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SWP Comment

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Military-Patriotic Education in Russia

How the Next Generation Is Being Brought Into Line with the Regime

Margarete Klein and Susan Stewart

Since 2022, the Russian leadership has significantly expanded its activities in the area of military-patriotic education for children and young people. New compulsory measures and voluntary programmes have been introduced. Their apparent diversity notwithstanding, the Kremlin has strict control over these new measures and programmes. Its goal is to educate the next generation in accordance with the Russian leadership's line, recruit loyal young people for the regime and the armed forces, and identify at an early stage those who might become critics of the regime. The new measures cover a growing number of children and young people and now extend even to kindergartens. Those affected respond with enthusiasm, indifference or opportunism. Overt resistance is evident only in isolated cases owing to the heavy pressure to conform and the repressive nature of the regime.

While military-patriotic elements in Russia's educational policy have been on the rise since the second half of the 1990s, under Vladimir Putin they have been systematically developed into central tools for the ideological integration of the younger generation.

Military-patriotic programmes received a significant boost in 2014 after Russia had annexed Crimea and invaded the Donbas. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 acted as a further catalyst. Since then, the number and scope of such programmes, their funding and the extent to which children and young people are involved have all increased enormously. In particular, the paramilitary component of the projects in question has been strengthened.

Main objectives: Loyalty and recruitment

The key elements of military-patriotic education in Russia are the interpretation of the country's history as a permanent, glorious defensive struggle against external threats (primarily from the West), its self-image as a besieged fortress and the glorification of its military. At the same time, the existence of an independent Russian "civilisation" is postulated – one that stands in clear contrast with Western liberal values. Further, the Russian canon includes traditional ideas of family, sacrifice, heroism and loyalty to the leadership, whereby the interests of the individual are to be subordinated to those of the community.



The Russian leadership is pursuing three goals in the area of military-patriotic education. First, it wants to ensure the loyalty of the younger generation to the regime and thus secure its own long-term future. For the Kremlin, it is not enough that young people generally support its domestic and foreign policy; rather, it should also be possible to mobilise them for specific projects initiated by the regime and thereby instil something more than mere conformist thinking. The war against Ukraine and the confrontation with Europe play a central role here. At a press conference on 14 December 2023, Putin cited an alleged quote from Bismarck according to which “wars are won not by generals but by teachers and priests”. Putin noted that Bismarck was “absolutely right” and commented: “Educating young people in the spirit of patriotism ... is crucial.”

For teaching staff and older youths loyal to the regime, the new measures make it easier to identify regime critics, increasing the ability of the state to target individuals for repression. For example, Rospatriot-sentr, which forms part of the state youth agency, conducts profiling tests on young people aged 12 – 18 to identify “leadership and anti-leadership figures”. In the occupied territories of Ukraine, the programmes also serve to eradicate the Ukrainian identity of children and young people and educate them to be loyal citizens of Russia.

Second, patriotic-military activities can be used to identify loyal young cadres for the regime and promote them accordingly. For example, the “Movement of the First” organises a competition called “Be, Don’t Seem To Be!” in which mentors aged 16 and above can participate and prove they are in line with the system. The career platform “Russia – Land of Opportunities”, established by the Presidential Administration in 2018, regularly holds competitions for future leaders at the “Senezh” training centre. One of the most prominent rising stars is Olga Zanko, who, in 2015, co-founded the organisation “Victory Volunteers” at the age of 25. Six years later, in 2021, Zanko became a State Duma deputy.

Third, the programmes serve the purpose of recruiting young people for the military. In order to reach the target of 1.5 million men and women serving in Russia’s armed forces and to recruit enough personnel for the war against Ukraine, the regime is making sure that schoolchildren are taught basic military skills, a positive image of the armed forces is promoted and values such as sacrifice and heroism are instilled. The aim is to raise a militarised generation for whom army service and war are normal aspects of daily life. In addition, the military-patriotic programmes facilitate the involvement of war veterans in the regime’s activities, for example, through school visits. The return from Ukraine of hundreds of thousands of men who have experienced violence firsthand and, in some cases, have become accustomed to earning a good wage presents a challenge to Putin’s system. Deploying those individuals as multipliers of the military-patriotic education of the next generation is one way of ensuring they feel appreciated and enjoy both prestige and an income.

