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Ideologization Without a Doctrine: Putin's Thin Statism in Russian Universities

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Abstract

Since 2022, Russian authorities have intensified efforts to ideologize the country's education system and use schools and universities to indoctrinate young people. These attempts appear to signal the emergence of a more explicitly formulated quasi-official state ideology. At the same time, scholarship on Putinism continues to emphasize the regime's lack of a coherent doctrinal corpus. Building on this tension, the present article asks: How is ideologization in higher education conducted in the absence of a full-fledged ideological doctrine, and how do teachers formulate the ideological message in their syllabi? The article analyzes a corpus of syllabi for "Foundations of Russian Statehood" from Russian universities and argues that Putin's regime can, in fact, be said to have an ideology, albeit a "thin" one. The ideological core of Putinism that the regime seeks to transmit through propaganda courses is the idea that the Russian state is the main "traditional value" and the guarantor of the historical continuity of Russian "civilization." Beyond this thin statist core, the rest of the ideological repertoire remains flexible.

Putinism as a Thin Statism

Since 2022, the Russian authorities have explicitly intensified their efforts to ideologize the country's education system, notably through the introduction of the obligatory courses "Conversations about Important Things" (Fomin 2022) in schools and "Foundations of Russian Statehood" (FoRS) in universities (Kortukov & Waller 2025; Fomin et al. 2025). These initiatives appear to indicate a shift toward a more openly articulated and promoted state ideology. At the same time, some scholarship on Putin's ideology continues to argue that his regime lacks a coherent doctrine (Laruelle 2025).

This article addresses the tension between these two trends: the intensive ideologization of education and the ongoing lack of a full-fledged ideological doctrine. Focusing on the course "Foundations of Russian Statehood," we ask: How is the ideologization of higher education conducted without a codified state ideology, and how do the teachers who are supposed to deliver the ideological message formulate it in their syllabi? Our analysis of FoRS syllabi shows that, for the most part, even those values that are officially declared as the basis of Putin's ideology are present in the syllabi quite weakly and are often mentioned only nominally. Only a small cluster of themes emerges from the syllabi as comprising a relatively stable ideological core.

Our evidence thus supports the idea that Putinism is best understood as a thin ideology (Freedon 2003; Blackburn, 2024)—that is, a configuration with a restricted ideological nucleus and a highly flexible periphery. Specifically, it can be characterized as "thin

statism," which lacks a detailed doctrine but does have a clear core: the state as the primary value, the guarantor of the historical continuity of the Russian "civilization state" (*gosudarstvo-tsvivilizatsiia*) and protector of its (vaguely defined) "traditional values." The broader ideological repertoire remains optional and easily adjustable to different purposes and situations (Fomin 2024).

Data and Methods

The study draws on a corpus of 946 syllabi used to teach the "Foundations of Russian Statehood" course at 182 Russian universities (Fomin 2026). These syllabi are usually authored by the instructor responsible for teaching the course. Syllabi are typically around 30 pages in length, though their size varies considerably due to the absence of a standard format across universities and, in some cases, the inclusion of additional sections, such as assessment materials.

"Foundations of Russian Statehood" was first launched in Russian universities in 2023, with teaching guidelines for the course distributed by the Russian Ministry of Education (Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation 2023). Those guidelines recommended that the module contain five sections: (1) *What Is Russia?*; (2) *Russia as a Civilization State*; (3) *The Russian Worldview and the Values of Russian Civilization*; (4) *The Political Organization of Russia*; and (5) *Future Challenges and the Development of the Country*. The guidelines outlined the general structure and content of the course, but instructors were left to determine the specifics of their own syllabi (Fomin et al., 2025).

We performed a dictionary-based content analysis of the syllabi to assess the extent to which themes derived from the official list of “traditional values” are reflected in the syllabi. This list, codified in 2022 by the presidential decree on the Fundamentals of State Policy on Preserving and Strengthening Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values (President of Russia 2022), includes the following concepts:

- “life,”
- “dignity,”
- “human rights and freedoms,”
- “patriotism,”
- “civicness,”
- “service to the Fatherland and responsibility for its fate,”
- “high moral ideals,”
- “strong family,”
- “creative labor,”
- “priority of the spiritual over the material,”
- “humanism,”
- “mercy,”
- “justice,”
- “collectivism,”
- “mutual assistance and mutual respect,”
- “historical memory and intergenerational continuity,” and
- “unity of the peoples of Russia.

