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Historical memory and political propaganda in the Russian Federation

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the hegemonic discourse on historical memory in contemporary Russia, in addition to its political implications. Furthermore, the role played by the Russian media system in the dissemination of the memory discourse endorsed by the Kremlin, and its impact, are also described. The analysis is carried out in a theoretical framework that advocates for the need for delving deeper into the intersections between communication and memory studies.

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The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again
Walter Benjamin

For a long time now only two real forces have existed in Europe - Revolution and Russia
Fyodor Ivanovich Tyutchev

1. Memory and propaganda

Bauman (2000) claims that, in times of *liquid reality*, it is difficult to plan for the future due to the uncertainties of the present – maybe for this reason there is a profusion of practices that seek ‘symbolic stability’ in the past, frequently transforming it into a museum or a place of certainties. Returning to the past so as to provide the present with a sense of purpose (and thus intensifying the political use of history) is, according to several authors (Berger and Niven, 2014), related to the diminishing importance of metanarratives specific to modernity which, in one way or another, put the accent on a prosperous future. Moreover, modern reason, heir to the Enlightenment, usually establishes an emancipatory project and, at the same time, includes self-criticism and acknowledgement of its own mistakes and excesses. The worth of the said project is evident, but its recurring *return to the origins* so as to recuperate inspiration and overcome difficulties is also its weakness and limitation (Mate, 1991). Ritualizing, commemorating (dramatizing), maintaining ‘intact’ and building a hegemonic narrative (seemingly inter-class, interreligious, interethnic, but more often than not contradictorily privileging a class, religion, ethnic group and/or nationality) is usually a priority for conservative and authoritarian regimes of different political bents.¹

In the material past, there does not exist anything like a ‘foundational essence’, an arcadia to return to where the basic elements of a national identity are safeguarded. What indeed occurs frequently is the construction of a model for remembering *our* past which contains a strong, linear memory that bowdlerizes, interprets and eliminates the fringes and

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¹ In the words of García Canclini (2001: 110): The dramatization of the patrimony is the effort to simulate that there is an origin, a founding substance, in relation with which we should act today.

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contradictions of historical contexts. In short, what is being referred to here is a propagandistic memory that serves today's politics. It is standard practice to construct a historical discourse which serves the efforts of the different actors towards forming identities destined for *mass consumption* and to ask how and why they are constructed, how they are disseminated and what social effects they produce – a discourse that allegedly seeks the 'meaning of history'.

In terms of hegemony, and in contemporary society, the success of the said discourse is grounded primarily in media policy, relations of power and media systems on a local, national and transnational levels, which makes the study of cultural industries essential when gauging the impact of national and international memory policies. We remember collectively and through mediation, so the study of mediation is a necessary condition for understanding why we remember what we remember.² The mainstream media often help to construct a *pop memory*, for the masses (although not popular, since it is controlled by the elites). In addition, the battle for the hegemony of the discourse involves negotiation and resistance in the reception of memory narratives, from which, of course, different perspectives of the past and ways of remembering frequently emerge. Propaganda, as a politically self-interested communication process keyed to constructing, maintaining or destroying social imaginaries (Vázquez-Liñán, 2012c: 81–107), can be used to frame memories, establish limits to what must be remembered – it can be the gatekeeper of memory. Memory discourse is a self-serving selection process that frequently intends to build, maintain or destroy a common identity. Its purpose can be classified, ethically, in different ways, depending on the specific case and arbiter. However, are those whose work and research revolve around memory policies willing to accept that its objective is always, to a greater or lesser extent, propaganda?³ Deconstructing and forcing the negotiation of the said discourse is an ethical obligation. Other memories are, needless to say ... possible.

In this paper, the accent is put on the idea that the memory discourse that forms part of the so-called 'Russian conservatism' seeks to accomplish a series of specific political objectives: to establish government policies in the framework of 'Russian tradition'; to invoke that tradition as the 'natural' path to achieving 'greatness'; and, at the same time, to discredit any form of social change that is considered alien to that tradition, describing it as something imposed from outside and, therefore, prejudicial to the development of Russia.

The propagandistic use of the past for identity building and justifying current policies is far from being a novelty or a practice that can be attributed exclusively to the governments of Vladimir Putin. However, the 'memory wars' that Russia has been waging for the last few years against neighbouring states in Eastern Europe, in addition to the tense relations between Moscow and Washington and Brussels, enhance the relevance of analysing the Kremlin's political discourse; a discourse that, in recent years, has also been channelled internationally through media such as *Russia Today* and *Sputnik*, thus substantially increasing its potential impact.