Besides its usefulness for the system, military-patriotic education in Russia has an ideological component. While Article 13 of the Russian Constitution prohibits the establishment of a state ideology, it is nonetheless the case that elements of such an ideology have emerged during Putin’s rule. Military-patriotic measures in the educational sphere can be seen as having contributed to this. Thus, the Russian leadership is increasingly resurrecting certain fundamental characteristics of the Soviet system, even though it was precisely this development that Article 13 was intended to prevent.

Diversity of measures

The regime relies on various measures for the implementation of its military-patriotic education policy. These differ in terms of nature (compulsory or voluntary), content focus and target group (age and/or gender).

Some measures are obligatory for all school children and university students.

They are based on a uniform curriculum. At the same time, there is a whole range of extracurricular activities on offer. While these are formally optional, implicit pressure from the system and certain practical considerations, such as the lack of alternative childcare, limit the individual's freedom of choice. The extracurricular activities allow the focus to be turned on a range of topics, which means that children and young people are ostensibly able to choose from among the narrowly defined ideological options and the net can therefore be cast as wide as possible. At the same time, young Russians are constantly exposed to similar content through other channels, such as pop culture and the gaming sphere.

Until the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia's military-patriotic education was aimed primarily at schoolchildren, teenagers and young adults. In October 2024, however, Putin pushed for similar activities to take place in kindergartens, including receiving visits from veterans, participating in parades and being introduced to the official propaganda. Overall, an ideological component with regard to gender relations is evident. While the paramilitary activities are targeted more at boys, the programme segments that deal with "civilian" skills are intended, above all, for girls. The latter are taught that, in principle, they can pursue any profession but being a mother is – in line with the traditional role model – the most desirable vocation for a woman.

A large number of state and state-affiliated organisations are involved in the planning and implementation of the measures. They range from the Ministry of Education and the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs (Rosmolodezh) to the Ministry of Defence, Cossack groups, veterans' organisations and formally private "military companies". The "Wagner" mercenary group, for example, founded the "Wagneryonok" youth club and has held recruitment talks at schools, while other relevant companies, such as "ENOT", have organised paramilitary youth camps.

The fact that many actors are involved in the military-patriotic education of the

younger generation reflects a management and control system that is typical for the Kremlin. This system not only makes sure that many shoulders have to bear the cost of the measures; it also prevents any of the actors involved from gaining either access to excessive financial resources or influence. Based on the principle of "divide et impera", the Kremlin's control is ensured through overlaps, duplications and competition. Thus, although the new educational measures are aimed at the militarisation of society, the Ministry of Defence is just one of several important actors. The militarism that has developed in Russia is shaped by the Kremlin; it does not translate into greater autonomy for the military.

Compulsory subjects

At the beginning of the 2022 school year, the subject "Conversations about Important Things" (also called "Important Conversations") was introduced. Although it is not considered an official school subject and no marks are given, it is perceived as compulsory and extends to all eleven grades. Each week, teachers address a topic in a manner tailored to the age of their pupils. "Conversations about Important Things" take place on Mondays during the first lesson, usually immediately after a ceremony (also introduced in 2022) in which the Russian flag is raised and the national anthem sung.

The topics discussed often include public holidays, such as Women's Day (8 March), the anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War (9 May) or the Day of Unity of the Peoples of Russia and Belarus (2 April). They are diverse and cover geography, history, culture and social responsibilities, among other things. Most relate strongly or even exclusively to Russia.

The materials for the "Important Conversations" are drawn up by the Russian Ministry of Education, with the participation of the Institute for the Study of Childhood, Family and Education (also called the Institute of Education for short). They are very detailed, with questions provided for the pupils and "correct" answers for the

teachers as well as methodological recommendations, videos and interactive suggestions. Although their use is not compulsory, the prepared materials simplify the task for teachers, who are often overworked, and make it less likely they will encounter any problems caused by their comments or teaching methods.

