

Image of Power

Portrayals of Russian Militarism and Military Power on the Website *Putin. 20 Years*

Poliittisen historian
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This thesis deals with the portrayal of militarism and military power by the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation on the website “*Putin. 20 Years*”. The website was published in 2019 in celebration of President Vladimir Putin’s twenty years in power and it details the most memorable moments of Russia’s history from 1999 to 2019.

For decades now, the Presidential Administration has worked to foster a certain image around President Putin. Throughout the years, this image has morphed together with the image of Russia as a whole. The image the Kremlin has built is largely centered around the aim of projecting power. In the case of Putin’s Russia, the power is specifically hard power, and it has often manifested as use of force.

The research material consists of photographs, and therefore this thesis falls into the category of historical image research. Examining Putin’s time in power through photographs is justified as his presidency is exceptionally visual. Image research attempts to approach the worldview of the picture producers, in this case focusing on militarism and military power. The research question is: what subjects under the larger themes of militarism and military power appear in the material? In the case of this thesis militarism covers cultural aspects, while military power focuses more on the ways the administration advertises its abilities.

The two main ways militarism and military power manifest on the website are ‘remembrance’ and ‘show of power’. Remembrance refers to portrayals of Russian military history, veterans, and different celebrations. Remembrance has a distinct sense glorifying sacrifice and suffering, suggesting that this angle is key to how the Presidential Administration wants to frame history. Show of power draws the focus on to the future and the military potential that Russia has, by flaunting the country’s military industry as well as potential for battle. Show of power also tries to justify use of force by showing that Russia is and has been under attack.

Keywords: Militarism, Military power, Russian Federation, Putin, Presidential Administration, Great Patriotic War, Public diplomacy, Historical image research

Tämä pro gradu käsittelee militarismia ja sotilaallisen voiman esittämistä Venäjän presidentinhallinnon vuonna 2019 julkaisemalla sivustolla ”*Putin. 20 Years*”. Sivusto tehtiin juhlistamaan presidentti Vladimir Putinin kaksikymmenvuotista taivalta Venäjän johdossa ja se esittelee Venäjän lähihistorian merkittäviä hetkiä vuosilta 1999–2019.

Venäjän presidentinhallinto on nyt jo vuosikymmenten ajan pyrkinyt luomaan ja ylläpitämään tietynlaista julkisuuskuvaa presidentti Putinista. Vuosien aikana tämä kuva on yhdistynyt Venäjän itsensä julkisuuskuvan kanssa. Kremlin luoma kuva on perustunut laajalti pyrkimykseen projisoida voimaa. Putinin Venäjän tapauksessa tämä voima on spesifisti kovaa voimaa ja se on useissa tapauksissa ilmennyt voimankäyttönä.

Tutkimusmateriaali koostuu valokuvista, näin ollen tämä pro gradu on historiallista kuvatutkimusta. Putinin valtakauden tutkiminen valokuvien kautta on perusteltua, sillä hänen presidenttiytensä on poikkeuksellisen visuaalista. Kuvatutkimuksen keinoin pyritään lähestymään kuvien tuottajien maailmankuvaa, tässä tapauksessa keskittyen militarismia ja sotilaallisen voiman teemoihin. Tutkimuskysymys on: mitkä aiheet militarismia ja sotilaallisen voiman sisällä nousevat esiin materiaalisissa? Tämän tutkielman puitteissa militarismilla viitataan sen kulttuurisiin ilmentymiin sotilaallisen voiman viitatessa tapoihin, joilla hallinto esittelee omaa kyvykkyyttään.

Militarismi ja sotilaallinen voima esiintyvät sivustolla erityisesti ”muistamisen” ja ”voimannäytön” kautta. Muistaminen viittaa Venäjän sotahistorian, veteraanien ja erilaisten juhlien esittämiseen. Muistamiseen liittyy vahvasti uhrauksen ja kärsimyksen glorifiointi, mikä viitanee siihen, että tämä on oleellista tavalle, jolla presidentinhallinto haluaa esittää historiaa. Voimannäyttö keskittyy enemmän tulevaisuuteen ja Venäjän sotilaalliseen potentiaaliin esittelemällä Venäjän sotateollisuutta sekä kykyä käydä sota. Voimannäyttö pyrkii myös oikeuttamaan voimankäytön näyttämällä, että Venäjä on ollut ja on edelleen itse hyökkäyksen kohteena.

Avainsanat: Militarismi, sotilaallinen voima, Venäjän federaatio, Putin, presidentinhallinto, Suuri isänmaallinen sota, julkisuusdiplomatia, historiallinen kuvatutkimus

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1 Introduction

On February 24th, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, expanding the crisis that had been ongoing since 2014.¹ Although Russia and Ukraine had been in a conflict for nearly a decade at that point, Russia had tried to hide behind the veil of indirectness, politics, and proxy fighters. In early 2022 it became abundantly clear, however, that Russian President Vladimir Putin was not above outright war waging. Today, Russia and Ukraine are in their fourth year of the war, and although some movement is happening, peaceful coexistence is still a faraway concept.²

The Russo-Ukrainian War might very well be the conflict that finally cements Putin's presidency as a war presidency. It will certainly make sure that his legacy will be marred by the memory of war of aggression. Whether Putin will be solely remembered for this war remains to be seen, but at present the war with Ukraine has at least ultimately proved what significance militarism and military power hold in Putin's power projection. It might have taken a full-blown invasion of a neighboring country to make it undoubtedly clear that Putin as a president relies on using force. However, the signs have been ever-present during Putin's two-and-a-half-decade rule.

1.1 Putin and Russia – An Unholy Alliance?

This thesis deals with the way in which Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime utilizes militarism and projections of military power in its image building. The research material consists of official photographs taken of President Putin during the years 1999–2019 and published by the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation on the website *Putin. 20 Years* in 2019. Looking at Putin's regime through the lens of militarism is a timely, yet

¹ McFaul & Person 2024, 34.

² Talks between Russia and Ukraine have been happening sporadically throughout the war unsuccessfully. Recent developments in Great Power politics, namely the election of Donald J. Trump as the President of the United States have created some movement towards peace talks, however, actual conflict resolution seems far away since Russia and Ukraine have very different views on how talks should proceed. For a look on Russia-Ukraine talks through peace negotiation theory see: Bramsen & Svensson 2024.

On April 28th, 2025, President Putin declared a unilateral three-day ceasefire from May 7th until the 10th. The ceasefire marks the 80th anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War. This move by the Kremlin was likely due to the Russian forces expelling Ukrainian troops from the Kursk territory. "Russia's expulsion of Ukrainian forces from Kursk removes hurdle to peace" *Reuters*, 28.4.2025
<<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-expulsion-ukrainian-forces-kursk-removes-hurdle-peace-2025-04-28/>> [Accessed on 29.4.2025].

also a timeless way to study this era of Russian history, since with any real examination, Putin's rule is revealed to be one of militarized power from the beginning.

Another defining characteristic of Vladimir Putin's presidency is its visuality.³ Although most presidents use photographs as a part of their image building, Putin's image and reputation is largely based on visual representations of him. Many photographs published of Putin border iconic status and likely most everyone has a specific photo that comes to mind when thinking of him.⁴ Furthermore, Putin has in the minds of many come to mean the same as Russia as a whole. Putin's own image has morphed with that of Russia's, and this could be said to be by design, as the Kremlin has worked hard to craft the President's image throughout the years.

The exploration of militarism in Putin's Russia through official images makes sense, due to the exceptionally visual nature of Putin's presidency, and his image by and large also being that of Russia's. Focusing on the official narratives of the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation reveals what the regime itself wants us to focus on. How it wants to be seen, and in turn, what it does not bring forth. In a world where it has become abundantly clear that Russian actions are not held back by a fear of "what will others think", examining what does the regime want us to think is crucial. Even if it is impossible to read the minds of the people in charge of decision-making in Russia, looking for patterns is helpful. This thesis is not an attempt to offer some new groundbreaking information on Russian militarism. Rather this is an exploration of the aspects of Russian militarism that are presented by the Putin regime itself.

In this introductory chapter I will delve deeper into my research question, introduce my research material, and explain the methodological approach. Chapters two and three cover my analysis of the research material. In the beginning of each main chapter, I will give a short introduction to the theme the chapter deals with. Chapter two covers the militarism aspect while chapter three focuses more on the actual displays of military power. This two-part structure was chosen to highlight the dual nature of militarism; it is both intangible but also concrete. The subchapters are based on the different thematic groups inside the research material. Even though the structure of the thesis is not strictly chronological, the material is, and this is somewhat reflected in the chapters. Furthermore, even if the analysis does not

³ See for example: Cassiday & Johnson 2010. Goscilo 2013.

⁴ Foxall writes about photographing Putin and how an important part of especially his domestic popularity are his different public "performances", most of which are photographed. Foxall's article explores the theme of photographing Putin through his vacation photos. See: Foxall 2013.

always follow some chronological order, the contextualization is naturally rooted in time, as events have different meanings depending on the time they happened in.

