

Repurposing Tradition to Justify the War in Ukraine

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 878

February 2024

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Since February 2022, the Russian authorities have used diverse strategies to justify the country's invasion of Ukraine and foster public support. These strategies are designed to support their overarching narrative of the war as a special military operation against what they attempt to paint as a fascist regime in Ukraine. This involves leveraging memories of the Great Patriotic War (1941–45), offering economic incentives, framing participation as a religious obligation, and conferring public prestige for participation.

In this memo, we focus on how these strategies have been tailored to specific communities and regions, looking at the Chechens, Buryats, and Tatars, as well as the largely ethnic Russian Perm region. In Chechnya, the conflict in Ukraine is treated as a continuation of Cold War-era geopolitical struggles against the “satanic West.” Soldiers are framed as “real men” – playing on a masculinity valued highly in the North Caucasus – and the war itself as jihad. In Tatarstan, meanwhile, the social pressure to protect the Motherland interacts with monetary incentives that enable volunteers to raise their families' standards of living, while religious “permission” from the Muftiate removes a potential obstacle to participation. Turning to Buryatia, participation in the war enjoys the endorsement of Buddhist figures as a means of safeguarding Buryats' Mongolian heritage. Parallels between the war in Ukraine and the Great Patriotic War also resonate strongly, tapping into citizens' pride in and collective memory of their ancestors' contribution to that Soviet victory. Finally, in the largely Russian-populated Perm Krai, there has been a heavy emphasis on commemorations and public ceremonies to honor the deceased, mirroring Soviet-era commemorations of the Great Patriotic War. All in all, a skillful repurposing of what can broadly be defined as “tradition” turns Russian citizens into inadvertent supporters of the “special military operation.”

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North Caucasian Jihad in Ukraine

The predominantly Islamic North Caucasus region has become a significant source of manpower for the conflict in Ukraine. Chechnya's leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, was one of the first regional leaders to [support](#) the military action and to involve the local population in this conflict. After [deploying](#) his personal troops to Ukraine, he expanded his role, [transforming](#) Chechnya into the departure point for volunteers from across Russia heading to the frontlines following a mandatory two-week training course. Regular announcements of troop dispatches on Kadyrov's Telegram channel, Kadyrov_95, [showcase](#) a ceremonial procedure usually led by prominent figures like Magomed Daudov, the speaker of the Chechen parliament, or Abuzaid Vismuradov, Chechnya's deputy prime minister. In their speeches, Daudov and Vismuradov [encourage](#) volunteers to fulfill their patriotic duty in a battle against the "satanic West," a framing that aligns with the overarching Russian narrative that presents the conflict in Ukraine as a continuation of Cold War-era geopolitical struggles. The texts accompanying these videos praise the volunteers as "real men," "patriots," and "warriors" – characteristics valued highly in the North Caucasus. Meanwhile, those who seek to avoid the draft are often labeled as "cowards" and "traitors."

In addition to this emphasis on masculinity, the authorities try to galvanize popular support by framing the war in Ukraine in religious terms. Chechen clerics actively call on North Caucasian ethnic groups to engage in "[jihad](#)" in Ukraine. The fact that Russia and Ukraine are predominantly Christian countries does not seem to deter Kadyrov's clerics. Interestingly, the resurgence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict led some of Kadyrov's soldiers to express interest in "jihad" in the Middle East, [forcing](#) clerics to creatively explain why there was not a comparable "holy obligation" to engage in the Palestinian conflict.

While Chechen elites' emphasis on masculinity and religious rhetoric may resonate with a specific segment of the population, significant support for the overarching Russian narrative comes from a distinct social norm less under the direct control of North Caucasian regimes. This norm [revolves](#) around the observance of funeral rites in accordance with local traditions. The expression of condolences to the families of those who have perished in the war aligns with the narrative promoted by the religious authorities. Phrases like "May Allah accept his jihad and make him a martyr!" are routinely used to convey respect to grieving families, even when the speaker does not support the military action. That is, to preserve community cohesion, many involuntarily conform to and even endorse the Russian narrative tailored to the Muslim population of the North Caucasus.