In order to approach this issue, a theoretical framework has been designed that emphasizes the relationship between political propaganda and the construction of social imaginaries, in addition to the importance of the role played by historical memory in the said construction. This is followed by a description of how the conservative elites interpret the national past, an interpretation that is nowadays hegemonic in the Russian Federation.⁴ It is claimed here that this interpretation, which takes the shape of a specific discourse on the past, has a number of political implications for the present, which will be addressed below. Lastly, the theoretical approach employed here underscores the need to unite the study of memory policies with that of their associated communication policies. Historical memory is, to a large extent, its discourse. It is therefore essential to examine the power structure and relations that underlie the communication system through which the discourse is channelled, an issue that will be addressed in the last section of this paper.

The sources used for the analysis performed here are supposed to be representative of the hegemonic discourse on the past in present-day Russia, for which reason the focus has been placed on the content of the major TV channels and secondary school history textbooks. Moreover, since it is important to identify the main arguments of the debate on the past held among the conservative elites, the production of those who have taken a stance in this debate through specialized publications or reports released by research centres, in addition, of course, to the public discourse of the President of the Russian Federation, has been taken into consideration.

2. Memory and 'class' imaginaries

Imaginaries are the result of all types of social intersections and relations of power over time. Memory policies translate part of those imaginaries into a specific discourse, while sometimes also trying to modify them. Those relations of power construct social classes and are therefore relevant to the study of the imaginaries implicit in memory policies, as well as the

² The intersection between memory and communication studies is something that has been around for some time now (Assmann, 2012; Sturken, 2008; Morris-Suzuki, 2005; Neiger et al., 2011, among others).

³ The European Union has also recently made an effort to construct a new discourse that *unites diversity* (an idea similar to that set out in official Russian documents dealing with memory) and builds the always controversial *European identity*, part of which is a common approach to memory and the management of its conflicts. Proof of this renewed interest in memory can be seen in the study 'European Historical Memory: Policies, Challenges and Perspectives' (Prutsch, 2013), and the increase in funds available for European projects related to the political use of the past, under the umbrella of the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation Horizon 2020 (European Commission, 2013).

⁴ Indeed, this is the interpretation that has been widely disseminated via the Russian mass media system. However, although it is not the object of study here, there are other ways of approaching national history that carry some weight in the public debate on the past. Among these alternative perspectives, perhaps the most significant is the one pursued by the organization 'Memorial', devoted to the defence of human rights and the recovery of historical memory.

class (or classes) that sustain them. What is proposed here is the use of the 'imaginary of class' concept, which, in some way, avoids the inter-classism of other formulas such as 'collective mentality' and helps us steer clear of the dangers posed by the agreeable appeal for consensus of the term 'culture' (Thompson, 1995: 19): 'A concept of class structure, even if conceived in general terms, is still a big advance over classness' (Ginzburg, 1992, xxiv). This risk makes it worthwhile to dwell upon the analysis of an imaginary 'of class' that allows us to glimpse the mental frames of those who have access to the 'canonical', or 'official' historical discourse; to wit, not only those who maintain a hegemonic power to this respect – leaders, social science historians and scholars, think-tanks, and others – but also the major national and transnational media conglomerates.

To that end, it is worth recalling E.P. Thompson's concept of 'class' understood as a historical concept in constant formation. What type of class are we talking about here? In the words of Thompson (1966, p. 9),

By class I understand an historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness. I emphasise that it is an historical phenomenon. I do not see class as a 'structure', nor even as a 'category', but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships [...] And class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.

Thus, defining Russian elites involves itemizing their relationships and practices. We should observe people in a specific period of social change and try to identify patterns of relationship between them as regards their ideas and institutions. Class implies, to a greater or lesser degree, an identity of internal interests and, frequently, 'against' another class (which comes into existence, maybe, precisely because it feels defined and beset by 'the other').

The analysis of imaginaries also involves that of ideology, understood here as the nexus (translator) between imaginaries and political practices. So, in the literature on memory policies, there are also to be found important clues for tracing current imaginaries. Manfred Steger (2009:16) underlines the role that ideologies play as a bridge between the unconscious imaginary and social practices in a specific context: 'I suggest that ideologies translate and articulate the largely pre-reflexive social imaginary in compressed form as explicit political doctrine. This means that the grand ideologies of modernity gave explicit political expression to the implicit national imaginary'.

Along the lines of Steger, the study of ideologies (and their propaganda) would also afford us a better understanding of the underlying imaginaries, discerned as 'that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy' (Taylor, 2004: 23). Ideology, as a necessary bridge between the imaginary and political practice, generates (and, likewise, contains) a discourse and specific memory policies. The literature on memory forms part of an ideological discourse generated mainly for the (political, financial, academic and media) elites with privileged access to communication systems.

