



THE ROLE OF THE OLDER GENERATION IN MODERN RUSSIAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes how the Russian Federation engages with the older generation and how propaganda narratives are used to strengthen patriotic spirit among young people by instilling respect for Russian veterans who contributed to World War II and other recent conflicts. The study also highlights that such rhetoric is gradually introduced at every stage of young people's education: from preschool to university. The paper emphasizes that the inclusion of issues related to the elderly in strategic documents illustrates the Russian state's awareness of the importance of strengthening patriotism to face contemporary geopolitical challenges. At the same time, the paper can serve as a basis for future scientific research aimed at further understanding the socio-emotional impact of these narratives, both internally and externally.

Keywords: Russia, older generation, veterans, rhetoric, propaganda.

Article info

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Introduction

This study examines how the Russian state currently relates to the older generation and how it utilizes them to instill family values and patriotism in young people. This issue has gained importance following the May 7th, 2024, publication of Russian President Vladimir Putin's Decree, which sets strategic development goals for the Russian Federation for 2030-2036. This topic has gained greater relevance, particularly for understanding Russian culture in the current geopolitical context. Given this, the following research question arises: How is respect for seniors used in Russian propaganda?

The paper is descriptive and documentary in nature, based on the analysis and synthesis of information from specialist literature and open Russian and Western sources, such as academic websites, state institutions, periodicals, and official documents. The information was selected based on relevance, timeliness, and credibility. The theoretical framework also used the model of the six cultural dimensions developed by Geert Hofstede.

This paper is subject to certain limitations, including the fact that it is not based on direct empirical data, such as surveys or interviews, but rather on data from surveys conducted by other authors. Therefore, the analysis of the information remains interpretative. Last but not least, intergenerational relationships are constantly changing, being influenced by new social trends.

Specific features of Russian society regarding interaction with the elderly

According to the model of six cultural dimensions developed by Geert Hofstede and presented in his and Gert Jan Hofstede's blog, the Russian Federation is a country with a high power distance, an avoidant orientation, and a long-term orientation, with a collectivist and feminine culture, as evidenced by the fact that an individual's behavior in society is influenced by their position in society. At the same time, in this culture, individuals express empathy, loyalty, and care for others, readily accept hierarchy, do not challenge authority, think strategically, and plan for the future.

In the article by Russian academic and sociologist Aleksey Levinson², it is highlighted that in primitive societies, the oldest person made decisions and was considered the wisest member and the group's storyteller. Basically, this individual was the one who had to pass on traditions and customs to the younger generation. Levinson points out that in certain cultures and societies, at certain levels of administrative and territorial organization, there were so-called "councils of elders" or "wise men" which were composed of the oldest men, who were consulted by the leaders of those social groups in making political, economic, military, and other decisions (Levinson, 2005). Such "councils of wise men" can still be found nowadays, including in certain federal subjects of the Russian Federation, particularly in the Caucasian and Siberian republics.

An example is the "Council of Aksakals" in the Republic of Tatarstan. The official website of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of the Republic of Tatarstan states that the objective of this council is to implement the institution's spiritual policy and related activities. The "Council of Aksakals" is headed by a president, who is assisted by a group of advisors that consists of elderly people with lifelong experience in various fields. They advise the mufti³ of Tatarstan on the effective exercise of his authority, the improvement of spiritual potential, and the strengthening of moral conduct of the Muslim community.

Levinson believes that intergenerational relationships are shaped by historical, religious, and social factors that only highlight the role of the family and respect for the older generation, and intergenerational dialogue, which represents a special place in Russian culture and represents key values and identity traits of the Russian people.

Furthermore, Aleksey Levinson notes that aging became a real social concern in the 20th century, when life expectancy was low. In the early 1900s, average life expectancy in Europe was about 42.7 years. By 2023, it had increased to 79.1 years, according to a sociological study published in 2023 by "Our World in Data". These data suggest that life expectancy has nearly doubled over the past century, largely due to better living conditions, advances in healthcare, improved nutrition, and changes in modern lifestyles.

Thus, the issue of old age led to the emergence of a branch of science in the early 1900s called "gerontology". This is defined as the science that studies the process of human aging from social, psychological,

biological, and economic perspectives, and its effects on individuals and society. In an article on the website of the Alliance for the Study of Aging⁴, Elie Metchnikov, a Russian microbiologist and immunologist, is presented as the founder of gerontology. He was the first to study and approach the human aging process as a medical condition and developed his own theories on how life expectancy could be extended (Stambler, 2015).