The “Important Conversations” are increasingly becoming an integral part of the Russian educational system. They have been extended to vocational schools and pilot projects have been launched in kindergartens. And since the 2024–25 school year, the Institute for Education has organised a competition that highlights the usefulness of the “Conversations” as an educational tool.

Moreover, since September 2023, physical education classes have been geared more towards serving paramilitary purposes. Pupils are now required to complete compulsory “basic military training”. Furthermore, since 2024, the subject “Fundamentals of Security and Defence of the Fatherland” has been added to the curriculum. It replaced the subject “Fundamentals of Life Safety” and covers topics such as the use of drones.

Since some of the compulsory courses at schools are considered rather dull, the regime is supplementing them with more interactive formats – for example, veterans visiting schools or pupils visiting veterans at home, contributing to the preservation of war memorials and writing letters to soldiers who are in combat. Through storytelling and role playing, children and young people are encouraged to take on the part of “good patriots” themselves.

As a result of the new and redesigned subjects, a growing number of school hours are being devoted to military-patriotic content. This creates additional burdens for teachers and leaves less time for traditional school subjects. Moreover, the value of English and other foreign languages is increasingly being questioned.

At university level, the course “Fundamentals of Russian Statehood” has been obligatory for first-semester students since

autumn 2023. It has a lecture format and focuses on Russia as a “state-civilisation” that has played (and continues to play) a special historical role and is characterised by certain (primarily collective) values. The course is accompanied by a series of compulsory videos from the project “Russia’s DNA”. That project is run by Andrei Polosin, currently Vice-Rector of the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA), which reports to the Russian president. Polosin has close ties to Sergei Kirienko, deputy head of the Presidential Administration, whom he calls his mentor.

On the “Russia’s DNA” website, the compulsory video series is described as containing “patriotic content aimed at combating the falsification of history [and] popularising cultural heritage and traditional values”. It covers topics that range from values (such as solidarity, stability and spirituality) through the Russian regions and resources to political and historical issues.

There is also a course textbook, which has received mixed reviews from Russian academics. But it is assumed that most students do not need to bother using the textbook as allowing anyone to fail the course is frowned upon. In particular, students outside the social sciences and humanities are said to have little interest in the course. And even though efforts have been made to quickly provide teachers with the necessary training, it is proving difficult to provide an adequately prepared teaching corps.

As in the case of “Important Conversations”, much depends on the teacher’s approach. While some teachers perceive the course as a continuation of the “Conversations” at university level, others draw parallels with the subject “scientific Communism”, which was taught during the Soviet era.

Extracurricular activities

Russia’s leadership is also counting on military-patriotic messages being sent by means other than just the compulsory state programmes. Children and young people are to be reached on an ongoing basis through

extracurricular activities. For this reason, both the funding for and the number of the relevant organisations and measures have increased significantly since 2022.

Among the more important organisations founded before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine are the “Victory Volunteers” and the Youth Army. The former originated from a 2015 initiative to commemorate the 70th anniversary of Russia’s victory in World War II and was subsequently institutionalised. Young people aged 14 and above stage commemorative events, maintain and restore war graves and memorials, provide support for veterans and organise patriotic-historical lectures and competitions. Russia’s history is presented as a long, glorious defensive struggle whose heroes serve as role models for today’s younger generation.

While the organisation “Victory Volunteers” aims primarily to provide a patriotic education for young people, the Youth Army focuses more on paramilitary training. Founded in 2016 by then Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, it is closely intertwined with the military. The Ministry of Defence finances the Youth Army and appoints its commander; the current holder of this position is Vladislav Golovin, who was awarded the title of “Hero of Russia” for his participation in the capture of the Ukrainian city of Mariupol. Many of the instructors are active soldiers or veterans. Accordingly, the activities of the Youth Army are aimed not only at conveying a positive image of the armed forces and promoting values such as self-sacrifice and heroism among children and young people but also teaching them practical military skills. Activities include training marches, sports such as wrestling and close combat, navigation, first aid for the wounded and weapons training. Among other things, participants practise throwing a hand grenade and assembling a Kalashnikov assault rifle.