3. Russian neo-conservatism and its interpretation of national history

As the author has already explained in another work (Vázquez-Liñán, 2012b), memory discourse is frequently associated with that of modernization, in a permanent re-edition of the narrative of progress which, as Huyssen claims (2003: 2), implies the manipulation of the past and the destruction of 'non-progressive' ways of being in the world: 'The price paid for progress was the destruction of past ways of living and being in the world. There was no liberation without active destruction. And the destruction of the past brought forgetting.' In the public discourse of the Russian authorities, what is striking is the omnipresence of references to national history. For Kalinin (2012), this is explained by the incompetence of the said authorities when governing the present and offering the country an ideology and a horizon, which leads to the institutionalized control of the past. Etkind (2009) points to the fact that the ideology that currently drives the Russian authorities is focused – in contrast to the Soviet ideology, which looked to the future – on the past, which highlights deep conflicts in the Putin era: 'The inability to distinguish between the Soviet past and the Russian present; an unscrupulous mix of political conservatism and historical revisionism; and indifference, bordering on incomprehension, with regard to the key values of democracy'. This inability of the Russian elites to draw up a policy for the future has meant, according to Gudkov (2004), that this has been limited to the instrumental use of a populism supported by part of the citizenry.

Therefore, the Russian elites have not wanted to work in favour of transforming the social imaginary in terms of national identity – or have been incapable of doing so – for which reason the 'national ideology' endorsed by the Kremlin⁵ is still using the same 'script', the same 'imaginary', to translate positions revolving around the concept of 'nation', constructed in imperial times (including Soviet imperialism), an idea that seems to have built a consensus among different political forces with parliamentary representation and, judging by several opinion polls, also for a large proportion of Russians.⁶

Nevertheless, judging by its public discourse, the Russian administration seems to be convinced of the need for having a 'national ideology' that establishes a course for the country and its policies. Outside this frame, of hegemonic pretensions and keyed to marking the limits of *political common sense*, would remain the reprehensible and proscribable of the mass media.

⁵ The articles and speeches of the Russian president are very illustrative of the essential features of the said 'ideology' (Putin, 2012, 2014).

⁶ The political project promoted by the Kremlin is intrinsically linked to the figure of Vladimir Putin, whose popularity reached 87% during the annexation of Crimea (Levada Center, 2014).

The effort, financed by the elites, to theorize on what the governing party calls ‘Russian neo-conservatism’⁷ (that which accompanies the construction of a particular discourse on memory) is an example of this and translates, in part, the current imaginary of the establishment in the Russian Federation, while at the same time generating associated policies and discourses. This neo-conservatism defends an ad hoc interpretation of national history formulated to serve current policies.

This way of looking at the past, in addition to being disseminated via the media system, using a large variety of formats, is especially evident in the history textbooks of compulsory education centres, which content is discussed in the highest echelons of power.⁸ On several occasions, Putin himself (*Ria Novosti*, 2013) has got personally involved in the process of elaborating textbooks, emphasizing the importance that they should not ‘contain any internal contradictions or ambiguous interpretations.’ The *construction* of a historical discourse without ‘contradictions’ or ‘ambiguous interpretations’ does not fit in easily with the narrative of the inherent complexity of present and past life in society, but does indeed coincide with the idea of unity that dominates the national ideology sponsored by the Kremlin. What is involved then is a unifying discourse that underlines the unity of the State, that explains linearly why Russia has been, is, and will be, one and indivisible with a common project imbued with an internal historical logic that lends meaning to it and in which the policies of the current government are perfectly assembled. Unity, unity and unity against the permanent threat (throughout the country’s history) from enemies, both internal and external, which pretend to put an end to ‘Russian civilization’ or, what is the same, its values which, for Sergei Ivanov, former Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office, are ‘the values of family, social morality, kindness, nobleness and charity; these values are the spiritual pillar of not only Orthodoxy but also of Islam, Judaism and Buddhism’ (*Pervy Kanal*, 2013b).

On 11 September 2013, an article by Vladimir Putin, entitled ‘A Plea for Caution’ appeared in *The New York Times*, addressing (not only) American citizens on his government’s position vis-à-vis the conflict in Syria. The article ended with a jibe at the claim made by Obama in what was then his last address to the nation, in which he emphasized American exceptionalism, stating that

‘The United States’ policy is ‘what makes America different. It’s what makes us exceptional.’ It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation. There are big countries and small countries, rich and poor, those with long democratic traditions and those still finding their way to democracy. Their policies differ, too. We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord’s blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal (*Putin*, 2013).

The essence of this criticism is difficult to refute: the propaganda of ‘exceptionalism’, a basic component of imperialism, poses serious political risks. The literature is full of examples and North American foreign policy has made that exceptionalism the not always recognized basis of its foreign policy for decades. Putin is right, but there is reason to doubt the credibility of his commitment to alternative practices to those he criticizes, given that the administration over which he presides has insistently promoted ‘Russian exceptionalism’ as the fulcrum of the Kremlin’s identity policies. In fact, the memory discourse endorsed by the Russian government intends to be the ‘historical demonstration’ of that exceptionalism.