1.2 Research Question

Although the research material, *Putin. 20 Years*, is focused on Putin, this thesis is not only about him. Rather this is an exploration of Russia, through the image of Putin, focused on a certain theme. The purpose is to see, in what ways militarism and military power are depicted as a part of President Vladimir Putin's, and by association, Russia's public image. The question then is: what subjects under the larger themes of militarism and military power appear in the material?

Examining the ways in which these themes are portrayed is interesting because it can suggest what significance they have held to the Putin regime, at least image-wise. In what ways are things pictured? Is there a clear emphasis on some aspect or another? Is some theme continuously on display in the material? Is the version of Russian militarism that the Kremlin gives us hard or soft? How, if at all, does the Kremlin explain its portrayals of military power? These thoughts can be answered by looking at what are the subjects that are highlighted in the material. Although the war in Ukraine has shown that use of force is undoubtedly one part of Vladimir Putin's rule in Russia, we would be remiss to think that militarism did not exist in Russia before 2022.

As militarism is a multifaceted phenomenon that could be a subject of an entire thesis in and of itself, it should be explained what I mean by it in this thesis. Militarism can be defined as a state of affairs where the threat or outright use of military force is utilized in pursuit of political goals. Militarism is also a situation where military values like patriotism, hierarchy, and discipline have permeated civil society.⁵ Militarism can then be either physical manifestations of military prowess or a set of values either imposed or naturally occurring. Furthermore, a state is often deemed 'militarized' when its defense spending is excessive, and militarism thrives in society. A militarized society can create the basis for a military buildup or the other way around, making it less likely that a country would have militarized values but a weak army and the other way around.⁶ When going through the material I have deemed

⁵ Campbell 2018.

⁶ For more on militarism, militarization, and military buildup see: Naidu 1985.

something as ‘militarism’ if it is about military history, patriotism, civil-military relations, as well as militarized social projects.

Militarism can be a part of a state’s ideology. There is debate among Russia scholars on whether or not the Putin regime has an actual ideology. On one side, the argument is that modern autocracies, like Russia, do not have a viable ideological alternative to Western capitalism and thus they have replaced broad *ideologies* with more limited *missions*. In one view, modern autocracies are also ideologically inconsistent since they are more focused on power preservation. The side that believes Putin’s Russia to have an ideology is not completely clear on what the ideology is, since it is seen consisting of multiple different ideas. Some consistent ideas that exist in today’s Russia and are described as being part of the ideology are patriotism, conservatism, and geopolitics dictated by imperialism and Eurasianism.⁷ By this definition, Russian state ideology, if it exists, would be militaristic.

Russian militarism has been researched quite extensively, and it is apparent that it is a facet of the Putin regime’s use of power even if an official ideology would not exist.⁸ The administration paints Russia’s military might as the most important aspect of its statehood. At the same time, militarism is framed as something Russia has been forced into by others that threaten it, while simultaneously normalizing it using whataboutism usually aimed at the United States.⁹ Furthermore, the state has worked to foster militarized patriotism in the Russian population, further exemplifying how militarism has seeped into all layers of the Russian state.¹⁰ In this thesis the focus is not on the population or civil society but rather on the administration’s narratives. It is sensible to then assume that if the government tries to encourage militarism in the population, militarism is important to the ones in power.

In literature about Russian militarism a very prevalent approach seems to be viewing Russian militarism as stemming purely from Putin. Putin’s effects cannot be ignored as he has been in power for decades at this point, but a broader review of Russian society shows Putin merely as a product of Russian strategic culture.¹¹ For the purposes of this thesis there is necessarily

⁷ Snegovaya & McGlynn 2025, 43-45. Emphasis added by the author.

⁸ In their well sourced and concise article on Putin’s ideology Snegovaya & McGlynn examine the ideas for and against the existence of ideology in Putin’s Russia. They analyze the existence of ideology through a criterial approach, assessing how the Putin regime fulfills set of criteria for ideology. See: Snegovaya & McGlynn 2025.

⁹ Stratievski 2024, 8.

¹⁰ For more see for example: Pynnöniemi 2021; Sperling 2009.

¹¹ Kerrane 2022, 72–73. The term ‘strategic culture’ was coined by Jack L. Snyder in the 1970’s. It is described as the sum total of ideas, conditional emotional responses, and patterns that members of national strategic

no need to separate where militarism stems from. It is enough to note that Russian militarism and the glorification of use of force can be viewed to affect decision-making and color the way Russia perceives the world and responds to events.¹²

The conversation around Russian strategic culture and decision-making, although significant, is too broad for this thesis. What comes to the basis of Russian militarism, different themes that come up in the research material exemplify how military values are held to a high accord in today's Russia. As the research material is created by the state itself, my analysis focuses on the idea that these values are imposed *on* the society by the administration. This does not mean, though, that these values could not have deep roots in Russian society. Putin might not have brought militarism to Russia but he uses it as a mainstay in his own power projection.

When it comes to the physical manifestations of military prowess, I have chosen to use the wording 'military power'. This too could be put under the umbrella of 'militarism', but I have chosen to separate the two concepts. The material covers Russia's use and advertising of military power and capabilities in ways which justify the separation. The fact that the material would contain shows of military capabilities is by no means surprising. The material is made by the regime itself and showing military power is something states do in general. The need to advertise military capabilities can be due to the need to enhance one's status either at home or abroad or possibly to use shows of military force as deterrence.¹³ In Russia's case one reason for this is likely the need to create distance between the weakness of late-era Soviet Union and 1990's new Russia.¹⁴ Of course, not every demonstration of military prowess actually communicates military power, but I believe that if the pictures have found their way on to the website, they are meant to communicate something. In the context of this thesis 'military power' then refers to instances of displaying equipment, military bases, troops, or even operations. This includes instances where the caption refers to Putin talking about new technologies or weapon systems.

community share. Strategic culture is explored in Skak 2016, while Kerrane explores the question of where does Russian militarism stem from, in a very well sourced and concise manner in his study.

¹² Kerrane 2022, 71, 73. Kerrane's study focuses on militarism as it affects strategic decision-making. His work is then more focused on militarism as institutionalization of use of force rather than more innocuous manifestations of military values. Kerrane's work is an excellent look into Russian militarism as it pertains to strategic decision-making and the ways in which the institutions are militarized. Kerrane writes from the point of view of military studies, so the work is obviously more focused on power structures and hard power.

¹³ Montgomery 2020, 312–313.

¹⁴ Montgomery 2020, 310.

This twofold approach of ‘militarism’ and ‘military power’ is supported by the material itself as one is more a state of being while the other is more active behavior. Besides, I do not believe that Putin’s goal is for Russia to be thought of as a militarized state. Rather, Putin’s goal is for Russia to be known as a Great Power.¹⁵ One important aspect of a Great Power is of course its military power, hence why it needs to be shown to the world. As a Great Power can even be viewed to have the right to use military force, positioning oneself as such can be an attempt to justify actions.¹⁶ This idea of being viewed as a Great Power has become more pronounced in the Putin regime’s thinking as time has gone on.¹⁷ This has likely affected the way in which certain subjects are presented on *Putin. 20 Years* as well. ‘Militarism’ in the Russian society is then something we can observe while ‘military power’ is something the Kremlin actively wants us to see.

1.3 Research Material

My research material consists of around 400 images spanning practically the entire length of the *Putin. 20 Years* website from 1999 until 2019. I have chosen these images from the website based on the themes ‘militarism’ and ‘military power’. These themes and their subthemes appear steadily throughout the website, however, some gaps in coverage do appear. In many cases these gaps happen between 2008 and 2012 while Putin was the Prime Minister and Dmitri Medvedev held the presidency.

The website *Putin. 20 Years* was released by the Presidential Executive Office in 2019, in celebration of “Putin’s twenty years in power”.¹⁸ The website is a chronological retelling of

¹⁵ Although Great Power ideation was not brought to Russia by Putin, it has become one of the most distinctive features of his politics. Putin’s ways of achieving Great Power status have shifted throughout the years though as in the early years of his presidency the focus was more on cooperation with the West rather than competition. For more on Russian foreign policy and the shift in Great Power thinking see for example: Tsygankov 2019. For more on the origins for the Russian Great Power idea *Derzhavnost* see for example: Allensworth 1998.

¹⁶ Justifications for the use of force vary depending on the actor and subject. For information on Russia’s justifications on use of force and how Russia views its own as well as the West’s military interventions see: Allison 2013.

¹⁷ Snegovaya & McGlynn 2025 talk about how certain elements in the Putin regime’s thinking have appeared as time has gone on. Furthermore, following Putin’s return to power in 2012 Russian foreign policy became more ideology driven and following that the Great Power identity also became driven by the idea of Russia as culturally different from western Great Powers. See: Tsygankov 2019, 231.

¹⁸ The Presidential Executive Office is mainly referred to as Presidential Administration or the Kremlin in this thesis, although Presidential Executive Office is the translation that the Administration itself uses on the website. *Putin. 20 Years* is available at “Putin. 20 Years”. *Putin. 20 Years* <<http://20.kremlin.ru/en/>> [Website accessibility verified on 13.5.2025].

