests he saw as instigated by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton). In the immediate aftermath of his election, themes from the 2007 Munich address recurred in Putin's speeches as he continued to refine the conspiracy argument.

Those themes come together in 2014, when, while speaking about the takeover of Crimea, Putin (2014) returns to the conspiratorial argument. one can see conspiracy themes meld with his version of "Russia-of-a-Thousand-Years," and, importantly, with his ideas about Nazis in Ukraine.

...those...behind the latest events in Ukraine had a different agenda: they were preparing yet another government takeover. They resorted to terror, murder, and pogroms. Nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes, and anti-Semites executed this coup.²

² The English language translation of this speech, which appeared on the Kremlin website, rendered the Russian as "riots" rather than "pogroms," thereby significantly changing its meaning.

At this point, the speech simply goes off the rails, as Putin (2014) warms to his subject:

Like a mirror, the situation in Ukraine reflects what is going on and what has been happening in the world over the past several decades. After the dissolution of bipolarity on the planet, we no longer have stability.... Our western partners, led by the United States of America, prefer not to be guided by international law in their practical policies, but by the rule of the gun. They have come to believe in their exclusivity and exceptionalism, that they can decide the destinies of the world, that only they can ever be right.

Putin (2014) even amplifies his complaints about the OSCE, first articulated in Munich in 2007:

In 2004, to push the necessary candidate through at the presidential elections, they thought up some sort of third round that was not stipulated by the law.... And now, they have thrown in an organised and well-equipped army of militants.

And then:

We understand what is happening; we understand that these actions were aimed against Ukraine and Russia and against Eurasian integration. And all this while Russia strived to engage in dialogue with our colleagues in the West.

...they have lied to us many times, made decisions behind our backs, placed before us as an accomplished fact.³ This happened with NATO's expansion to the East, as well as the deployment of military infrastructure at our borders.

It happened with the deployment of a missile defence system. It happened with the endless foot-dragging in the talks on visa issues, promises of fair competition and free access to global markets. (Putin, 2014)

Shifting the blame to the West for the lack of economic progress in Russia, Putin (2014) declares:

In short, we have every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment, led in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, continues today. They are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner...

Putin concludes this section by drawing what must have been a frightening picture for his Russian audience—NATO ships in the Black Sea.

3. THE ACCESSION SPEECH AND THE 2023 PAFA

We now turn to the two recent speeches mentioned at the beginning of this paper: Putin's September 30, 2022, address on the Accession of Donetsk and Lugansk to the Russian Federation and his annual Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly (PAFA), delivered February 21, 2023. Our argument is that by this point, Putin has gone all-in on a Western conspiracy as the reason Russia is not the progressive, prosperous, "sovereign" nation he

³Mikhail Zygar dates Putin's turn against the West to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq (see Zygar, 2016, p. 37).

thinks it should be.⁴

As noted in the introduction to this paper, conspiracy theory is the belief that an explanation for the condition of society lies in “the discovery of those who are interested in the occurrence of [a] phenomenon and have...conspired to bring it about” (Popper, 1950, p. 306). Clearly, in Putin’s thinking, the mastermind behind Russia’s troubles is the West, particularly the United States, and the remnants of Cold War thinking and policy.

We see this belief manifested clearly in the two speeches under examination, the Accession speech in 2022 and the PAFA for 2023, as he excoriates the West for trying to destroy Russia. In Putin’s mind, there is little doubt that the difficulties facing Russia are the result of efforts by the United States to create the unipolar world he believes they desire. But more than simply desiring so much international hegemony, the conspiracy thesis assumes that the malevolent actors have the ability to destroy Russia, thereby bringing about the end they seek.

Putin believes the West is undermining Russia by denying it the natural spheres of influence and the prestige that grow out of the thousand-year history of Russia-Ukraine-Belarus. Thus, the argument is premised on the mythic, unified Russia-of-a-Thousand-Years, whose peoples always worked together for a common good. Conflating mythic Russia with the Russian state, in the Accession Speech he declares that the annexation of Donetsk, Lugansk, Zaporozhe, and Kherson—and before them, Crimea—was a “spiritual choice” of union with “their Motherland” which “for more than a thousand years of Russian statehood” had defined “our ancestors” (Putin, 2022).

Thus, Russians and Ukrainians are, he states, one people. Kiev is the “mother of Russian cities.” “Ancient Rus is our common source.” Prince Vladimir “predetermined the...basis of the culture, civilization and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus” (Putin, 2014).