The neoconservative project, which includes a specific version of the meaning of historical memory and is managed by the Kremlin and United Russia, gains theoretical shape in publications such as *Rossiiski Konservator*, edited by United Russia and directed by Igor Demin, and in the material produced by the Center for Social-Conservative Politics, as well as in the texts of authors linked to the party, like Yuri *Shuvalov* (2010); *Volobuev* (2011); *Posadski* (2010), or intellectuals who have re-embraced the cause, such as Alexander Duguin. United Russia defines the objectives of its project ‘Istoricheskaya Pamiat’ (Historical Memory) in the following terms: ‘Cultural, moral and spiritual revival of Russia. Strengthening the stability of Russia’s state (*gosudarstvennosti*), education in and development of patriotic sentiments, unity of the Russian people, and multi-ethnic harmony. Preserving the cultural, moral and spiritual environment, and traditional Russian values. Rebuilding churches founded to commemorate important historical events and anniversaries that, in addition to their religious character, also serve to glorify the Russian State’ (*Patriotic Platform of United Russia*, n.d.). The project is coordinated by Sergei Naryshkin, the chairman of the State Duma and member of United Russia.

What is also essential for the dissemination of the conservative message is the Russian president’s permanent allusion to the foundations of the Russian national identity and its roots in the country’s past. Putin repeatedly emphasizes the need to maintain the unity (and coherence) of the discourse on national history, which is reflected in explicit policies such as the proposal for a sole national history textbook for compulsory education. In his own words, the cultural policy of the Russian Federation should ‘serve to shape at all levels, from history textbooks to documentaries, this vision of unity of the historical process’ (*Putin*, 2012). For the Russian president, Russia is simultaneously a state and a civilization. Preserving this unity against the country’s enemies should be the authorities’ chief objective. And history is, above all, an identity discourse for unity, hence the hegemonic narrative of national history should be ‘free of contradictions’, and it is the duty of the authorities to ‘reconstruct the integrity of the historical fabric’ (*Putin*, 2013). For the Russian president, the strength of a people is also to be found in its unity, and so it depends on ‘to what extent the citizens of a country feel like one people, to

⁷ *Gudkov* (2004) calls it ‘neotraditionalism’, while *Mikhalkov* (2010) prefers to talk about ‘enlightened conservatism’.

⁸ On the debate on history textbooks, see: *Zagalovki* (2013), *ITAR-TASS* (2013) *Pervy Kanal* (2013a). The Memorial organization has started up an interesting project called ‘Uroki Istorii’ (History Lessons), involving an in-depth analysis of Russian history textbook content. Available at: <http://urokiistorii.ru/> (accessed 15 July 2013).

what extent they are steeped in their history, values and traditions, and whether they are united by common objectives and responsibilities' (Putin, 2013).

For Lev Gudkov (2004: 662), director of the Yuri Levada Analytical Center, this 'neotraditionalism' encouraged by the Kremlin is characterized by: '1) the idea of the 'Russian Renaissance' (a nostalgia for the past empire, the complaints and moaning of the old dreams of the country's past as a world superpower); 2) anti-Western propaganda and isolation and, consequently, the rehabilitation of the image of the enemy as a functional part of the positive meanings of the 'Russian'; and 3) the simplification and preservation of a poor image of mankind and social reality'.

The re-edition of Russian traditionalism, heavily dependent on its unique interpretation of history, is an attempt at re-launching an old discourse, openly counterrevolutionary and anti-liberal, which focuses on the exaltation of a messianic history and emphasizes the moral superiority of Russia over the West. Furthermore, its proponents advocate for Orthodoxy (the Church as the moral guide and driver behind social policies),⁹ the hierarchy of power and the unity of the State, also defining conservatism as the only possible path towards the country's modernization, its territorial integrity and the preservation of 'Russian civilization' (Medinski, 2010).

Russian neoconservatism establishes a linear historical path from 'Holy Russia' to 'Grand Russia' (Mikhalkov, 2010), understanding the Soviet era as a kind of anomaly in the *natural* course of Russian history, which revolves around the troika 'Tsar, Orthodox Church and *Gosudarstvennost'* (authoritarianism, hierarchy, and unity of the State morally sanctioned by the Church). This new ideology translates, in part, the postulates of the 19th century conservatism that Count Uvarov summarized in the motto 'Orthodoxy, Autocracy and the National Way of Life (*narodnost*)'. It also borrows from the Soviet imaginary, from which it maintains authoritarianism, and condemns communism (imported from Europe and, therefore, *strange* and condemnable) as being contrary to traditional Russian values. Nikita Mikhalkov, a prominent Russian movie producer, in his 'Manifesto on Enlightened Conservatism', one of the documents that tries to define the *mission* of Russia in contemporary society, sketches an idealized, strong and vertical paternalist state in decision-making. Endorsing one of the maxims of the neoconservatives, he accepts conservatism as the 'essence' of the Russian tradition emanating from the elites and, *therefore*, openly positive for the country. For their part, revolutions, liberals or workers, the product of radicals influenced by strange ideas about Russian tradition, have always plunged the country into destructive chaos:

National and universal history teaches us that the most important modernizing reforms have been successful only when they were endorsed by Russian statesmen or public or religious figures of a centrist and enlightened conservative ideology. As regards the 'destruction in the country and in the minds', which has brought so much suffering, misery and misfortune to Russia, it has been, and still is, the work of preachers of radical progress and the hot-headed leaders of democratic-bourgeois and proletariat revolutions (Mikhalkov, 2010).