Vladimir Putin's time as the President and Prime Minister of Russia through photographs. The photos have been compiled from both the Kremlin's own archives as well as Russian news organizations TASS' and RIA Novosti's.¹⁹ *Putin. 20 Years* can also be accessed through the official website of the Presidential Executive Office, *Kremlin.ru*, but it is its own separate entity.²⁰

Putin. 20 Years is made up of twenty albums, one for each year of Putin's rule, starting from the year 2000.²¹ At the beginning of each album there is a short description which summarizes the most important events or the overall theme of the year in question. The albums themselves consist of a variable number of *events* with each event containing a variable number of *items* meaning photos or videos.²² The events can span just one or multiple days, depending on what is covered. Most of the items are accompanied by short captions, with some captions having a "read more" -tab that either takes the viewer to the *Kremlin.ru* site or opens a popup with more info.

The website touts itself as being a "collection of memorable moments and milestones".²³ This suggests that some moments are more worthy of remembering than others, and those have made their way onto the website. Even before compiling the website though, decisions have been made about what to document in the first place. *Putin. 20 Years* then should not be viewed as a historical archive or an index of everything that has happened in Putin's Russia in the first two decades of the 21st century. Admittedly, the website does not claim to be such. Rather it is a curated collection of moments the Presidential Administration has deemed worth remembering.

Putin. 20 Years was created in 2019 from what must have been thousands of photographs and videos. The site was not built in real-time as events were unfolding, but after the fact. The time when *Putin. 20 Years* was created undoubtedly affects it. The site was created in post-Crimea world, but before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia's standing in international relations had then already shifted, but the situation was very different from today. The power of hindsight means that history can be, if not rewritten, edited. As the website is made by the

¹⁹ "About the album". *Putin. 20 Years* <<http://20.kremlin.ru/en/about>> It is not specified in the photos from which collection they come from. [Website accessibility verified on 13.5.2025].

²⁰ Official English language website of the Presidential Executive Office available at "President of Russia". *President of Russia* <<http://en.kremlin.ru/>> [Website accessibility verified on 13.5.2025].

²¹ The first pictures on the website are from 1999 but they are in the album for the year 2000.

²² My material covers only the photographs.

²³ "About the album". *Putin. 20 Years*. <<http://20.kremlin.ru/en/about>> [Website accessibility verified on 13.5.2025].

Presidential Administration it can be assumed to be the official narrative *of* the Putin regime *by* the Putin regime.

To whom is the website geared towards then? *Putin. 20 Years* is available in both Russian and English meaning that the target audience is both at home and abroad.²⁴ As the contents of the different language versions are the same, comparisons between them would not be that fruitful. As an example, in the event for February 23rd, 2008, President Putin is pictured in Krasnaya Polyana, meeting with servicemen and congratulating them on the Defender of the Fatherland Day. The events on the English language and Russian language sites are the same, both contain five items, four pictures and one video. The captions in all of the items match and so do the web addresses.

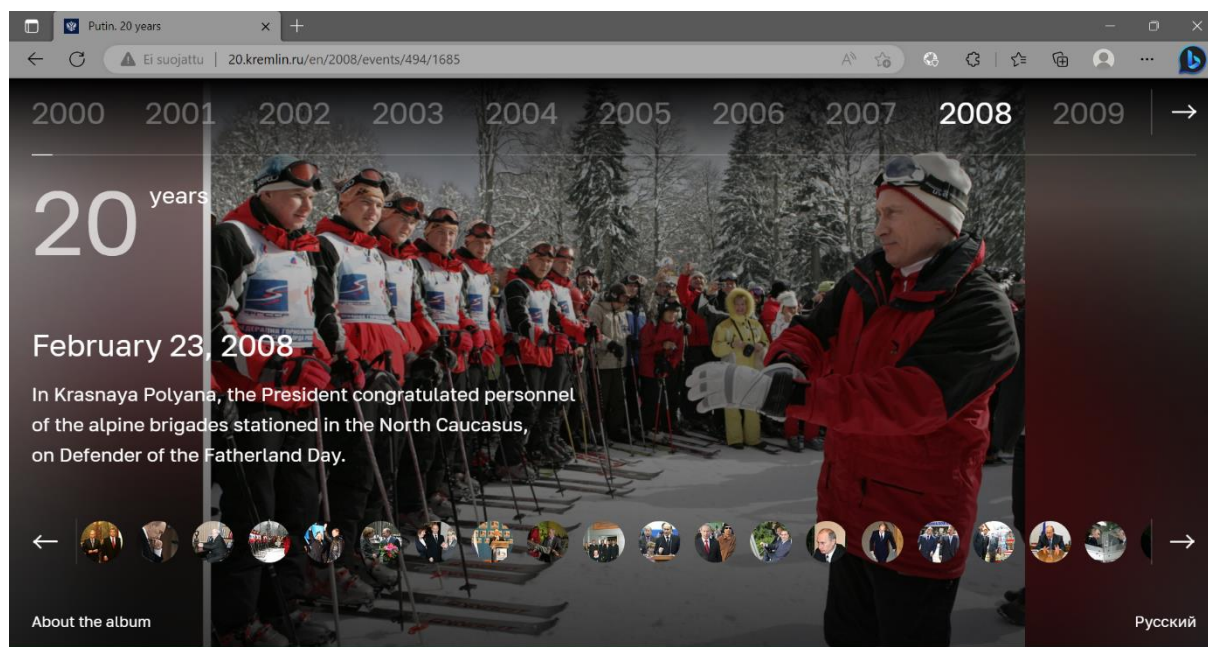


Photo 1: February 23, 2008, In Krasnaya Polyana, the President congratulated personnel of the alpine brigades stationed in the North Caucasus, on Defender of the Fatherland Day. Screen capture taken on 29.3.2023 by the author.

²⁴ In this thesis I chose to use the English language version for readability.

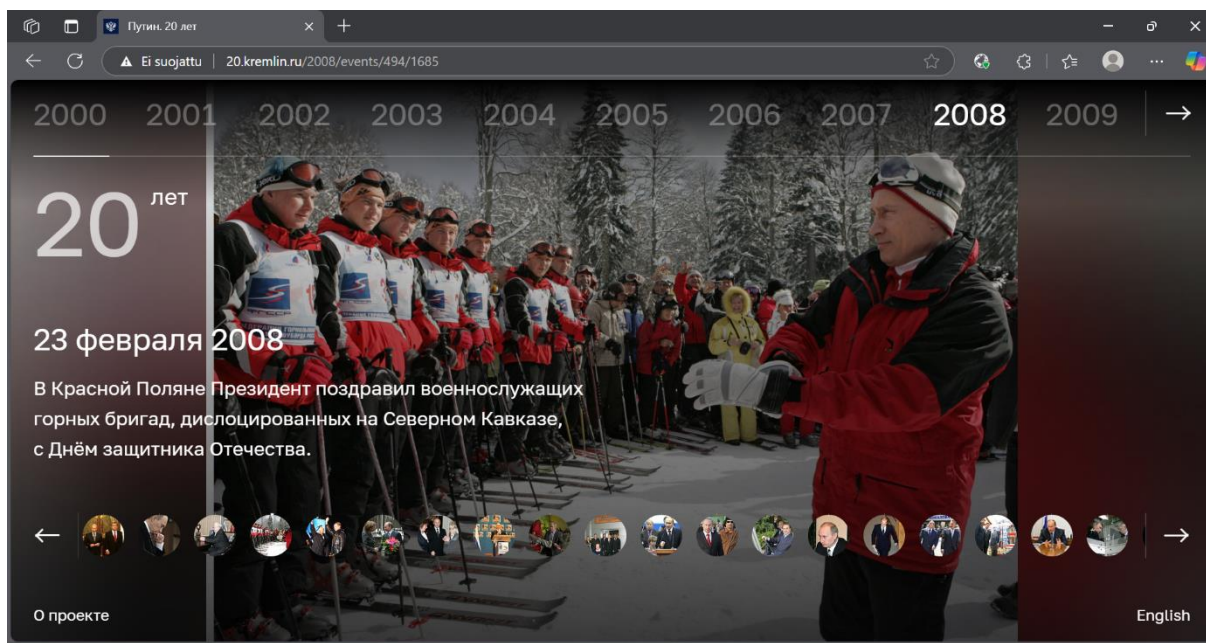


Photo II: 23 февраля 2008, В Красной Поляне Президент поздравил военнослужащих горных бригад, дислоцированных на Северном Кавказе, с Днём защитника Отечества. Screen capture taken on 10.5.2025, by the author.

The fact that the website exists in both languages tells us that the purpose is to portray an image to audiences that are more, as well as less familiar with the cultural connotations. As I am not a native Russian speaker and not native to the cultural context it is natural for me to use the English language version of the website. The fact that I am an ‘outsider’ also means that I am one of the target audiences of the material. Not every nuance necessarily opens up to someone who is not of Russian cultural heritage, but it is not necessary as the website is meant to be viewed by different audiences. Different audiences might interpret the narrative differently but that is also a choice made by the Kremlin.