In classical Russian literature, themes of respect for the elderly and intergenerational conflict are common. For example, Ivan Turgenev, in his novel "Fathers and Sons," addressed the conflict between the generations of "fathers" and "sons," more specifically, the clash between the traditionalist and humanist ideals of Arkady Kirsanov and the materialistic ideals of young people, represented by Yevgeny Bazarov.

Respect for the elderly is also a recurring theme in the work of other authors. For example, in "Letters on Kindness" by Dmitri Likhachev (1985, p. 2), the author addresses young people directly, encouraging them to love their parents, care for older people, preserve traditions, and develop a sense of patriotism. He believes that education and respect play a crucial role in shaping the younger generation's national identity.

Russian culture also has many popular sayings and fixed expressions that are educational in nature and urge young people to respect the elderly: "*The elderly are respected even in a horde,*" "*Do not raise your hand against an elderly person and do not speak ill of the dead,*" and "*The older you are, the more right you are*".

Finally, there are several important dates in the Russian Federation dedicated to older people. October 1st, the International Day of Older Persons, highlights their role in society and draws attention to the need for a dignified, active, and secure life in old age. May 9th, Victory Day, commemorates the significant contributions of war veterans, former camp prisoners, and survivors of the Siege of Leningrad⁵.

The older generation as a tool of Russian propaganda

Russia's current political leadership emphasizes respect for the elderly and the memory of World War II veterans, while also seeking to ensure living conditions that allow them to live with dignity. This concern is reflected in the Decree issued on May 7th, 2024, by Vladimir Putin, which outlines

the Russian Federation's national strategic development goals for 2030-2036.

This document outlines several objectives aimed at improving the overall quality of life, with measures specifically for older people. These goals include raising life expectancy to 78 years by 2030 and to 81 years by 2036; increasing the number of older citizens who benefit from long-term care services; ensuring at least 70% state funding for projects aimed at promoting and protecting Russian spiritual, moral, and traditional values; and providing housing.

Because older people are a social group with strong emotional significance in society, Russian authorities actively use this potential for propaganda purposes, both at home and abroad. According to a report published by ZOIS⁶ (September 2024), between 800,000 and 900,000 Russian citizens left the country after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022-2024. Many people emigrated for various reasons, mostly because of opposition to the regime or fear of military mobilization. Therefore, the Russian state concentrated its efforts to promote patriotism and a sense of national identity among its citizens. A survey conducted by Levada-Centre in April 2025 shows that 42% of young people "unconditionally support" the Russian president, while 45% say they "somewhat support" him.

It is important to note that in Russian society, respect for the elderly – especially for war veterans – is instilled in young people from an early age, in preschool and continuing through school and university. This respect is closely associated with cultural and political events organized to celebrate Victory Day against fascism on May 9 each year, to mark the end of the Siege of Leningrad, the defeat of German, Romanian, Hungarian, and Italian troops at Stalingrad, and other major victories of the Red Army [fig. 1 and 2].

The article published on the EUvsDiSiNFO (2024) website states that, with Moscow's shift towards Eurasian cooperation and the launch of geopolitical challenges by Vladimir Putin in his famous 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, Victory Day has become a main tool for internal propaganda to boost patriotism, glorify the Russian army, and mobilize society against the danger posed by the collective West and its values.

An article published on the EUvsDiSiNFO (2024) website also highlights a clear shift in the meaning of Victory Day celebration over time. Before 2008, these events largely focused on honoring World War II veterans and commemorating the victims. However, after

²Alexey Levinson is the head of the Socio-Cultural Research Department at the Levada-Center, an independent Russian non-governmental organization that conducts opinion polls and sociological research.

³The spiritual leader, an Islamic scholar of a Muslim community.

⁴The Alliance for Aging Research is a non-profit organization that promotes health and equitable access to healthcare for older adults.

⁵Present-day Saint Petersburg. It was besieged by the Nazi German Army between 1941 and 1944.

⁶Centre for East European and International Studies is a publicly funded research institute.

the conflict with Georgia in August 2008, Victory Day increasingly took on a more aggressive tone, promoting Russian military strength and the Kremlin's readiness to use military force against its adversaries. As a result, the holiday gradually evolved into a celebration that glorifies war and all its atrocities.