In 2022, following the full-scale invasion, another large organisation was founded on Putin’s initiative – the “Movement of the First”, which makes a conscious link between itself and the Soviet-era Pioneers.

The “Movement of the First” has a broader thematic focus than the other two organisations and combines patriotic activities such as decorating windows on public holidays with active political, media and cultural work. Meetings are held with high-ranking politicians and Putin appears at the organisation’s congresses. Furthermore, the Movement has its own media channels, which teach children and young people how to conduct public relations in line with the regime’s agenda, while its cultural festivals closely adhere to the leadership’s programmes. And there are also paramilitary components, such as the “Zarnitsa 2.0” war game, which dates back to the Soviet era and was relaunched last year. Some 800,000 children took part in 2024, and that number is reported to have risen to 3.1 million in 2025.

The large number of organisations serves to cast a wide net to attract children and young people with different inclinations. While schools tend to deploy more traditional methods for teaching the compulsory measures, non-school organisations use a wider range of methods and promote a spirit of adventure and community. “Milentainment“, for example, gives participants the opportunity to have their own highly emotional experiences and feel like heroes of the fatherland. This is achieved through re-enactment, role playing and immersive activities such as video games or simulated war scenarios. Similarly, the “Zarnitsa 2.0” war game allows children and young people to try their hand at being medics, commanders or drone operators, while members of the Youth Army wear their own uniforms, are fed from field kitchens and hear first-hand accounts from veterans of the war against Ukraine. In addition, mentors are employed to serve as “good patriot” role models and to encourage children and young people to form emotional bonds beyond those of the family.

Although the conventional family is at the core of the so-called traditional values that the Russian leadership repeatedly invokes, the regime is increasingly intervening in the upbringing of the younger

generation. This is evident not only in the training of specific skills but, above all, in the teaching of values. Thus, the main role assigned to the family is that of an anchor of emotional stability. Parents who are opposed to their children receiving a military-patriotic education risk repression.

Perceptible, albeit limited criticism

According to opinion polls conducted among the Russian population, the 18–24 age group is the most critical of the regime’s current foreign policy. In particular, it has a negative view of the war against Ukraine. At the same time, interest in the war is lowest among this group. Thus, there is a mixture of rejection and apathy among Russia’s young adults. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the critical opinions of this cohort are part of the motivation for the Russian leadership to seek to influence the younger generation through the measures described above. Evaluating how successful the regime has been in this endeavour is not easy, however.

As far as the “Important Conversations” are concerned, they have established themselves over the past three years and are now widely accepted or at least tolerated. But there are indications that parents are making various efforts to have their children exempted from taking the subject – whether by submitting requests to the school, making informal agreements with teachers or organising competing activities. Some parents try to have their children put into the class of a teacher who is known to downplay the ideological content.

Although there are reports of school teachers being dismissed for refusing to conduct the “Important Conversations”, these are probably exceptional cases. However, it is likely that some teachers who might similarly have refused had already lost their jobs or resigned over their stance on Russia’s war against Ukraine. Among those who have remained, some appear to talk about the content differently from how

the materials dictate or approach the topic in a different manner.

It should be noted that to date, attempts to avoid taking “Important Conversations” or to modify their content have been made only at the individual level (that is, by families or teachers or, more rarely, by an entire school) and have not been of an organised nature. It can therefore be assumed that most children participate in these classes without the content being questioned to any significant extent. That said, some parents rely on being able to set different priorities or express opposing views at home.

Opinions about the university course “Fundamentals of Russian Statehood” are divided, but it tends to be seen as a necessary evil by its critics. There are virtually no reports of students refusing to attend the lectures. Severe criticism can be heard from some teachers who have undergone training for the new course: they have had harsh things to say about the textbook, the accompanying videos and the university’s instructions for the lectures. Critics of the course often condemn it as propaganda rather than a serious academic discipline. However, it is also seen by some as an opportunity for genuine discussion, depending on how the lessons are structured. Several teachers have complained that the textbook contains statements that are unclear; for example, the key term “civilisation” is not clearly defined. This not only makes it difficult to adequately convey the book’s contents; it also leaves the instructor vulnerable to attack as a regime critic if they offer an interpretation that is not to the liking of those in power.