However, many Ukrainians, Putin argues, especially prominent, wealthy, and politically empowered Ukrainians, have been corrupted by Western influences, contaminating Slavic/Orthodox unity. Putin identifies these forces in Ukraine as “Nazis” and “neo-Nazis,” and by eliminating this malign influence, this enemy, Russia can purify Ukraine and restore it to its rightful place in the “Russian World.”

Hofstadter identifies the belief that events and social conditions are the result of a conspiracy of powerful individuals as the central feature or element of the conspiratorial mindset, resulting in a shifting of blame away from the society and its leaders and on to those conspirators who have a malign interest in the outcome. Such a belief both explains and results in a loss of agency on the part of those most affected by the undesirable conditions. At the same time, the presence of an identified enemy provides not only a scapegoat, but also a unifying force that can itself be used to control society by justifying all manner of restrictions. Therein lies the attraction of this world view.

Clearly, by 2022 Putin has perfected the conspiratorial world view and the concomitant conspiracy argument that he deploys to justify everything from increasing repression to the invasion of Ukraine. Looking at the Accession speech of 2022 and the PAFA of 2023 through the lens of Hofstadter’s matrix, it is possible to identify the

⁴ We puzzled for some time over the meaning Putin gives to the term “sovereign,” as he uses it frequently, usually to declare Russia a “sovereign” nation. After considering context and usage, we have concluded that Putin is referring to “agency”—meaning Russia as a sovereign state has agency to determine its own course and its own national interest.

conspiratorial elements in Putin's arguments beyond the obvious shifting of blame to the West and the reliance on the "mythic Russia" argument. In essence, he projects Soviet behavior—particularly as it related to the language and culture of Ukraine and the Warsaw Pact countries—onto the West, using those charges as proof of the malign nature of Western interest in destroying Russia. In so doing, he exemplifies the non-falsifiable nature of the conspiracy argument.

For example, in the 2022 address, Putin identifies the "neo-Nazi coup d'état in Ukraine in 2014," and the "terrorist attacks carried out by the Kiev regime," praising those who "died for the right to speak their native language, to preserve their culture, traditions and religion...." (Putin, 2022). He calls out the "Kiev authorities and their true handlers in the West," and declares that Russia will defend its land (now including the Donbas) in a war he claims was started by Kiev in 2014.

Identifying the West as the true enemy, Putin (2022) declares:

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the West decided that the world and all of us would permanently accede to its dictates. ...the West...continues looking for another chance to strike a blow at us, to weaken and break up Russia, which they have always dreamed about, to divide our state and set our peoples against each other, and to condemn them to poverty and extinction. I want to underscore again that their insatiability and determination to preserve their unfettered dominance are the real causes of the hybrid war that the collective West is waging against Russia. They do not want us to be free; they want us to be a colony. They do not want equal cooperation; they want to loot. They do not want to see us a free society, but a mass of soulless slaves.

In reference to Thayer's element about tradition and morality, Putin (2022) has much to say in this regard as well, casting Russia as the protector of civilization:

They do not give a damn about the natural right of billions of people, the majority of humanity, to freedom and justice, the right to determine their own future. They have already moved on to the radical denial of moral, religious, and family values.

Let's answer some very simple questions for ourselves. Now I would like to return to what I said and want to address also all citizens of the country—not just the colleagues that are in the hall— but all citizens of Russia: do we want to have here, in our country, in Russia, "parent number one, parent number two and parent number three" (they have completely lost it!) instead of mother and father? Do we want our schools to impose on our children, from their earliest days in school, perversions that lead to degradation and extinction? Is that what we want for our country and our children? This is all unacceptable to us.

In these passages alone, one can see virtually all of the elements of Hofstadter's paradigm—the depiction of the enemy, social conflict, the source of power. The only thing missing is evidence. One apparent difference between earlier conspiracy theories and those in vogue today is the role of evidence. Hofstadter (1965) and Young (1974) both demonstrate that conspiracists—those who adhere to the conspiracy theory of history— attempt to amass "evidence" in support of their claims. That evidence is marked by fallacies and other flaws, but it is, nonetheless, seen as vital to the argument for the existence of a conspiracy. In the 21st century, in contrast, a series of claims are made and then the burden of proof is shifted from those who would make the claim to those who would oppose it. This was perhaps best demonstrated during the aftermath of the 2020 US presidential election: when asked for evidence of a stolen election, one advocate responded, "Where is

the proof that the election was NOT stolen?” thereby shifting presumption and demanding the opposition prove a negative.