Putin. 20 Years, just as the official homepage of the Presidential Administration, is a medium through which the regime can disseminate information it itself wants people to know. At its core, *Putin. 20 Years* is a form of public diplomacy. It should be noted that this thesis is not about public diplomacy per se. However, public diplomacy as a concept, and how it relates to *Putin. 20 Years* deserve some exploration. By definition, public diplomacy is the way in which states engage publics globally to serve their own interests.²⁵ To put it in another way,

²⁵ Snow 2020.

public diplomacy is a country trying to make a good impression on the people of other countries.²⁶

Public diplomacy is a political tool countries operate, and their success is largely dictated by whether or not the country has soft power. Both public diplomacy and soft power are about influencing people in non-kinetic ways. When it comes to certain countries, though, this concept becomes a bit more complicated. Since soft power is largely created by reputation which in turn is to a large extent created by civil society, rather than governments, authoritarian states are not necessarily considered to possess that much soft power. Therefore, when an authoritarian state does public diplomacy, it is easily dismissed as propaganda as the messages lack credibility and the backing of a good reputation.²⁷ As Russia's reputation is objectively bad at the moment and its civil society is not very productive, it is clear that it does not possess that much soft power. In lieu of this, Russia has opted for what it has; portrayals of power.

By and large, propaganda and public diplomacy are one and the same. Nowadays, however, public diplomacy is used to refer to a more transparent form of propaganda thanks to the negative connotations the word propaganda has acquired.²⁸ Following this idea of transparency, *Putin. 20 Years* is much more in the vein of public diplomacy, since we know that it is the Presidential Administration's point of view, we are consuming. The tone and mere existence of the website nevertheless has echoes of propaganda since why did Putin's twenty years in power deserve to be celebrated in such a way? Throughout Putin's time in power, it has been evident that there has been an attempt to build a cult around him. What once rose from civil society has become a frantic need to cling to power by the increasingly unpopular administration.²⁹ 'Putinism', however, is not something that stems from the Russian public, it is a way of governance that has seeped deep into the power structures of the entire country.³⁰

Russia is often referred to being a neo-patrimonial state. This means that although institutions exist, and decision-making is portrayed as institutionalized, true decision-making is informal

²⁶ Nye 2019, 11.

²⁷ Nye 2019, 7–10; Berridge, 2010, 179.

²⁸ Berridge 2010, 179.

²⁹ Cassidy & Johnson 2010 write about Putin's cult of personality being both easily individualized but also state controlled. Putin's likeness has been utilized for marketing purposes, and he has also been the inspiration for art. A large part of 'Putiniana' has stemmed from the Russian public. See: Cassidy & Johnson 2010. For more on the Putin cult see also: Goscilo 2013.

³⁰ For more on Putinism see for example: Fish 2017.

and happens in closed circles around the president.³¹ What is the significance of this to this thesis then? As *Putin. 20 Years* is something that the Presidential Administration has put out, it is good to ask whose narrative it is: the institution's or the individual's? As decision-making is highly personalized in Putin, an assumption can be made that, what the Presidential Administration puts out reflects the narrative of Putin and his inner circle. This all is to say that the narrative that is being analyzed reflects that of Putin's and his inner circle's, meaning those who make decisions in Russia.

1.4 Methodological Approach

Since my research material consists of photographs, this thesis falls into the category of historical image research. Although methodology is more of a tool than the main focus of the thesis, it is necessary to briefly discuss historical image research. There are a few different methods of inquiry that are used in historical image research, the most significant ones for my work being the Documentary Method and the Serial Iconographic variant of the PWD model. These methods have their strengths but also their weaknesses that make them difficult to use on my specific material. To counteract this, I have compiled my own method using the Documentary Method and PWD model as bases. I will first talk about image research and its possibilities in general then move on to describing my method and its steps.

At first glance it might seem that pictures have little to do with research in the field of Social Sciences. However, analysis of the images is grounded in the context of the society which they portray. The Documentary Method has its roots in social sciences, and the theories behind it are focused on understating the logic of different milieus i.e. the physical and social settings that people occupy.³² The Documentary Method then examines pictures as products made by picture producers.³³ The focus is on how the picture producers' internal worldviews manifest in the images themselves.³⁴ Doing research on an image is then not so much about the image itself but about what it reveals about the entity that created it. Although in its current form the Documentary Method is used as a tool for image analysis, originally the

³¹ Fortescue 2023, 182. For more on Putin's highly personalized decision-making see for example: Herd 2019.

³² Bohnsack 2008.; Bohnsack 2014, 220.

³³ Kanter 2018, 37–39.

³⁴ Kanter 2018, 37.

method was applied to materials such as interviews, highlighting its utility in investigating the thinking behind the images.³⁵

Unlike the Documentary Method, the PWD model originates from art history.³⁶ Although these two methods differ somewhat in their focus, they also share many aspects. One of the main components of both methodologies is a three-tiered analysis of the image in question in which it is analyzed on a *pre-iconographical*, *iconographical*, and *iconological* levels. Meaning that the image is first described without giving context to it, then with context, and finally the meaning behind the contents is analyzed.³⁷ This three-level analysis is part of art historian Erwin Panofsky's contribution to the development of both methodologies.³⁸ This order of analysis tries to ensure that the picture is being analyzed without prejudice, only as what it is. Although the methodologies are there to uncover something behind the image itself, for the analysis to be valid it must stem from the contents of the image itself.

What makes images worth studying then? 'Visual' is argued to be central to the cultural construction of social life in contemporary Western societies.³⁹ We are constantly surrounded by imagery of all kinds and the mass is ever-growing. Although the rise of artificial intelligence is a modern issue, it does not mean that images of yesteryears give us an unbiased view either. Images interpret the world; they give us a representation of what is through a lens and thus they are not a clear window into reality.⁴⁰ This does not mean that images give us nothing, though. It only means that they should be used as insight into the worldviews of those who have created them. Images illustrate the narrative being created.

These worldviews are thought to be shaped by the time and lived experiences of the picture producers.⁴¹ This historical time and place that is significant in the case of the picture producers is also a major part of the PWD model. In the PWD model, one of the steps of interpretation is placing the picture into a historical continuum. This is called 'documentarization' of the picture and it focuses on studying its significance as a historical

³⁵ The Documentary Method is still widely used in qualitative research when analyzing different textual materials. In the context of this thesis though, I will focus only its application for analyzing pictures. For more on the different applications of the Documentary Method see for example: Bohnsack & Pfaff & Weller 2010.

³⁶ Kleemola 2016, 31.

³⁷ Kanter 2018, 44–46.

³⁸ Kleemola 2016, 31.

³⁹ Rose 2012, 2.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ The Documentary Method is based largely in Karl Mannheim's *Sociology of Knowledge* in which knowledge is seen as socially and historically anchored.

document.⁴² This focus on what meaning the picture holds as a document of a time and place, is something that the two methodologies have in common, and it is at the heart of my research.

1.4.1 Doing Image Research on *Putin. 20 Years*

Putin. 20 Years is built to be experienced, making it markedly different from the regular Kremlin photo galleries. On *Putin. 20 Years*, the photos are a chronological slideshow of each year of Putin's reign and the site gives the viewer several seconds to look at a picture. The viewing experience then differs greatly from the regular site of the Presidential Executive Office where photos accompany reports of different events. For this thesis I have taken screen captures of *Putin. 20 Years* and will be analyzing everything put on screen and not just the original image itself. These screen captures contain a lot more information than just the raw images since they include the captions as well. Furthermore, I believe that the layout of the website has somewhat affected the selection of the photographs.

Nearly all pictures on the site have a caption laid over the photo alongside the date on which the photo was taken. Captions often direct us on how a photo should be read which can be both useful and detrimental to analyzing a photo. While analyzing a photo one should challenge the reading given by the caption and question why this particular reading of the photo is promoted. Looking at the picture detached from the caption works also to restore the picture's communicative independence.⁴³ There is of course the question "can we interpret a picture on its own?" For some the answer is no, because the perceived context can be changed easily just by changing the accompanying caption.⁴⁴ In the case of *Putin. 20 Years*, the captions become a vital part of the photos since you cannot look at a picture without also seeing the caption. This does not mean that it is impossible to detach the photo from the caption, rather the caption becomes a part of the picture. In my analysis I have not actively tried to detach the photo from the caption since the caption is crucial to the narrative being built by the Presidential Administration.

⁴² Kleemola 2016, 32.

⁴³ Vowinckel 2018, 27–28.

⁴⁴ Kleemola, 2016, 34.

The fact that the website is made by the Presidential Administration itself also affects my analysis of *Putin. 20 Years*. What is important from the point of view of image studies is the self-representing nature of this material. Although these pictures have been taken by photographers of subjects and stylistically, many of them would be considered press photos, there is still an element of self-representation.⁴⁵ As the website is made of Putin, for the benefit of Putin, on behest of Putin, and him being the subject of most photographs, how is he portraying himself? This is an important question since self-representation lays somewhere between truth and identity, and photographs, especially the ones aimed at public consumption, hold a lot of emotive power.⁴⁶ At the end of the day photographs are a human product made in a specific time and place and therefore they reflect the worldviews of their producers. Pictures can then provide insight into the sect of society by whom the pictures are made by.⁴⁷ In this case it is the powers that be in Russia.