At the same time, the article notes that since 2008, military parades in Moscow have been held annually, with a steady increase in the number of troops and military equipment. During Vladimir Putin's time, Russian propaganda also moved away from traditional Soviet symbols, replacing them with the Ribbon of St. George. As World War II veterans became fewer in number, new forms of commemoration emerged, most notably the Immortal Regiment campaign. Over time, Victory Day expanded beyond remembrance of World War II to honor the veterans of all wars fought by the Russian army, including the most recent conflict in Ukraine.

In comparison, Western societies have maintained the tradition of celebrating the victory over fascism in World War II as a day of commemoration and remembrance of the tragedies and massive destruction that occurred during that period.

Hence, the Immortal Regiment campaign plays an important role in promoting the image of World War II veterans in Russian propaganda. According to the official website of the Immortal Regiment initiative, the main stated objective of this propaganda campaign is to preserve the memory of the generations of the "Great Patriotic War"⁷ in society and in every family that had participants in this global conflict. According to the information from the Immortal Regiment website, participation in the event requires that each person who wishes to commemorate the memory of a relative – who was a veteran of the army or navy, a partisan, engaged in the war industry behind the front lines, a prisoner in concentration camps, or a participant in the Siege of Leningrad – on May 9th, participants are expected to join the march in the city, carrying a photo or placard bearing the name of their relative and join the parade of the Immortal Regiment column.

Also, in places where no Immortal Regiment march is held, people can honor their war veteran relatives at the nearest local monument dedicated to fallen heroes. At the same time, the official website of the Immortal Regiment presents the initiative as a private, apolitical civic action open to any citizen, regardless of nationality, religion, or political views. Although from a formal point of view, the movement is not intended to serve political, commercial, or promotional purposes. President Vladimir

Putin and the entire central political leadership participate in every Immortal Regiment parade in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other major Russian cities. The stated goal of the Immortal Regiment initiative is to establish it as a nationwide tradition for the entire Russian people to celebrate Victory Day on May 9th.

Another article published by the EUvsDiSiNFO (2024) portal notes that the initiative emerged as a civic movement that brought millions of participants. Over time, it was gradually taken over by the Kremlin. While many citizens joined marches on their own – which says a lot about the sincere social adherence to this action – there were also reports of students being mobilized to participate in these events, with portraits distributed by the organizers, sometimes depicting individuals they did not personally know. Since 2023, the massive public marches of the Immortal Regiment have been canceled, with authorities encouraging participation in online formats instead. This shift is widely seen as an attempt to prevent the marches from becoming a platform of dissent. If citizens were able to display portraits of their loved ones who died in the so-called "special operation"⁸ in Ukraine, numbers that could sharply contradict official Russian data were made public.

The website dedicated to the 80th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany notes that veterans participating in the parade wear military uniforms and, like other participants, wear the St. George ribbon [fig.3]. The ribbon is presented as a symbol of the heroism and bravery of Red Army soldiers during World War II. Thus, the St. George ribbon is used for propaganda purposes both within the Russian state and beyond its borders, promoting Russia's interpretation of World War II history.

At the same time, at the military parade held on May 9th in Moscow's Red Square, alongside the Russian president on the official tribune are World War II veterans and well-known elderly political, military, and cultural figures [fig. 4]. This is a symbolic image that sends a powerful message from the highest political level to Russian society about how all citizens of the country should relate to older generations.

Another tool used in propaganda by the Russian authorities to strengthen respect and care for older generations and veterans in society is the Russian national civic movement Victory Volunteers. The official website of this organization states that its goal is to maintain intergenerational connections and pass on the memory of heroes to future generations [fig. 5]. The priority is cooperation with veterans and veterans' organizations to clean and repair veterans' homes, accompany them to activities and medical facilities, do shopping, and

congratulate them on national and personal holidays.

A key propaganda campaign supported by the organization's volunteers is called Victory Letter, which sends congratulations and thanks to veterans of the Great Patriotic War and participants in the "special military operation" in Ukraine. In addition to activists from the *Victory Volunteers* movement, participants in the *International Volunteer Corps* of the national initiative *80th Anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War 1941-1945* and participants in the *International Volunteer Corps* of the national initiative *80th Anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War 1941-1945* or humanitarian missions in the case of participants in Russia's war in Ukraine.

The website of the Volunteers of Victory lists the following partners of this Russian national movement: the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation, the official portal dedicated to the 80th anniversary of the victory over fascism, Rossotrudnichestvo, the Memory of the Generation Charitable Foundation, the Union of Russian Veterans, the national civic organization "Heroism in Labor in Russia," Yunarmia, the Russian Patriotic Center of Russian Youth, the civic organization "Rossmolodyoj"⁹, Russian Railways, the international media group Russia Today, and the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection.