In the case of Putin’s argument, no attempt is made to provide evidence; the argument structure depends instead on declaration and the narrative of the thousand-year history of Russia. And how will the country defend itself against the depredations of the West? Through unity (e.g., a lack of dissent) and reliance on the long history of the Russian people, aided by the strong centralized government they have created.

To emphasise, one of the reasons for the centuries-old Russophobia, the Western elites’ unconcealed animosity toward Russia is precisely the fact that we did not allow them to rob us during the period of colonial conquests and forced the Europeans to trade with us on mutually beneficial terms. This was achieved by creating a strong centralized state in Russia, which grew and got stronger based on the great moral values of Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism, as well as Russian culture and the Russian word that were open to all.

Thus, the vision of mythic Russia developed by Putin over the course of his years in office substitutes for evidence in the historical argument he makes for the existence of a mighty Western conspiracy against the country. The conspiracy claim itself is embedded in presumed motive statements by Putin while the narrative he constructs carries the argumentative and evidentiary burden.

He continues this theme and his conspiracist argument on the one-year anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine in his constitutionally mandated Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly.

One year ago, to protect the people in our historical lands, to ensure the security of our country and to eliminate the threat coming from the neo-Nazi regime that had taken hold in Ukraine after the 2014 coup, the decision was taken to begin the special military operation. (Putin, 2023)

Not letting up on either his fantastical narrative about Russia-of-a-Thousand-Years or his insistence that Russia’s inability to prevail in Ukraine is due to the West (more likely true in this instance), Putin (2023) accused the Western allies of duplicity and provocation.

The United States and NATO quickly deployed their army bases and secret biological laboratories near Russian borders. They mastered the future theatre of war during war games, and they prepared the Kiev regime which they controlled and Ukraine which they had enslaved for a large-scale war.

In this speech, however, Putin, whom Anatoly Kurmanaev described as an “amateur revisionist historian,” (Kurmanaev 2023) pays some attention to the need for—or at least the expectation of—evidence as he details something like a timeline for the period leading up to the invasion. He notes that no one has more military bases abroad than the United States (true); “the planet is covered with them!” (probably true). He details alleged negotiations among Russia, Ukraine, the US, and NATO regarding the Donbas through December 2021.

In essence, all key, fundamental points were rejected. After that it finally became clear that the go-ahead for the implementation of aggressive plans had been given and they were not going to stop.

The threat was growing by the day. Judging by the information we received, there was no doubt that everything would be in place by February 2022 for launching yet another bloody punitive operation in Donbas. (Putin, 2023)

Of course, it was Russia that had amassed troops and military equipment along the borders of Ukraine with Russia and Belarus. Nevertheless, “Let me reiterate that they were the ones who started this war, while we used force and are using it to stop the war,”—an argument premised on his claim that the war began in 2014.

Most of this speech is a revisionist version of recent Russian history, particularly as it relates to the conflict in the breakaway regions of the Donbas. Indeed, the address continues in this vein for over 13,000 words. Like the September 30, 2022, speech, Putin’s Address to the Federal Assembly exhibits not only the characteristic elements of conspiracy argument, but also many of the stylistic devices and fallacies that are found in these arguments.

4. CONCLUSION

A common strategy in conspiracy arguments is to posit a claim and then proceed as if the claim were proven, using it as a premise in subsequent arguments.⁵ Similarly, Putin’s claims about mythic “Russia-of-a-Thousand-Years” stand in for multiple argumentative elements, but serve best as an assumed universal truth that encompasses the values of the historical society he envisions as well as the bolstering of spirit and a call to arms to fight the conspiracy. That (assumed) conspiracy of the United States and NATO provides a convenient nemesis, deflecting blame for economic hardship, rationalizing repression and further strengthening of the State, and, at the same time, justifying prosecution of the war in Ukraine. Success in Ukraine will bring purgation of the nation, cleansing it of contamination so that Russia and Ukraine can again become one people. This assumed unity, essential to mythic, trans-historic, transnational Russia—the “Russian World”—is the foundation for all of Putin’s arguments about the country and its people—their strength, their unity, and their perseverance—thereby obscuring reality.

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⁵ For a detailed description of this approach, see Young & Launer, 1995.

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