Another significant aspect about the pictures on *Putin. 20 years* is that they were made to be published. The pictures did not come from personal collections but are by their nature for public consumption. Although the research material is not necessarily comparable to news media since it is distributed in a different way, i.e. all photos have been collected into one centralized place rather than disseminated through publications, its influence can be viewed in a similar way. Media has the capacity to influence many societal norms and examining whose perspectives are dominant in the media can offer information on prevailing power structures.⁴⁸ By examining this collection of photographs we can gather information on how it tries to influence society. With these pictures we already know whose perspective it is we are looking at. The question then is more about the *how* rather than who or what.

The material is a collection of different types of photos. Some of them are purely photojournalism as they were taken for the purpose of documenting a moment for journalistic purposes and some have been published in newspapers etc. at the time. Some, on the other hand, are more akin to portrait photography. Photojournalism and portrait photography are two different genres made for different purposes and so the messages they convey should also be different. As *Putin. 20 Years* consists of many different styles of photos, it poses a dilemma in how to interpret these pictures.⁴⁹ When it comes to photojournalism, there is a

⁴⁵ Särkkä 2018, 156.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Banks 2014, 398.

⁴⁸ Hodgetts & Chamberlain 2014, 380–381.

⁴⁹ For more information on how the picture genres affect interpretation see: Pienimäki 2012 (in Finnish).

school of thought that photojournalism should be an objective representation of reality. However, for a picture to be published it has already gone through an extensive editorial process.⁵⁰ In my material these photojournalistic pictures are not in their natural habitat, a newspaper, but rather on a website that is selling a narrative. Therefore, we can detach them from the journalistic expectation of objective truth and rather focus on the narrative being created. After all, the basic idea of the Documentary Method i.e. that the images reveal something about the picture producers worldviews and that the worldviews have been shaped by time and life experiences, corresponds with the idea that the strategic culture of Putin's Russia is largely shaped by an age cohort whose life experiences are homogenic.⁵¹ It is these picture producers' milieu that I am exploring. Although it should be noted that I cannot recreate or uncover the intentions of the picture producer. What I can do is assess the choices made in the photos and the wordings chosen for the captions and further speculate why each photo has been chosen for the event it represents.

It should be noted that I am not a part of the same milieu as the picture producers, in this case people inside the Kremlin power structures. Neither am I from the same cultural background as I am not a Russian or living in Russia. I am looking at and analyzing these images as an outsider, although an outsider with preexisting knowledge of the culture and milieu they portray. What makes my work easier is that I am temporally not too far removed from the events which I analyze. Neither is my cultural knowledge of modern Russia non-existent.

1.4.2 My Method of Inquiry – A Synthesis

In compiling my own methodological approach, I especially focused on the aspects the Documentary Method and the PWD model had in common but also modified certain steps to fit my specific research material. The goal was to find an approach that worked on a large mass of photos and took into consideration the specific characteristics of the material, particularly its self-representing nature, as well as the large amount of context that is tied to each photo via the caption and date.

⁵⁰ For more information on the different schools of thought regarding photojournalism see for example: Mäenpää 2012 (in Finnish).

⁵¹ Skak writes about the building of Russian strategic culture by the people at the head of the security services. The people who have been in those positions of power during Putin's time represent the same age cohort and have had the same experiences that color their thinking. The concept of a strategic culture is not fully supported by the field, but it does have a long history in Sovietology. See: Skak 2016.

For this thesis the theme by which I have originally chosen the material is 'military'. The entire *Putin. 20 Years* has over 2700 images, and that is not counting the videos. In order to make the material usable for this work, I used military as an umbrella term to refer to all things related to the Russian military, military as a part of society, veterans, military personnel and equipment, active military campaigns, remembrance of past wars etc. These groups later on morphed into 'militarism' and 'military power'. I have made my method a bit more lenient in how a picture can be themed or grouped. Instead of strictly looking at the content of the image itself and searching for recurring imagery, I have also looked at the caption and context behind the image. As mentioned before, separating the image from possible accompanying texts is something that one should strive towards when analyzing pictures, however, since the captions are central to the website, I have used them to group pictures as well. What has not been included though, are pictures with no real connection to *Russian* militarism or military power. For example, pictures where Putin is on a state visit and accompanied by military personnel from that country are not automatically included unless the event or photo has an otherwise clear connection to Russian militarism.

Following the serial-iconographic variant of the PWD model, the first step of my method is grouping the pictures by theme or subject matter.⁵² After compiling the groups, I have chosen example pictures to be analyzed. The number of examples will depend on the size of the group and the variance inside it. Since there is a lot of variation inside the groups in what the pictures are of, my choices have largely dictated the direction this work takes. When choosing the examples I have prioritized images where there is either the biggest number of symbolic elements, or those that are of events from which information is abundant. Not every picture will be analyzed as deeply as some merely support other findings. Additionally, a picture can also exemplify one subject matter while technically being a part of another group. The exact number of images in each group is therefore not that significant. What is more important is to see if certain subjects or themes clearly dominate the material.

The actual analysis begins after the grouping. I am utilizing the three-tiered analysis that both the Documentary Method and the PWD model have, with some tweaks. In the first step of my analysis, I will describe what is in the picture but not entirely without context as the pre-iconographical step would actually call for. Since in this material Putin is in most cases the one unchanging element, it is unnecessary to try to remove him from the analysis. After

⁵² Kleemola 2016, 32.

describing what is in the picture alongside Putin, the rest of the context is added. This means possibly giving names for the people previously only described but also mentioning when and where this picture was taken.

This latter part of contextualizing comes from the PWD model where it is called ‘information assessment’.⁵³ In the information assessment step, the picture’s authenticity should be investigated by applying source criticism to it.⁵⁴ However, in the case of this specific material I have decided to forego the step of authentication. Not because I think it is unimportant, but because it is difficult if not impossible with my material. I have no access to the pictures’ metadata so I will have to trust the information given by the captions and the dates on the website. It should be noted that it is not the authenticity what is in question here, rather it is how an idea is illustrated. Furthermore, a large part of these pictures is of neutral subjects, they are in many cases not outright war propaganda and part of them are from events that are documented by others as well.

After laying out *what* we have in the picture, my analysis moves to the part of *how* it is in the picture. In the Documentary Method this part is called reflecting interpretation, which describes as well as reflects on the way the subjects are in the image. In this part of my analysis, I will go over the physical structure of the image as well as the mood of the picture. I do this to see if one subject dominates either the frame or the moment, for example. I will also reflect on the genre of the photo. Whether the photo is more news-like or more reminiscent of a portrait will influence the reading of the photograph. Assigning a genre to a photo is tricky in the sense that pictures are often genre fluid and, furthermore, the context in which these photos have been published dilutes the meaning of the genre. Nevertheless, the genre does tie back to how something has been portrayed and therefore it has some significance.

Finally, I will look at the photo in context of the event it represents. My approach is inspired by a part of the PWD model where the history and future of the image is imagined. Since my material affords me some extra context, I do not have to imagine what has or will happen. On the website pictures are part of events and many times there are several photos from one event, this affords me the luxury of seeing what happened before and after the photo was taken. Although the previous and next picture is not always from the same moment, they can

⁵³ Kleemola 2016, 31.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

give clues to why the photo was taken or published. This will in turn help assess the possible value of the picture as a historical document; something that is crucial to the PWD model.

It must be noted that I do not strictly follow some kind of order when describing and analyzing the images. The levels and steps of analysis often happen concurrently and writing them out by following a clear structure is not fruitful nor enjoyable to the reader.

2 Putin's Russia is Militaristic

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the newly independent Russian Federation worked on distancing itself from the heavy legacy of the Cold War. This new Russia was to be open to the world, democratic, and non-militaristic.⁵⁵ After twenty-five years of Vladimir Putin's rule, Russia looks very different from those times. To straight up say that Russian society is militaristic would perhaps be a bit contentious. Society is not necessarily militaristic even if the government is. Yet there are signs that Russians indeed possess a certain amount of militaristic impulse.

In 2014, following the annexation of Crimea, President Putin's popularity surged.⁵⁶ Crimea's meaning to the Russian people is a much more complicated issue than just militaristic impulses. However, its effects showed the Kremlin that these sentiments could be stoked up. Although only one example, Crimea shows that the Kremlin utilizes deep-seated sentiments that exist in the psyche of the nation. Furthermore, when listening to what Putin and the one-time President Dmitri Medvedev have to say about the nation's history, it is clear that the administration tries to proactively strengthen and create these ideas. The centuries-long Russian history has been described as a "tradition of military glory" by the two leaders.⁵⁷ The message that comes from the top then seems to be that Russia has a long history that has included battle, but importantly it has always won.