We also track the so-called “pentabasis of the Russian worldview” (Kharichev et al., 2022), which is supposed to serve as the ideological framework for the regime’s indoctrination efforts and is said to include the following values:

- “creativity,”
- “tradition,”
- “concord,”
- “trust in institutions,” and
- “patriotism.”

We further add several other topics that are often discussed as elements of Putinism: “anti-Westernism,” “civilizationism,” “Eurasianism,” “nationalism,” and “personalist authority.”

We track all these themes with hand-built lists of indicative words and phrases. For each theme, we calculate its presence score, i.e., how widespread it appears to be across syllabi (based on whether any of its vocabulary elements is mentioned at least once), and emphasis, i.e., how frequently its vocabulary is used (Fomin 2026). Based on those measures, we determine which of these elements are actually central to the Putinist indoctrination message by separating them into four groups:

- *ideological core* (present in almost all syllabi and emphasized),
- *ideological semi-periphery* (present in almost all syllabi but less emphasized),
- *ideological periphery* (less often present), and
- *ideologically irrelevant* (rare).¹

The results of the analysis are summarized in Table 1.

The Thin Core of Putinism: State, History, Civilization, and Tradition

Our analysis indicates that four of the listed values—“state,” “history,” “tradition,” and “civilization”—serve as the ideological core of Putinism as manifested in the FoRS syllabi.

The appearance of the “state” on this list of core values is fairly predictable, since the very title of the course suggests that it focuses on the “foundations of statehood.”

It is likewise unsurprising that “history” emerges as a core theme. Virtually all FoRS syllabi make historical references in almost every section. A large chunk of the course’s content (and, accordingly, testing and grading guidelines) is dedicated to the history of Russia.

Table 1: Ideological Configuration of Putinism, Based on FoRS Syllabi.

Core	Semi-Periphery	Periphery
STATE CIVILIZATION HISTORY TRADITION	Civicness Nationalism Unity and concord Service to the Fatherland Patriotism Moral ideals	Creativity Dignity Justice Family Life Personalist authority Eurasianism Mutual help and respect Spirituality Anti-Westernism Rights and freedoms
Excluded as irrelevant: collectivism; humanism; labor; mercy; trust in institutions		

¹ “Core” themes are defined as those with widespreadness $\geq 90\%$ and above-average emphasis ($z \geq 0.5$). Themes with widespreadness $\geq 90\%$ but $z < 0.5$ are classified as “periphery;” themes with widespreadness $< 50\%$ and $z < -0.5$ as “irrelevant;” and all remaining themes as “semi-periphery.” For more details, see Fomin 2026.

Moreover, the list of official aims and objectives of the course, often repeated verbatim in syllabi, stipulates that students are expected to “treat historical heritage with respect” and be “aware of the distinctiveness of the Russian state’s historical path” (Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation 2023). Some syllabi further claim that the “loss of cultural continuity” is a major challenge facing the country (Shafigulina 2023). Finally, a smaller but still significant share of syllabi discuss the preservation of historical memory as an important role of the government and its cultural policy.

Predictably, another core concept of the FoRS is “civilization,” around which two out of the five officially prescribed sections of the course center. As the syllabi move through the main discussions and themes of the course, there are frequent references to “civilization state,” “Russian civilization’s values,” and “future scenarios of Russian civilization.” This term also frequently appears in conjunction with the core theme of “history,” not least because “prolonged historical development and a generational continuity of political and moral philosophy, significant cultural and socioeconomic influence, [and] distinct worldview systems” are sometimes listed as the key features of civilizations (Proskurina 2023; Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation 2023).

The final concept comprising the course’s ideological core is “tradition.” References to “traditions” are central to the course, as it is explicitly designed to instill “respect for the historical heritage and sociocultural traditions of various social groups.” Mentions of “traditional values” or “worldview traditions” also emerge in the syllabi in the context of discussions of Russian civilizational principles, Russian identity, and the “sociocultural continuity” of the nation (Lobchenko 2024). However, the syllabi almost never specify whose and which traditions are referred to, and the term remains vague. Some syllabi do refer to the officially adopted list of “traditional values,” but, as our analysis shows, not all of the values listed, in fact, carry the same weight.