Russia is, in itself, a civilization, an alternative to communism, to Western liberalism, understood as *unnatural* (Mosolikov, 2011), and which moral failure threatens to extend itself globally. In the face of that threat, it is necessary to defend oneself and, in this frame, neoconservatism is understood as a 'national ideology', concocted in opposition and on the defensive, constructed as opposed to the Western 'other'; which exploits the culture of fear against a new attempt by the external enemy to put an end to Russian civilization.¹⁰ Russia is, according to this version, the 'spiritual reserve' of Europe,¹¹ the place where the traditions lost by the West, after its multicultural and postmodern drift, are maintained.

Russia is that conservative bastion that, over the centuries, has stood in the way of European revolution and liberalism. Russia is the centre and the main outpost of European conservatism [...] European conservatism is in its death throes and Russia is the last European country where the values of conservatism still play an exceedingly important role. It is for this reason that liberal and revolutionary Europe has 'feared and hated' Russia for the last three centuries. The Western world understands perfectly that, if that conservative bastion falls, the triumph of liberalism and globalization will be unavoidable [...] Present-day Europe and Russia could never be allies: European liberalism and Russian conservatism are two opposing and irreconcilable ideologies. We would probably be that 'unique conservative

⁹ The document, entitled *The Basis of the Social Concept* (Russian Orthodox Church, 2000), stresses the importance of the national identity of Orthodox Christians: 'Orthodox Christians, aware of being citizens of the heavenly homeland, should not forget about their earthly homeland', as well as the need to participate in State affairs: 'The patriotism of the Orthodox Christian should be active. It is manifested when he defends his fatherland against an enemy, works for the good of the motherland, cares for the good order of people's lives through, among other things, participation in the affairs of government. The Christian is called on to preserve and develop national culture and people's self-awareness. When a nation, civil or ethnic, represents fully or predominantly a monoconfessional Orthodox community, it can in a certain sense be regarded as the one community of faith — an Orthodox nation.' The frequent public expressions of admiration of the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church for President Putin represent the type of relationship that part of the Orthodox hierarchy deems adequate to maintain with the Kremlin. For further information on the different points of view existing within the Russian Orthodox Church, see, among others, Chapnin (2013).

¹⁰ Bauman (2006: 11) recuperates the term 'derivative fear' (Lagrange, 1996) to describe 'a kind of "second-degree" fear — so to speak — socially and culturally "recycled", or [...] a "derivative fear" that orientates its behaviour (after changing its perception of the world and the expectations that guide its choice of behaviour), whether there is an immediate treat or not'. Derivative fear, 'sediment of a past era' (p.11) is historical and susceptible to being used periodically through discourses that return it to the present. Remembering the moment of a traumatic experience and emerging victorious from it can serve to boost patriotism and national unity (together we can find our way out of any situation), but also remembering the presence of a menace (our enemies, although under a different guise, still pose a threat).

¹¹ And at the same time, the bastion that liberated the European continent from the 'Asian barbarism' of the Mongol-Tatar yoke. The conflictive contact between both realities would be, according to this way of looking back on the past, an essential component in the construction of 'Russian civilization'.

European power' that is capable of showing Europe the correct way of preserving its cultural idiosyncrasy, instead of watching it disappear without trace in the whirlwind of globalization (Mosolikov, 2011).¹²

Russian neoconservatism borrows from ideological currents, such as *Pochvennichestvo*,¹³ the idea that social change should be brought about gradually and seeking the way forward through history and national traditions, instead of doing so with imported theories of a revolutionary nature (to wit, liberalism or Marxism). Hence, the central role that the Orthodox Church – entrusted with the job of steering social reforms that accompany political changes – also plays in the 'state' public discourse, due to its direct contact with the people and because it is understood that it is the natural interlocutor with a people of a proven spiritual superiority.

From this perspective, Shuvalov (2011) highlights the basic achievements in the last two decades of Russian history; on the one hand, 'the construction of democracy in Russia, the intensification of historical memory in Russian society, and a conservative shift in civic values.' The said 'conservative shift', as Shuvalov (2011) affirms, 'is not an arbitrary choice of the political elite. It is the dominant trend in the values and ideology of Russian society' (Shuvalov, 2011). This 'natural trend', which prefers tradition to liberty (Mosolikov, 2011), in harmony with historical development in Russia, emanates, according to this version, from the people, although it is captained by United Russia, proclaimed the authorized catalyst of these popular trends.