2.1 Putin, the Strongman

Vladimir Putin became the acting president of the Russian Federation on December 31st, 1999, when the then President Boris Yeltsin stepped down and handed power to the then Prime Minister Putin.⁵⁸ Putin's rise to the top position was sudden and fast, but having not been in the public eye prior gave the Kremlin an opportunity to build President Putin's image in any way they liked.⁵⁹ Important factor in figuring out what Putin's public image would be was his predecessor President Yeltsin. Although, Putin was handpicked to be his successor, there needed to be a clear break between the two men. In the late 1990's Yeltsin's reputation

⁵⁵ Stratievski 2024, 6.

⁵⁶ Aron 2017, 78.

⁵⁷ Malinova 2017, 62.

⁵⁸ Aleksashenko 2018, 15.

⁵⁹ Simons 2016, 153–154.

was essentially in the gutter thanks to his age, health, and alcoholism, so in contrast Putin needed to be young, healthy, and capable.⁶⁰

The building of this image had started already when Putin was appointed prime minister earlier in 1999. Fortunately, the ongoing Second War in Chechnya had provided Putin with an opportunity to establish himself as a strong wartime leader. In an interview in August of 1999, he had suggested that he as the prime minister, not President Yeltsin, was responsible for Russia's efforts when it came to Chechnya.⁶¹ The war created the environment in which Putin could show masculinity and be portrayed as a savior of the Russian people. Although this savior image was more multifaceted since it also came to mean Putin saving Russians from the turmoil of the 1990's, the war allowed for more concrete expressions of the warrior imagery.⁶²

The story of *Putin. 20 Years* begins on December 31st, 1999, with Yeltsin stepping down. Already in this first event, Putin is pictured visiting the troops in Gudermes, in eastern Chechnya.⁶³ In photo 1 Putin, who had been named the acting president just moments earlier, is shown traveling to see the troops stationed in the North Caucasus. Putin traveling to the Caucasus right away was clearly an attempt to underline the Second Chechen campaign as *his* war.⁶⁴ The First War in Chechnya broke out in 1994 and although the war had ended in 1996 by an accord giving Chechnya autonomy, the situation on the ground was so unstable that few believed the peace would last. In August of 1999 the Islamic International Brigade invaded Chechnya's neighbor Dagestan, reigniting the conflict.⁶⁵ Following a set of terrorist attacks on Russian cities, Russia declared the Chechen government illegitimate and deployed forces to re-establish control over the area.⁶⁶ Russian forces were much better prepared for the Second Chechen War than they had been the first time around, and it only took a few months for the Russian forces to take over Chechnya's capital city Grozny.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ Simons 2016, 154.

⁶¹ Wood 2011, 180.

⁶² The 1990's were a time in which the whole political system and economy in Russia was in flux and this probably partly affected the ways in which Putin's image was built. For a description on post-Soviet Russia in the 1990's. See for example: Medvedev 2000.

⁶³ Putin. 20 Years, 2000/events/2/16; Putin. 20 Years, 2000/events/2/17 (on the website the event from 1999 is in the folder for the year 2000).

⁶⁴ Wood 2011, 180.

⁶⁵ Galeotti 2017, 14, 16.

⁶⁶ Galeotti 2017, 16.

⁶⁷ Galeotti 2017, 16, 18.

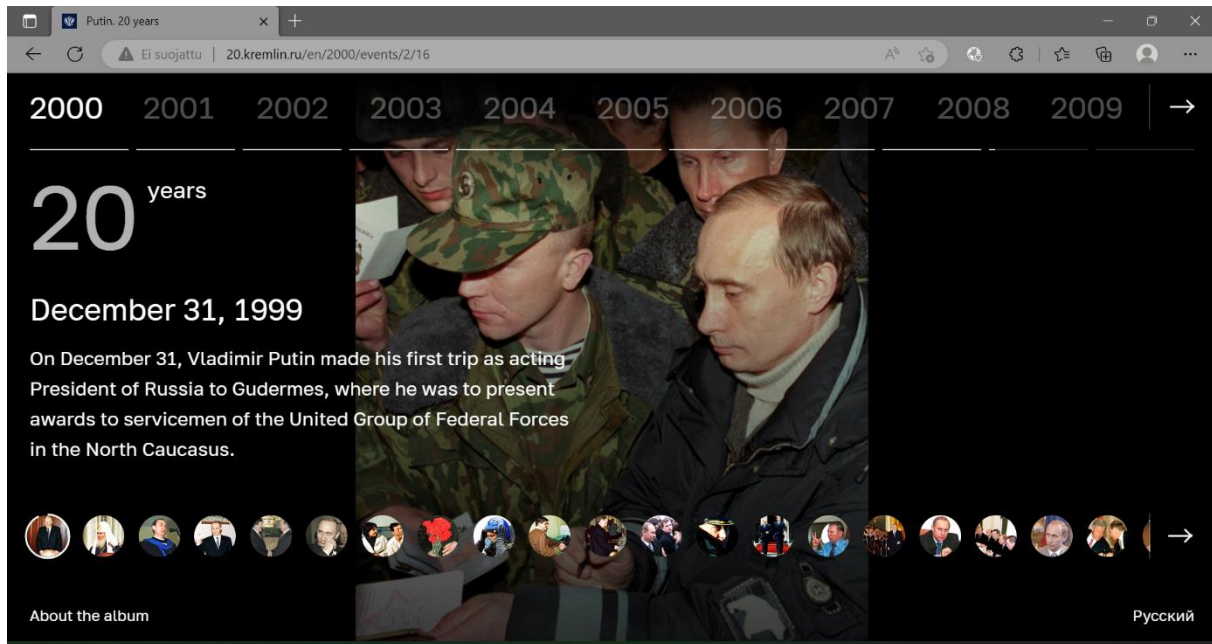


Photo 1: December 31, 1999, On December 31, Vladimir Putin made his trip as acting President of Russia to Gudermes, where he was to present awards to servicemen of the United Group of Federal Forces in the North Caucasus. Screen capture taken on 18.2.2023 by the author.

Putin's first act as an acting president being a visit to Gudermes not only showed that the war was his top priority but that the servicemen were on his mind. After all, the President was ready to travel to far away Caucasus to celebrate New Year's with the troops. Interestingly, in photo 1 Putin, surrounded by soldiers, seems to be holding a pen and some kind of document. The photo seems to suggest that Putin was handing out signatures, as the soldiers around him are holding these documents and scurrying around the President who is in the process of handing one of these documents off frame. The photo is a quick snapshot of this moment; it does not seem to be very posed as the group is bunched up together. Putin, who is not even in the center of the image, is looking down at the document in his hand and the whole set up of the shot brings to mind a paparazzi picture of a celebrity among fans. This trip was, quite obviously, a political stunt, the likes of which there are many on *Putin. 20 Years*.

After the trip to Gudermes on New Year's Eve, Putin visited Chechnya again soon. On March 20th, 2000, under a week before the presidential election, acting President Putin flew to Grozny, capital city of Chechnya on board a Soviet built Su-27 fighter jet. This trip was done while the fighting was still ongoing.⁶⁸ In photo 2 Vladimir Putin is pictured onboard the

⁶⁸ Putin. 20 Years, 2000/events/10/33.

fighter jet, in the process of removing his oxygen mask after presumably landing on the ground in Grozny. According to the Kremlin Putin had co-piloted the flight and, in the picture, he seems to be wearing the appropriate gear; a leather jacket, and a flight helmet, adorned with the Russian flag. Although Putin merely co-piloted/navigated the jet, by looking at just the picture itself, one might think he himself had been the pilot. Furthermore, the picture is akin to a still from a movie, making it more like a portrait of a hero than regular news imagery. It is most likely these stunty images, where Putin is presented like an action hero, that people think of when they think of him. The photo, which was circulated in the media at the time, showed Putin as a leader who was ready to defy danger and get his hands dirty.⁶⁹ In later pictures in the event, Putin is seen exiting the plane, revealing that he is wearing a suit under the pilot get-up, demonstrating that he is also professional.