Semi-Periphery of Putinism: National Unity, Patriotism, Service to the Fatherland

As we move beyond the core of Putinism as it appears in FoRS syllabi, we find several other concepts that are also extremely common across the syllabi—appearing at least once per syllabus—but are less emphasized than the core ones. Those semi-peripheral concepts are “moral ideals,” “service to the Fatherland,” “civicness,” “nationalism,” “patriotism,” and “unity and concord.”

One of the most widespread and prominent concepts in this category is “moral ideals.” Its simplest and most common usage is in the statement of the main goals

of FoRS: “the formation of the spiritual, moral, and cultural foundation of a developed and well-rounded personality” (Tarichko 2023; Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation 2023). It is also used interchangeably with “traditional values” as “spiritual-moral values.” Sometimes, these morals are connected with religion (Tarichko 2023; Shipilov 2024). For instance, one syllabus indicates that “Russian religious traditions, especially Orthodox ones, have a significant influence on forming moral and ethical norms of Russian society.” A sentence in another section of that syllabus echoes this point: “Orthodoxy forms moral values and safeguards national identity” (Shipilov 2024).

Another theme we found on the semi-periphery of the FoRS discourse is “service to the Fatherland.” It appears in the syllabi primarily as a declarative value rather than a concept subjected to elaboration. It is most often mentioned in lists of course objectives or expected learning outcomes and is frequently invoked alongside self-sacrifice and heroism, with these notions presented as closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing. In this configuration, service is rarely distinguished analytically from related concepts and tends to function as their implicit extension rather than an autonomous category. References to service are commonly embedded in broader narratives about Russian civilization.

Conceptually, “service to the Fatherland” is close to another relatively widespread and emphasized theme—that is, “civicness.” Civicness rarely appears outside statements of the course’s objectives. If the authors of the syllabi decide to go deeper into the contents of the course, civicness is mentioned in section 5 about the future development of the country. Here, some universities cite the education ministry’s guidelines, which mention the “communitarian character of Russian civicness” (Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation 2023), but no other definition is given.

“Civicness” is often paired with “patriotism” to designate the creation of civic-minded and patriotic individuals as the key goal of the FoRS. After the course, students are expected “to perceive and share a mature sense of civicness and patriotism” (Belchevichen & Kozlov 2023; Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation 2023). In some syllabi, “patriotism” is very prominent, mentioned in more than one section and in different contexts. For instance, the theme can appear both in the context of the history of Russia—if war heroes are described as “patriotic” (section 1)—and in the context of the country’s future—if used as an ideal toward which Russia should move to successfully overcome future challenges (section 5). Moreover, patriotism has the most regional character of all concepts, as students are often encouraged to discuss the patriotism of local figures.

Finally, we also find in the ideological semi-periphery of Putinism topics that emphasize the importance of national unity. This theme is not always present in the syllabi, but when it is, it refers to both an empirical truth about Russia and a normative goal of the government. As a characteristic of contemporary Russia, national unity is described as the consequence of Russia being a “civilization state” and a unique result of its development. Unity, as “unity in diversity,” is more often used as a traditional value toward which the country is moving and which must be protected at all costs. Here, its use varies substantially across universities, with some choosing to use it only when listing traditional values, while others delve deeper (Meleshko 2025; Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation 2023). For example, unity is frequently discussed in terms of Russian unity (Shipilov 2024). However, one university chose to also mention Slavic unity through language (Mochalova 2024). Another university mentions online “fakes” as a potential threat to national unity (Kulish 2023). Still others explain that the importance of unity among Russians is a product of Russian collectivism and its traditional value system (Shipilov 2024).

Periphery: Justice, Autocracy, and Family Values

The peripheral concepts found within the Russian ideological construction include “creativity,” “dignity,” “justice,” “family,” “life,” “spirituality,” and “mutual help and respect,” as well as “rights and freedoms,” “personalist authority,” “Eurasianism,” and “anti-Westernism.” These concepts are fairly rare and vary significantly in their elaboration in the syllabi. They rarely receive the same treatment as the core and semi-peripheral notions and are, instead, used as filler words. For example, the word “family” has only marginal importance and is usually mentioned within a broader concept of the “pentabasis.”