Masculinity, Camaraderie, and Patriotism of Volga Muslims

Somewhat similar tactics are used to recruit soldiers from among the Muslim Tatar population. The official recruitment page, Tatarstan-heroes.ru, illustrates how diverse

incentives converge. The content and visuals on the website appeal to concepts of masculinity and male camaraderie, portraying the army as a space for courageous men who support each other. The economic benefits of participating in the war – including the salary offered, bonuses for participating in attacks, and welfare support for family members – are highlighted. The website emphasizes the social respect and recognition that veterans can attain and frames military service as an imperative duty of citizens and patriots.

Rather than being conscripted, many young men in Tatarstan succumb to social or peer pressure and enlist voluntarily. This is especially obvious in rural areas, where many Tatars reside. Families in Tatar villages with draft-aged men [fear](#) public shaming if a family member refuses to go to the recruiting station. Young men are themselves reluctant to stay behind if all their peers in the village have volunteered or been drafted. Joining the army brings public prestige, attracting attention from the local government and media. Local leaders' meetings with soldiers and their families are featured in the local newspapers, earning the soldiers respect within the community. The same recognition is [granted](#) to the families of fallen soldiers.

Another strong incentive to volunteer is financial. Despite the fact that Tatarstan is a wealthy republic in comparison to other Russian regions, there is a pronounced local focus on consumerism and maintaining a certain standard of living. The money earned by volunteers enables them not only to feed their families, but also to maintain or elevate their families' standard of living, for example by purchasing an expensive car or building a house.

As most Tatars are Muslims, the influence of Islamic rhetoric is noteworthy. In support of the military action, the Muftiate of the Republic has issued "permission" for Muslims to participate in this war. While the extent to which Tatars can be considered practicing Muslims is debatable, this permission holds significance for some believers—even if, unlike in Chechnya, the Muftiate does not depict the war in Ukraine as jihad. Tatarstan's Muftiate has asserted that this war aligns with "Islamic values," [emphasizing](#) that those who have sworn allegiance to Russia "in the defense of freedom, the people, and the fatherland are obliged to fulfill this oath, which is not only a civic duty, but also an Islamic duty."

Brotherly Support of Tough People: The Buryats

Since the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Buryats have [been](#) one of the most visible ethnic groups in the conflict. Their presence on the frontlines in Ukraine was made more likely because many Buryats were already in contract service in the numerous Russian military units stationed in the republic. Military service was popular among Buryats due to its perceived role in advancing young men's careers.

Like their counterparts in other republics, the local authorities also use religious and ethnic social mechanisms to galvanize support and encourage volunteering. For instance, the leader of the Russian Buddhists, Damba Ayusheev, [asserts](#) that Buddhists are fighting not only to preserve the Russian and Slavic worlds, but also to safeguard their Mongolian heritage. Meanwhile, the ethnic Buryat Buddhist cleric Bair [Batomunkuev](#) has repeatedly visited the war zone in Ukraine to raise the morale of Buddhist fighters from Russia.

Additionally, the authorities actively promote camaraderie between Russians and Buryats in Buryatia, emphasizing their strong relations. The Minister of Culture of Buryatia, Soelma Dagaeva, [stated](#) that “our [ethnic] Russians call themselves Buryats, and the Buryats walk like Russians. Our guys are all brothers.” This narrative is [echoed](#) by Vladimir Putin, who, after meeting ethnic Russian soldiers from Buryatia, said, “I asked why they didn’t run, the enemy ran, and they told me that the Buryats don’t run.”