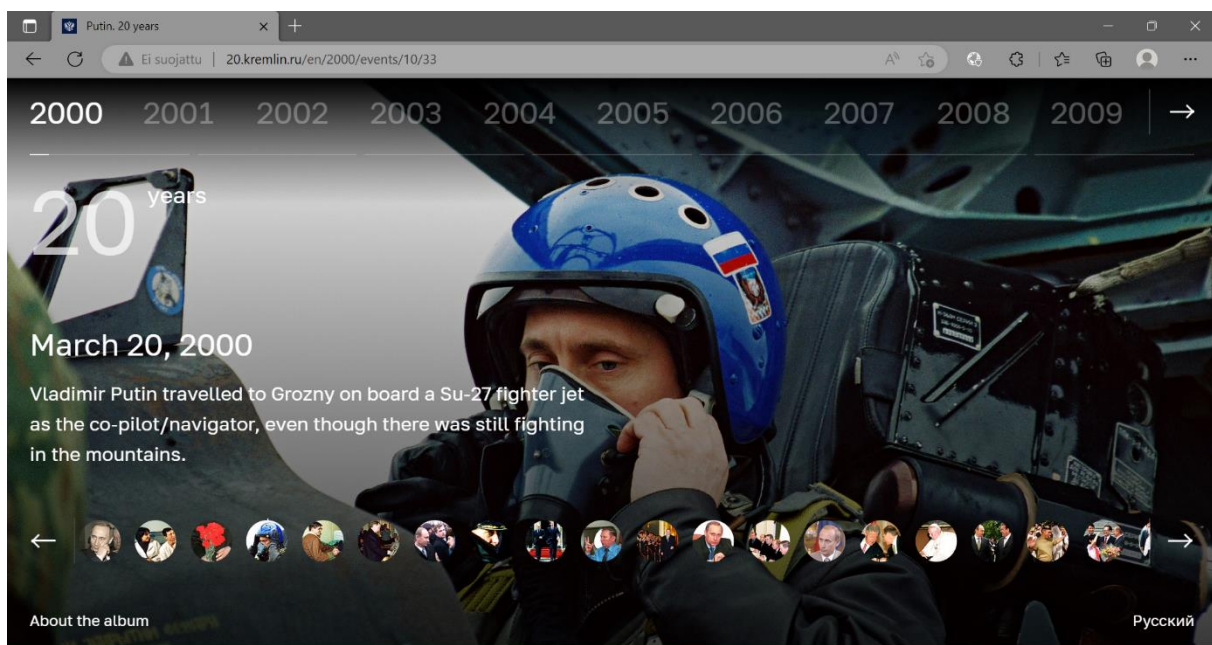


Photo 2: March 20, 2000, Vladimir Putin travelled to Grozny on board a Su-27 fighter jet as the co-pilot/navigator, even though there was still fighting in the mountains. Screen capture taken on 18.2.2023 by the author.

While visiting Grozny Putin had ordered the withdrawal of an airborne regiment from Khankala, east of Grozny, the first airborne unit to be withdrawn from Chechnya.⁷⁰ Setting up this elaborate stunt and announcing the withdrawal of the regiment just a week before the presidential election was hardly a coincidence. Afterwards commentators did even argue that it was this maneuver that won Putin the election.⁷¹ Significantly, Putin did not officially

⁶⁹ Wood 2016, 335.

⁷⁰ Putin. 20 Years, 2000/events/10/37; Putin. 20 Years, 2000/events/10/517.

⁷¹ Wood 2016, 335.

campaign before the election. He did not take part in debates, nor did he have a clear program or any campaign promises. By campaigning by the way of not campaigning, Putin created distance between himself and politics, something people had little trust in.⁷² Whether or not this stunt actually won Putin the presidency is probably hard to prove, but clearly it did not hurt either. Vladimir Putin won the presidential election held in March of 2000 with 53.4% of the vote.⁷³ Was Putin's landslide victory merely a sign of an electorate that craved for something new and different after Yeltsin or proof that Russians want a strong leader?

Putin's image as a leader, although new in the sense that he was younger and fitter than any leader in decades, was also traditional. His strong and almighty way of presentation had echoes of even czars past, and once he had been elected, his inauguration was designed to underscore the centrality of Russian history. It was held in the Kremlin and in his inaugural speech, Putin underscored the need to remember Russia's past.⁷⁴ Although Putin might have been a logical choice for the presidency as he had already been occupying the position as the acting president, the image created for him must have been a factor too. The heavy emphasis Putin's team put on his image as a savior and warrior character could not have been random. People around Putin must have believed that this angle would work, otherwise they could have chosen any other role for him.

Picturing Putin as a strongman continues throughout the length of the website. It has been a mainstay in his image throughout the years and has always formed a major pillar of his power projection. *Putin. 20 Years* is littered with pictures of Putin in the midst of different heroic feats from guiding cranes in a motorized hang glider to fitting a tiger with a tracking device. Inside the theme of militarism though, the ways in which strongman Putin is depicted is always in relation to something. Very few images in the material fall solely into the category of 'strongman' as showing Putin in that way is tied to what he is doing. The 'strongman' group is then quite difficult as many pictures in the material could be read as exemplifying this group, but they are also a part of another grouping. A generous reading puts this group at around fifty photos, but it is not so much how many there are, but in what way and in which context do they come up. In 2000, when Putin came to power, the strongman image was

⁷² Simons 2016, 155–156.

⁷³ Galeotti 2022, 81.

⁷⁴ Dawisha 2014, 266–267.

intrinsically tied to Chechnya, but not exclusively. Military exercises have also given Putin a stage on which to act the part of a great military leader.

Especially during his first two terms Putin is often wearing a uniform while attending military exercises; something he does not do practically ever outside of these situations. This method dressing happens less and less as time goes on but in the early years these looks were plentiful. Military exercises seem to be the one arena where it is acceptable for Putin to appear this way without it having echoes of a military dictatorship. The President does not only dress the part though, he also acts it. Military exercises as a flashy show of the country's military prowess offer a setting in which the President can be shown at the same time being in control of the country's defense but also responsible for it. This image is created by photographing Putin in different settings, be it inside a nuclear submarine, in the cockpit of a fighter jet or on the deck of a nuclear cruiser. When Putin is photographed in these settings he is either portrayed as the leader, meaning that he is given or giving information and he is he is seemingly managing everything, or he is portrayed like he would be participating.

In photo 3 Putin is pictured during a naval exercise in the Barents Sea. In the image he is posing with binoculars lifted to his face, looking out in the distance on the deck of Pyotr Velikiy. He is in the middle of the frame with the blue sea in the background, bringing to mind an old-timey explorer. Putin is clad in a thick winter coat with white shearling-trim sleeves, leather mittens, and a naval cap with black shearling on the outside. The style of cap is the same that naval admirals wear, demonstrating the President's position in the pecking order. The striking backdrop combined with Putin's choice of outfit makes the image look highly stylized and posed. Here Putin is not trying to blend in or pose as one of the people, rather he is presented in a strong manner, like in a portrait. According to the caption, Putin is watching the launch of a ballistic missile, but the image itself is reminiscent of someone from years past leading a naval battle. Naval cosplay was something Putin partook often in his early years. At later dates he is photographed inside submarines and on-board different battle ships, usually dressed for the role. Unlike in photo 3, in many later images Putin is shown wearing a much simpler outfit, donning a striped *telnyashka* shirt just as a regular serviceman would.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ See for example: Putin. 20 Years, 2004/events/197/584; Putin. 20 Years, 2005/events/291/919.

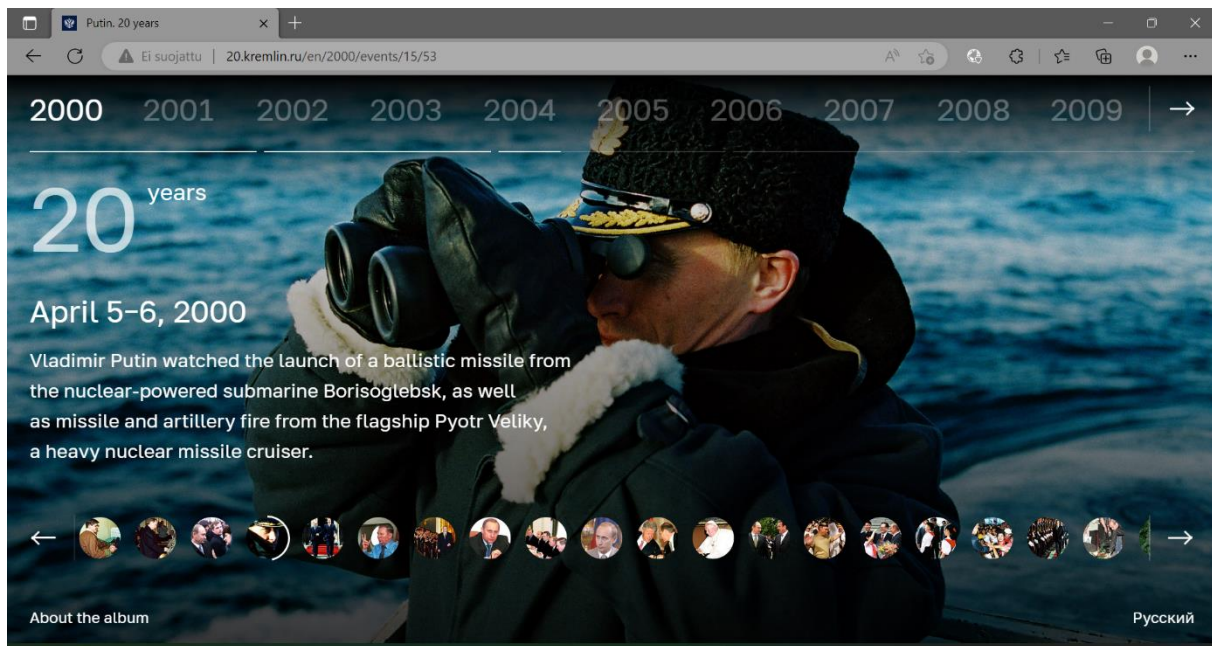


Photo 3: April 5-6, 2000, Vladimir Putin watched the launch of a ballistic missile from the nuclear-powered submarine Borisoglebsk, as well as missile and artillery fire from the flagship Pyotr Veliky, a heavy nuclear missile cruiser. Screen capture taken on 18.2.2023, by the author.