Nevertheless, these peripheral concepts sometimes (if rarely) take a more dominant position in the syllabi. The example of the word “justice” shows how the authors of syllabi enjoy some autonomy in choosing which concepts to emphasize. Often, the word “justice” is either absent or used only to mention the “value guidelines for Russia’s development and prosperity” (Minin and Soshnikov 2023). However, certain universities have chosen to discuss this value in different contexts. One uses it as an epithet for the way in which contemporary Russia “ensures the security and sovereignty of the Russian Federation at the beginning of the 21st century” (Shafgulina 2023). Another university sees justice as an ideal toward which Russia must move, the absence of which is a “problem” in international relations (Mochalova

2024). Yet another syllabus sees a “Russia of just capitalism” as one of the potential future images of the country (Novikov et al. 2024).

Notably, we find the theme of “rights and freedoms” in the ideological semi-periphery of Putinism (although the official list of traditional values puts them almost at the very top). It is much less widespread in the syllabi than other peripheral concepts, but when it does appear, it can be rather prominent. Many syllabi do not mention this topic at all, while others only mention it in the test questions section, which is itself rare. These exercises are usually multiple-choice and fact-based, asking, for example, about the first civil liberties act in Russia (Lapparova 2023) or the highest Russian value according to the Russian Constitution (Tarichko 2023). Several universities (Tarichko 2023) quote a 2007 speech by the Russian Orthodox Patriarch (Patriarch Aleksii II 2007) to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe about the importance of morality and Europe’s gradual loss of such values “with the emergence of a new generation of rights, which contradict morality;” students are asked whether immorality and freedom can coexist and whether moral values are the most important type of freedom. One university lists international human rights agreements, such as the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, in its bibliography.

Finally, some of the topics that we include in our analysis turn out to be virtually irrelevant to Putinism as it appears in FoRS. An overwhelming number of syllabi do not refer to “trust in institutions,” “mercy,” “labor,” “humanism,” or “collectivism” at all. Unlike those on the periphery of Putinism, these “irrelevant” concepts are almost never elaborated upon and, if mentioned, are mentioned only in passing or as an adjective without further reflection: “mercy,” “humanism,” and “trust in institutions” are usually brought up exclusively in the context of the official list of “traditional” or “pan-tabasic” values.

Conclusion

Our analysis thus suggests that Putinism might best be characterized as a “thin ideology,” and specifically a “thin statism.” In the FoRS course, which is supposed to be the key tool for indoctrinating the younger generation en masse into the Putinist worldview, the state is placed at the center, as the “foundations of statehood” appear in the very title of the main propaganda course. The state is imagined as a “civilization state” underpinned by “traditional values.” The exact essence of those values, however, is defined quite vaguely. Rather, the state itself is represented as the paramount value, implying the importance of serving it and being united as a nation of patriotic, morally upright individuals.

When it comes to the values beyond the state itself, they serve, at best, as occasional additions. Even the “family” component of “traditional family values,” which supposedly defines the Russian “civilization state,” does not make it to the core of Putinism. Neither do “justice,” “Eurasianism,” and “anti-Westernism.” These ideological elements do, however, remain noticeable and can appear as prominent—yet optional—additions to the statist core. Other elements from the officially declared list of “traditional values”—like “collectivism,” “humanism” and “mercy”—turn out to be almost completely absent from the Putinist message. Similarly, “trust in institutions,” which is supposed to be one of the main elements of the Russian civilizational “pentabasis,” appears very rarely. Thus, the constructs that could be expected to extend the ideological core of Putinism beyond the idea of loyalty to the state largely fail to do so.

Conversely, what does still serve to underpin Putin’s ideology is history. It appears as one of the most prominent concepts throughout the FoRS syllabi. It is used to justify the importance of preserving, protecting, and serving the state by emphasizing the value of maintaining historical continuity. This, however, also points to

one of the main deficiencies of Putinism: the lack of a vision of a desirable future around which a proper ideological doctrine could be built (Fomin 2022).

Overall, our analysis suggests that Putinism’s ideological commitments are minimal. They do not limit the regime’s adaptability or significantly constrain decision-making (including, perhaps, its choice of friends and foes in international affairs). Moreover, the Russian authorities can be quite flexible when choosing from a broad menu of concepts to justify their policies for the public.

This study also supports the hypothesis that there is, in fact, no detailed, elaborate doctrine of Putinism that must be taught to students. That said, the emergent youth indoctrination system can still be effective in delivering the concise message of statist loyalty as a paramount value (Fominykh et al. 2026). However, its efficiency might be conditioned on teachers’ compliance and their ability to contribute to the system as “downstream ideologists.” To date, instructors can still—and sometimes even have to—make their own choices as to which values to emphasize as the “foundations” of the Russian state (Fomin et al. 2025).

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