The prevailing state narrative taps into Buryats’ pride in and collective memory of their ancestors’ contribution to the Soviet victory in the Second World War. The State Archive of Buryatia has even [published](#) documents on Buryats’ participation in the Russian war against Napoleon in the nineteenth century. Federal Russian television channels [glorify](#) Buryats, particularly for their bravery. The television items suggest that Buryats are so formidable that not only Ukrainians but even Chechen comrades-in-arms fear them, a narrative also picked up by Ukrainian [media](#). This narrative plays on a widespread [rumor](#) among Buryats about a shootout in the Kherson region of Ukraine between Chechens and Buryats in which the Buryats allegedly emerged victorious.

All these discursive elements create an easily digestible “cocktail:” resistance against the collective West (an ideological rationalization), endorsement from Buddhist figures (religious rationalization), the promotion of Buryat courage on federal television channels, continuation of the legacy of heroic ancestors (endorsement based on national pride), and solidarity with the Russian majority (patriotic duty). Together, these elements prevent soldiers’ families from protesting against the war or complaining about it.

Perm Krai as Representative of Russia More Broadly

The relatively ethnically diverse Perm Krai presents a compelling case study to investigate social mechanisms driving endorsement of the war that do not necessarily tap into minority ethnic or religious identities.

Similar to other regions in Russia, the authorities in Perm Krai strategically leverage the narrative of the Great Patriotic War to garner popular support for the ongoing conflict. They actively engage in commemorations and public ceremonies to honor the deceased, mirroring Soviet-era commemorations of the Great Patriotic War. Notable efforts include the [opening](#) of a boulevard and square “in memory of the heroes of the special military operation,” the addition of a memorial [plaque](#) to the “Soldier of Russia” monument on the Boulevard of the Soviet Army in Perm, and the establishment in the village of Siva of

a “[Memory Square](#)” that has as its centerpiece an armored reconnaissance and patrol vehicle (BRDM).

As of September 2023, the official website of the governor and government of Perm Krai [reports](#) the placement of over 60 memorial plaques in schools across the region. Governor Dmitry Makhonin has consistently [underscored](#) the importance of honoring the memory of deceased Perm soldiers. However, efforts to commemorate SMO participants seek to avoid the public mobilization observed during the “Immortal Regiment” events, an annual march on May 9. The [cancellation](#) of the 2023 processions was attributed to security concerns related to the conflict in Ukraine.

The dedications of monuments in Perm Krai honoring the “heroes” of the special military operation are deliberately not promoted as large public gatherings. Instead, they target specific groups, such as schoolchildren, social activists, SVO veterans, and the families of deceased soldiers. The emphasis on schoolchildren is evident through a nationwide initiative known as the “[Hero’s Desk](#),” which is supported by the pro-Putin United Russia party. This initiative involves unveiling school desks adorned with the images and biographies of fallen soldiers who once attended the same school. Efforts to reduce public gatherings are evident, with social media engagement favored over in-person events. For instance, the Dobryansky district in Perm Krai [initiated](#) the “We remember, we are proud” social media campaign to pay tribute to military personnel who have lost their lives during the special military operation.

Conclusion

The Russian authorities strategically employ diverse strategies and social mechanisms to advance their overarching narrative, which portrays the conflict as a special military operation geared toward denazifying Ukraine. Different mechanisms currently operate in various local contexts to encourage support for the Russian war effort: these include societal (gendered) pressure; ethnic traditions, often framed within a religious narrative; and the desire for social cohesion. While the narrative of the Great Patriotic War and the reinforcement of masculinity and traditional gender roles serve as universal references and motivation across Russia, local authorities exploit ethnic and religious narratives to rally support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine, invoking “Islamic values” or even urging “jihad” in Ukraine. This phenomenon may be partly explained by the values primed in areas with ethnic minorities and suggests that regions with such minorities may exhibit less enthusiasm for promoting the “Russkii Mir” (the Russian World), an ideology championed by the Russian leadership and Patriarch Kirill that sees Russia as a “[special civilization to preserve](#).” Consequently, support for the war in Ukraine might diminish over time, as the aforementioned narratives may become insufficient to convince exhausted populations—especially in a context of declining financial incentives.