The success of the extracurricular activities can be measured by the number of participants. After all, these are “voluntary” activities, even if there are indirect pressures from group dynamics, a lack of alternative leisure pursuits and reports that entire school classes have been forced to take part in these activities. Between 2022 and 2025, the official membership numbers of the Youth Army and “Volunteers for Victory” have grown from a few hundred thousand to 1.8 million and 1 million, re-

spectively, although it is not clear whether these are actual members or merely participants. According to official figures, no fewer than 13 million children and young people have taken part in the activities of the “Movement of the First” during the first three years of its existence. Even if these figures are to be treated with caution, it is evident that the number of young people being reached has increased significantly. In addition, the measures have proved of practical use in allowing the regime to continue the war against Ukraine. Since 2022, more than 11,000 alumni of the Youth Army are said to have volunteered to serve in that war.

A new generation in the mould of the Kremlin

The Russian leadership is concerned that young people are more critical of the regime than are other age groups. Thus, the measures and programmes described above can be understood as an attempt to win over the younger generation using various methods. They are having an increasingly widespread impact, extending not only to schools but also to universities and, more recently, kindergartens. In addition, the relevant programmes are also being implemented in the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine. This is a particularly perfidious approach, as Ukrainian children are being re-educated in line with Russian propaganda and turned against Ukraine both physically and psychologically.

There are differing views among observers about what this policy will achieve. Some expect large parts of the Russian population to be successfully brought into line. Others believe that the measures will trigger protests in the medium term because some members of the target group feel patronised. Still others point to the increasing polarisation of society, which is being exacerbated by mobilisation campaigns and propaganda. If the parallels drawn with the Soviet era are taken seriously, it will likely take some time for opposition to the meas-

ures to spread beyond a small marginalised minority – if, indeed, it does at all. Even though the world has changed dramatically since the Soviet era, Moscow is successfully ensuring that large parts of the Russian population do not have access to reliable information and instilling mistrust of Western media. This is due not only to the regime’s ability to control the flow of information, but also to the fact that many citizens would find it difficult or even painful to change their views.

Therefore, it cannot be assumed that the next generation in Russia will be in favour of a relationship with the West that is significantly more positive than it is today. This is particularly true of those who are on their way to becoming part of the country’s political elite. Rather, it is probable that the values currently promoted by the Kremlin will be reflected in the actions of those individuals, not least as these values are being underpinned by tangible incentives. Those who regard war as a normal part of daily life are likely to more readily support the conflict in Ukraine and accept the casualties. Those who revere heroes will likely seek to emulate them. Since many of the organisations mentioned above not only indoctrinate their own members but also seek to reach the wider population, their impact extends beyond the age cohort of children and adolescents. A militarised society will be more inclined to endorse the Kremlin’s bellicose approach and its risky foreign policy.

It is important to understand that ideological elements go hand in hand with practical benefits for the young people who participate in the programmes. If they see their involvement as a preliminary step to being admitted to their preferred university or gaining entry into an attractive profession, it will be easier for them to accept the programmes’ contents without raising any questions. This effect is reinforced by the formation and strengthening of networks over time. Participants meet again in other contexts and support one another professionally and/or privately. They accept the ideology or are more willing to espouse it

because of the sense of belonging and social advancement that result from doing so.

Through its activities in the area of military-patriotic education for children and young people, the Kremlin is attempting to secure long-term support among the population for its current foreign policy. There will, of course, continue to be Russian citizens who oppose that policy in the future. However, they will most likely remain in the minority and belong to socio-economic strata that have little influence on political developments within the country. Those who shape Russian politics in the future will – either out of conviction or (more likely) opportunism – accept the ideology that has informally become established through the military-patriotic educational measures of recent years. That ideology vilifies the West and glorifies war. Thus, it will take generations, rather than years, for a different Russia to emerge.



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