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Putin's Rejection of the West, in Writing

By Leonid Bershidsky

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What kind of country is Vladimir Putin's Russia? The third year of his third presidential term has offered plenty of clues: the Crimea invasion, the shuttering of uncensored media outlets, prison terms for protesters. Now, Putin is planning to put the intellectual and ideological foundations of the new regime into words.

A document called "Foundations of the State Cultural Policy" has been under development since 2012. A special working group under Putin's chief of staff Sergei Ivanov will soon roll it out for a month of "public debate" before Putin gets to sign it. Quotes from the culture ministry's draft, presumably the basis for the final one, have leaked out.

"Russia must be viewed as a unique and original civilization that cannot be reduced to 'East' or 'West,'" reads the document, signed by Deputy Culture Minister Vladimir Aristarkhov. "A concise way of formulating this stand would be, 'Russia is not Europe,' and that is confirmed by the entire history of the country and the people."

Russia's non-European path should be marked by "the rejection of such principles as multiculturalism and tolerance," according to the draft. "No references to 'creative freedom' and 'national originality' can justify behavior considered unacceptable from the point of view of

Russia's traditional value system." That, the document stresses, is not an infringement on basic freedoms but merely the withdrawal of government support from "projects imposing alien values on society."

The draft goes on to explain that certain forms of modern art and liberal Western values in general are unacceptable and harmful to society's moral health.

Although Putin has mentioned Russia's "civilizational differences" with the West in his speeches, Russia has never asserted, in so many words, that its ideology is based on the rejection of the European path and of universal values such as democratic development and tolerance toward different cultures. If "Foundations of the State Cultural Policy" is adopted in the form proposed by the culture ministry, isolationism and, yes, intolerance of anything "alien" will be enshrined on an official level.

I read an interesting explanation of the anti-Western backlash in a column by pro-Kremlin political commentator Dmitri Yuriev. For a quarter of a century, he wrote, Russia sought rapprochement with the West and strove to be a member of the club. "A policy of entering the world community, joining the 'normal world' was approved by default," Yuriev recalled. "That 'normal world' was friendly, peaceful, democratic. It awaited Russia with gratitude for getting rid of the threat of Communist expansion and a world war." In fact, however, Russia "came up against increasingly vicious, cynical and uncompromising contempt for the interests of Russia."

Yuriev's description of Russia's seduction and rejection by the West, which it sought to befriend after the Soviet Union fell apart, lies at the core of what Putin, and his culture ministry, bill as a return to traditional values. In the view of official ideologues, the West held up the bright wrappers of its hypocritical values to coax Russia into submission, and it very nearly succeeded. Having gained nothing on that path, Russia must cleanse itself of the remnants of its romance with liberalism and tolerance.

In fact, after Moscow's Crimean adventure, the West seems out to prove this point of view correct. By talking of "containing" Russia and breaking off all kinds of cooperation, from trade and visa liberalization talks to Group of Eight meetings to joint programs with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Western governments cast themselves in the role of wolves shedding their sheep's clothing. A tough stance on Russia's aggression against Ukraine should not translate into enmity and spite, if only because the seduction tactic worked for more than 20 years and it still works better now. Putin's regime will not last forever, but the disenchantment with liberal values as an enemy's political tool may well outlast him.