Territorial unity, revolving around Moscow; political unity, revolving around the President (and the party, which name, United Russia, does not seem to be a coincidence); religious unity, revolving around the Patriarch; and ideology, revolving around the 'national ideology'. Unity and, of course, vertical policies or vertical of power (*vertical vlasti*), ranging from the Presidency to the people ... but in reality not taking the people into account.

4. Political implications of the official historical discourse

Our historical sensibility is characterized by respect for authority, the power of the State, public law and order, and the rejection of the chaos of the 'senseless and merciless' Russian revolts.

(Nikita Mikhalkov)

In the works of those who profess to be neoconservatives, tradition is frequently identified with political stability, supported by a perspective of national history that 'shows' how natural and 'intrinsically Russian' obedience to authority and opposition to social unrest and popular revolts are (Mikhalkov, 2010). The Russian people would then put their trust in the hierarchy of the State and its criterion, instead of in representative or participatory systems imported from the West. That is to say, paternalist authoritarianism as a feature of the national identity. In this way, the democracy without civic participation (democracy without democracy) which is behind this concept, originally put forward by Vladislav Surkov and taken up by the Russian authorities of 'sovereign democracy' (*Suverennaya demokratia*), is easier to justify if citizens feel responsible for reproducing those historical moments of national glory about which they are insistently reminded by the media, and which always coincide with military victories or the need to rally round the autocrat in the face of an external threat. In other words, if I feel like the proud heir of the authoritarian practices of the past, I will be more receptive to policies of the same nature in the present.

The evident contradictions in the neoconservative discourse in Russia constitute, at the same time, its strength and weakness. Reconciling the anti-capitalist and anti-bourgeois essence, as well as the moral superiority attributed to the Russian people, with the ethically debatable methods used by the elites while amassing huge fortunes might seem difficult to justify. Nevertheless, in propagandistic terms it is not necessarily a bad combination (coherence between words and deeds is not always an indispensable condition for electoral success). The official discourse, which flows through a generally docile media system (an essential factor for evaluating the chances for success), tries to cater to those who feel more at home thinking about themselves as spiritually superior, although misunderstood and persecuted, people with respect to the West. These people believe that they have an historical mission to accomplish which, although it entails sacrifices (which form an indispensable part of the historical discourse promoted by the Kremlin), is worthwhile in the interest of a high-minded objective shared by past generations, especially those who fought in World War II. Simultaneously, as often happens with 'populist' propaganda, supporting the leader (conveniently flattered in the media) can be understood as 'psychological support', not so much (or not always) ideological and, much less, rational. So, the leader is seen as someone who has the courage to say what the majority of people think, but do not voice for fear or shame.

¹² The Russian president has frequently expressed himself along the same lines (Putin, 2014).

¹³ The phenomenon of *pochvennichestvo* in Russian thought and literature developed primarily during the first years of the 19th century and its tenets were disseminated through journals such as *Vremia* and *Epokha*. Notwithstanding the fact that its conservative proposals were fairly similar to those defended by the Slavophiles, the proponents of *pochvennichestvo* maintained some degree of neutrality in the clashes between these and the Westernizers. Its proposals essentially aimed to achieve unity (which included Slavophiles and Westernizers) regarding the 'intrinsically Russian' values of the population as a whole by advocating for a rapprochement between the educated classes and the peasantry on the basis of those values and through certain traditional communal self-management systems.

The promotion of the past implicit in neoconservative texts has clear-cut political implications, which begin with the delimitation of the politically *normal*, understood as that which preserves the harmony with the historical project of Russian civilization, and the *abnormal*, which refutes the said project and, therefore, has no place in the political ecosystem of the Russian Federation: within, the competition of ideas is developed; outside, there is nothing more than the adversary: 'I believe that the next stage of the development of Russian democracy (and, at the same time, our objective for the next decade) would involve the configuration of a range of left and right wing parties in our country, in accordance with the principles of Russian conservatism, that is, for the benefit of the majority' (Shuvalov, 2011). The degradation of political life generated by an approach like this is evident. In the words of García Canclini (2001:113):

The commemoration of the 'legitimate' past – which corresponds to the 'national essence', to morals, to religion, and to the family – becomes the preponderant cultural activity. To participate in social life is to comply with a system of ritualized practices that leave out 'the foreign', whatever challenges the consecrated order or promotes scepticism.

This radical reductionism of the public sphere that confines the political debate, framing it, hampers the emergence of social movements that could put forward other proposals for social change, and reduces the possibilities of civic engagement. The legislation accompanying the political project of the Kremlin also includes the censorship of organizations that could champion the said alternatives,¹⁴ in addition to other legislative initiatives that seek to preserve 'traditional morality'.¹⁵ Without the dissemination of alternative projects it is difficult to consider structural changes.