The external socio-emotional impact of Russian propaganda on the topic of war veterans

Externally, Russian propaganda on the topic of veterans of the Great Patriotic War has certain characteristics depending on the objectives pursued and the intensity of actions in specific areas of application. In the former Soviet countries, propaganda narratives on this topic aim to keep them within Russia's sphere of influence not only on political and economic grounds, but also on ideological, cultural-educational, and scientific grounds.

Social adherence to Russian propaganda on the topic of war veterans varies across the states that broke away from the former USSR. It is more pronounced in countries that have chosen to be part of political-military or economic integration structures led by Russia—the CIS¹⁰, CSTO¹¹, and EAEU¹², namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, or where Russian

influence is still strong (Republic of Moldova, Georgia) and is much lower in states that have definitively broken away from Moscow (the Baltic States) or are at war with the Russian Federation (Ukraine).

On May 12th, 2025, the official website of the CIS published a summary of events held in member countries in 2025 to mark the 80th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany. CIS Secretary General Sergei Lebedev noted that this was the central and most important event held in the CIS, emphasizing that:

"Each republic made an invaluable contribution to the defeat of fascism, and every family in the CIS today cherishes the memory of those who rose up to defend their homeland, those who never returned from the battlefield, and those who forged the Great Victory with their selfless work behind the lines. The fiery years of war convincingly demonstrated that the fraternal international friendship of the peoples of the Soviet Union was not a myth, as modern falsifiers of history try to portray it, but an incredibly powerful force. It is our common duty to honor the sacred memory of those who died for freedom and peace on Earth, to defend with all our might the just cause for which they fought and gave their lives, and to strengthen in every way the unity of all people of good will in the fight against any manifestations of Nazism and neo-Nazism, as well as the threat of a new world war." (CIS, 2025)

In this context, Russia's war against Ukraine in February 2022 has led to a change in the domestic and international perception of Moscow's current propaganda narratives, related to the Great Patriotic War and, implicitly, to the theme of war veterans. Russia's aggression in Ukraine has led to the collapse of some Soviet propaganda narratives that have been taken up by today's Russia: the myth of the victorious Russian army, the myth of the Russian soldier as liberator, and the myth of brotherly peoples (Voicu&Gomboş, 2022, p.179).

Conclusions

The Russian state's concern for supporting the elderly and preserving the memory of war veterans contributes to strengthening the sense of patriotism in society and cohesion between generations, educating the younger generation in the spirit of traditional Russian moral values, and fostering a sense of belonging to a state with global superpower status.

⁷ The generic name in Russia for World War II.

⁸ This is how Russia officially refers to the war it started against Ukraine in 2022.

⁹ Russian youth

¹⁰ Commonwealth of Independent States

¹¹ Collective Security Treaty Organization

¹² Eurasian Economic Union

At the same time, patriotism significantly influences the formation of social consciousness and national identity. Patriotic education in Russia has well-defined objectives and becomes part of the collective understanding of the country's past, present, and future. Patriotic ideas promoted through education, the media, culture, and within the family, where the memory of the Great Patriotic War is usually sacredly preserved, help shape a system of values and beliefs that influence public opinion in the direction desired by the authorities.

As highlighted in this paper, the Russian authorities are aware that patriotism has the potential to become a powerful force for social consolidation and mobilization of the nation to achieve its goals and face current geopolitical challenges. This is illustrated by the inclusion of issues affecting the elderly and patriotism in Russia's medium- and long-term strategic planning documents.

The natural process of physical disappearance of people who participated in one way or another in the Great

Patriotic War will cause Russian authorities to act with greater determination to implement propaganda strategies and tools that convey the memory and respect for the status of "war veteran" to younger generations. Social adherence to Russian propaganda on this issue, both domestically and abroad, is in most cases driven by material rather than emotional factors. It is well known that war veterans recognized by Russia and their descendants receive a range of benefits regardless of whether they live in Russia or another country, as well as tax and administrative benefits if they reside in the Russian Federation.

Furthermore, the use of images of elderly people associated with events organized by the Russian state at home and abroad to mark Victory Day against fascism aims to capitalize as much as possible on the emotional potential generated by these images to promote Russian propaganda narratives regarding its own perspective on the truth of the history of World War II and maintain its sphere of influence over the entire former Soviet space.

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