Likewise, an historical discourse that legitimizes the existing social hierarchy (understood as fair, natural, adapted to Russian traditions) allows a certain part of the population to voice, in parallel, their pride in forming part of a political system like the Russian one and to assume, and even legitimize, that their participation in the country's political affairs is (and this is normally the way things are) virtually non-existent.¹⁶

5. The media system channelling the neoconservative discourse

Let us recall how Hollywood helped shape the consciousness of several generations of Americans. It promoted values and priorities that were rather positive in terms of national interests and public morals. Russia could learn from that experience.

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¹⁷Historical memory always appears in a specific discourse, which is channelled through the most varied media. We recall collectively and mediations are essential in this process. There cannot be a cultural memory without communication, for which reason the study of media systems, and the relations of power that they represent, is one of the keys for understanding and assessing the impact of memory policies. Manuel Castells (2009) states that politics is, nowadays, fundamentally media politics. The privileged access of a small elite to the mainstream media discourse often results in the promotion of a specific memory discourse, and in the marginalization (or censorship) of other possible discourses. Those that have greater access to a larger number of influential discourses are, to a great extent ... more powerful (Van Dijk, 2008).

When studying the media system in modern-day Russia it is now commonplace to focus the analysis on its comparison with the media structure of the Soviet period. This approach is relevant and allows us, to some extent, to chronologically establish the Russian media transition, alongside the country's socio-political transition. Likewise, the comparative study of the different post-communist transitions and their resulting media ecosystems is useful and illustrative (Curran and Park, 2000; Sparks, 2008: 43–71; Hutchings, 2010), as is the analysis of the Soviet aspects of the current media structure of the Russian Federation.

However, more than 20 years after the fall of the USSR, the media system in Russia has undergone important changes (Rosenholm et al., 2010; Strovskii, 2011; Beumers et al., 2009; Vartanova, 2010; Gorgham et al., 2014) which, although they have not suppressed its authoritarian nature, have indeed noticeably transformed the rules of the game. The privatizing policies after 1991 and the global transformation of the country during these years produced a media system that combined political control of content with the need to make a profit. So, an absent-minded observer would maybe find the best analogy by comparing the Russian media system with that of the Italy of Berlusconi, rather than comparing the former with that which characterized the USSR.

¹⁴ Legislation such as the Federal Law 'On Non-Profit Organizations' (2012), which penalizes organizations that receive financing from abroad, is a good example of this.

¹⁵ The controversial Federal Law 'On Propaganda of Non-Traditional Sexual Relationships among Minors' is just one example of such initiatives.

¹⁶ An opinion poll conducted by the Levada Center in October 2013 yielded interesting results in this respect: when asked the question 'do you feel proud of living in Russia?', 70% of the respondents answered 'Definitely yes or probably yes' (and this is the lowest percentage since 2006), while 22% answered 'Definitely not or probably not'. When asked the question 'do you believe that you exert some degree of influence on the political and economic life of the country?' 17% answered 'Definitely yes or probably yes' (the highest percentage since 2006), while 78% answered 'Definitely not or probably not' (Levada Center, 2013).

¹⁷ On the Russian Federation's media industry, see Vázquez-Liñán (2012a).

The aim behind the changes in the structure of the media and culture in the Russian Federation since the turn of the century has been the construction of a media system designed in such a way that the discourse of the elites is always hegemonic, which also implies the consolidation of the establishment as just that. To that end, the Russian authorities have chosen a tried and tested recipe, which combines the legislative control of information, judicial repression, the dissemination of a patriotic message based on 'Russian exceptionalism', and the adoption of entertainment as the dominant content *format* of the media system. These ingredients are prepared by a media industry characterized, above all since Putin's ascent to power, by its business concentration and allegiance to the establishment.

Although none of these elements were alien to the Soviet system, it was Vladimir Putin who established the rules of the game in the new situation. Lev Gudkov (2009) describes what are, in his view, the two chief lines of the propaganda strategy implemented by the Russian authorities since 2003 in the following way: 'To disassemble the country's modernization, but without really introducing basic institutional reforms, and imitate, in a traditionalist fashion, the 'pompous' style of a superpower' (para. 3). The resulting 'communication' system is founded, in the author's opinion, on the following principles: on the one hand, a high level of ownership concentration in the media industry, which makes the major media dependent on the State and leaves them in the hands of a small clique of entrepreneurs, frequently those who have entered into *agreements* with the Kremlin. Yes to the free market, but with conditions. Moreover, the country's media companies are not famous for their transparency regarding their investors – who are all too frequently protected by the 'trade secret' (Kachkaeva, in Richter, 2007, p. 88).

So, control of the major media remains in the hands of a few, although, it must be said, camouflaged time and again by a hotchpotch of initials, companies and investment funds. As Tarochina (2011) states: 'Those in power are only interested in big figures, and especially in television'. Control of the ownership and content of the three major federal television channels (First Channel, Russia-1 and NTV)¹⁸ is a *state issue* in present-day Russia (Kachkaeva, 2009: 73–95; Kratasjuk, 2006; Novikova, 2010; Oates, 2006; Zvereva, 2010). On the other hand, critical information that generates politically-charged debate is only channelled through media of a limited scope to which, following Tarochina's line of argument, the authorities devote little attention.

Control of information and legal prosecution have been, and still are, essential for intervention in the media system by the establishment. Control and prosecution start with passing laws that hinder the work of journalists or that define 'extremism' or 'terrorism' in a way that nearly everything, if necessary, could be one or the other or both; and then continue with the application of legislation by a judiciary that, as Dmitri Medvedev (2009) himself stated, 'should necessarily be free from external influences' (para. 42). Furthermore, the *legal* control of media content is possible essentially thanks to the Criminal Code,¹⁹ the rules governing the coverage of electoral processes, and anti-terrorism legislation²⁰ and federal laws combating extremist activities. The application of the Federal Law on Combating Extremist Activities,²¹ which, among other things, regards the 'abatement of national dignity' as an offence (art. 1.1), has caused frequent problems for those whose discourse could jeopardize the stability of the establishment.²² Furthermore, political control of television involves discussing programme content in meetings with the directors (Strovskii, 2011, pp. 302–303), as well as mounting ideological pressure (Zvereva, 2010, p.270) exerted on the staff of media companies. With these limitations, and in a market environment, political information does not only lack pluralism, but also *competitiveness* as content. Politically-charged debate evaporates and is substituted by its staging and infotainment (Strovskii, 2011, p.323). Nonetheless, and despite this, Russian laws ensure, to a certain degree, media coverage of different discourses and set limits to business concentration (Richter, 2007). The problem, however, lies in the permissiveness of the courts when it is those in the spheres of power who fail to comply with the law. Beyond the courts, the threats and aggressions suffered by human rights activists, journalists or whoever voices his or her opposition to the regime are far too commonplace. To a certain extent, it is a serious 'extrajudicial' consequence of the permissive attitude of the courts towards the abuses of power.

6. Conclusions

The choice of a certain form of cultural memory by those with greater access to the hegemonic media has clear socio-political repercussions. Such a choice always appears in the form of a politically pre-meditated discourse that is channelled through the education system, as well as through a variety (as regards their format) of media systems, whose study is essential so as to assess the socio-political impact of the historical memory discourse.

¹⁸ According to the report prepared by Volkov and Goncharov (2014) for the Levada Center, which includes information on media consumption patterns in Russia, 90% of citizens said that they kept themselves informed about developments in Russia and the rest of the world basically through television, ranked much higher than any other media channel (the Internet was the primary choice of 24% of the respondents). Moreover, and according to the same report, of those who watched TV news programmes, 82% regularly watched First Channel, 71% Russia-1, and 48% NTV.

¹⁹ Criminal charges of libel (art. 129) or slander (art. 130) are particularly frequent.

²⁰ Primarily, the Federal Law of March 6, 2006, 'On Counteraction against Terrorism', which has been amended on several occasions. The complete text of the law is available at: <http://www.rg.ru/2006/03/10/borba-terrorizm.html> (accessed 23 August 2012).

²¹ The Federal Law of 2002 'On Combating Extremist Activities', which is being permanently updated. The complete text of the law is available at: <http://www.rg.ru/2006/07/29/ekstremizm-protivodejstvie-dok.html> (accessed 23 August 2012).

²² Media legislation in Russia, as well as the working conditions of journalists were well reflected (Richter, 2007; Baturin et al., 2004; Soldatov et al., 2008).

In the case analysed in this work, that of the historical discourse endorsed by the Kremlin in present-day Russia, the hegemonic narrative of memory intends, in the author's view, to reduce the possibilities of social change in the country and safeguard, as already mentioned, the establishment's position of power. This desire to maintain the status quo, ideologically illustrated by the neo-traditionalism endorsed by the party United Russia, is underpinned by a selective recovery of specific periods of the national past, interpreted as having been characterized by sound 'political stability' and, *therefore*, by prosperity and social peace. In this way, the current elites present themselves as heirs to those who led the country during these periods and guarantors of the values and traditions comprising the 'traditional Russian vision' of the world; a vision that is usually juxtaposed to the 'Western imaginary'. To that end, a discourse that defends the 'intrinsically Russian' character of political practices, such as authoritarianism, included in the bevy of values that should be preserved as the unique country's own tradition, has been constructed and promoted, which makes it easier for such authoritarian practices to find greater acceptance nowadays.

The impact of this discourse on Russian citizens is multiplied by the very nature of the media system through which it is channelled, always very united around the elites and which usually closes ranks when confronted with the possibility of disseminating alternative discourses. If citizens cannot have easy access to different narratives that construct other imaginations, social change in the Russian Federation would appear to be a chimera.

If the fact that the hegemonic discourse identifies continuity with 'that' past with political stability is also taken into account, the possibility of political evolution towards greater civic engagement would seem rather remote.

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