Seeing Putin clad in military attire could perhaps feel a bit foreign, after all, Putin was never a military man as he was brought up in the KGB and FSB systems.⁷⁶ By presenting himself through the lens of a military man, Putin has created a sense of strength around himself. Furthermore, Putin is often pictured in camo gear outside of work especially while on vacation in the Russian wilderness. In some cases, Putin's camo gear is clearly not the same the Russian military uses and more akin to hunting clothing.⁷⁷ Although Putin is not photographed wearing a full-on camo uniform with the pattern the Russian military currently uses, he is often pictured wearing casual wear with tags "Армия России" or Russian army, like in photo 4 where he is photographed in the picturesque mountain setting in Tyva region. In the photo Putin is strolling towards the camera with the cinematic backdrop of mountains and clouds behind him. The obviously performative photo has been taken while the President was enjoying his two days off. Showing that Putin embodies the military and its strength even in his free time fits his image.⁷⁸ Yet, the looks are often subtle enough as to not seem overtly militaristic.

⁷⁶ Wood 2011, 173.

⁷⁷ Putin. 20 Years, 2002/events/106/286; Putin. 20 Years, 2002/events/118/312.

⁷⁸ For a study on Putin's vacation photos see Foxall 2013.

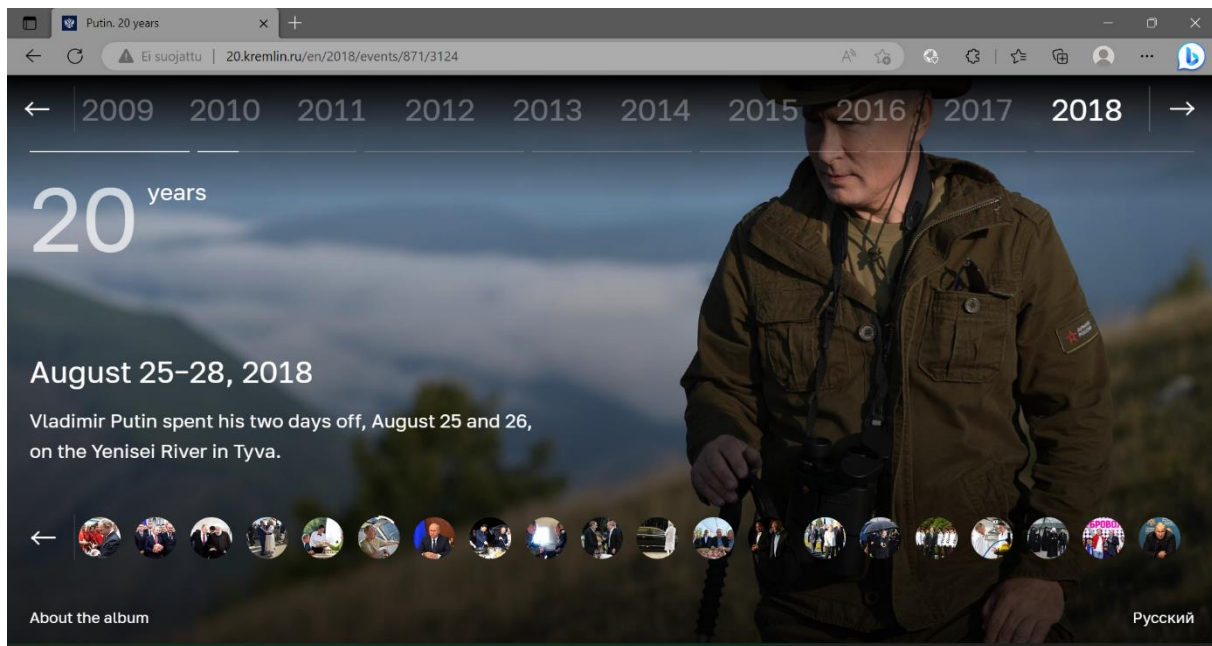


Photo 4: August 25-28, 2018, Vladimir Putin spent his two days off, August 25 and 26, on the Yenisei River in Tyva. Screen capture taken on 8.5.2023, by the author.

By dressing like a military man, the President loans some gravitas the military has. This exchange of power could, however, be seen as mutual. Putin's first two terms were an era of great personal popularity for him while the Russian military was in flux.⁷⁹ Putin could therefore be seen acting as a poster boy for the military. The President who was an object of admiration and enjoyed the trust of people could lend credence to a struggling military with credibility issues. Perhaps presenting Putin as a literal poster boy for the military has become too cliched in modern day, though. When looking at all the different stunt images of Putin on *Putin. 20 Years*, military themed ones are a miniscule portion of them. Throughout the years Putin's stunts have come under ridicule, therefore it is not surprising if in compiling the website, the Presidential Administration has not wanted to include each and every one. One reason for the lack of military themed ones might also be the need to further Putin's reign from war imagery. Even if there has been a need to present Putin as strong wartime president at times, it is a fine line to toe between looking like a strong leader and saber rattling.

⁷⁹ Putin's approval rating fluctuated between 70 and 90 percent practically all throughout his first two terms in office. See: Frye & Gehlbach & Marquardt & Reuter 2016, 3.

2.2 The Military is the Backbone of Society

Already in his first inauguration speech President Putin brought up national unity. Finding something under what the Russian populace could be united was something that Yeltsin had also grappled with. Now, in search for national identity Putin started using militarism and patriotic ideals as tools to create unity in the Russian people.⁸⁰ An official ideology was too Soviet to use, and in a multiethnic country like Russia, using ethnonationalism was out of the question. Soon, history became Putin's bag of tricks, but that did not come without issues either. As Russian history is riddled with episodes of the state and its people going against each other, history must be used selectively. It has then been military history that has been pushed to the forefront.⁸¹ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia had inherited most of its military capabilities, however, the military was in dire need of a reform as it too had suffered from the chaos of the 1990's.⁸² Nevertheless, it had a long, storied, and often victorious history which the Putin administration could utilize. The strongman leader would, however, need a strong military.

Using military and war as tools had started already in the prime minister era as Putin had made the Second Chechen War *his* war. The whole operation held echoes of trying to regain military glory after the embarrassment of the first Chechen War.⁸³ The war in Chechnya was only one piece of the puzzle though, since in order to reform the Russian military and make it a demonstrable force, its image needed some work. At the turn of the millennia the Russian military was weak. It had inherited many systematic issues from Soviet times, and these had made military service extremely unappealing to people.⁸⁴

The problems the military faced became impossible to ignore on August 12th, 2000, when the nuclear submarine Kursk sank in the Barents Sea. The entire crew of 118 people lost their lives in the tragedy which was the first of its kind since the collapse of the Soviet Union. For the recently elected President Putin, this was the first crisis he had to encounter. Kursk had been taking part in a naval exercise when explosions onboard the vessel sank it. Most of the

⁸⁰ Wood 2016, 334.

⁸¹ Bækken, 2021, 262–263.

⁸² Galeotti 2017, 5-10.

⁸³ Galeotti 2017, 16.

⁸⁴ Galeotti 2017, 11. One of the biggest issues that has riddled the military is a culture of hazing known as "*dedovshchina*" meaning "grandfatherism" where new conscripts are subjected to humiliation and given menial tasks by their superiors and older conscripts on the threat of punishment. This issue is systematic and serious and still leads to multiple deaths every year.

crew onboard had died in the explosions but around two dozen servicemen had survived the blasts. It was exactly these initial survivors that became the biggest source of contention. It took hours before the search for Kursk even began and over a day until the wreck was located. Unfortunately for the people still onboard, Russian authorities initially refused to accept foreign aid in the rescue mission and access to the wreck was gained only after a week, at which time there were no survivors. Opinions on how long the crewmembers survived inside the wreck before they died of carbon monoxide poisoning ranged from few minutes to five days.⁸⁵

The fiasco that was the rescue mission did not look good for the President whose unhurried response read as callousness and even lack of leadership. But it was the armed forces who bore the brunt of the blame for the handling of the accident. Instead of a quick response the military leadership delayed information and even outright lied. Instead of admitting in what dire straits the Russian Navy was following the Soviet collapse, military leadership tried to cover it up. It took six days for the Navy to come out and offer information to the public, and that happened only after media pressure started mounting.⁸⁶

Putin. 20 Years deals with the Kursk tragedy in an interesting way. Obviously, event of this magnitude could not be ignored; the Kursk accident was headline-news not only in Russia but abroad as well. On the website the event for August 12th, 2000, is only one image. In photo 5 a wreath can be seen floating in water. On the wreath there is a ribbon with some difficult to decipher text on it. What can be read from the ribbon is “АПЛ Курск” referring to “атомной подводной лодки Курск” or nuclear submarine Kursk.⁸⁷ The solemn image focuses on the loss of lives but in a very respectful manner. Although not in any way celebratory, the image itself is beautiful and centered on remembering and honoring the dead. This picture was obviously not taken on the actual day of the tragedy since the response to the submarine’s sinking was very much delayed.

⁸⁵ Barany 2007, 20–23.

⁸⁶ Barany 2007, 23–24.

⁸⁷ Putin. 20 Years, 2000/events/75/200.

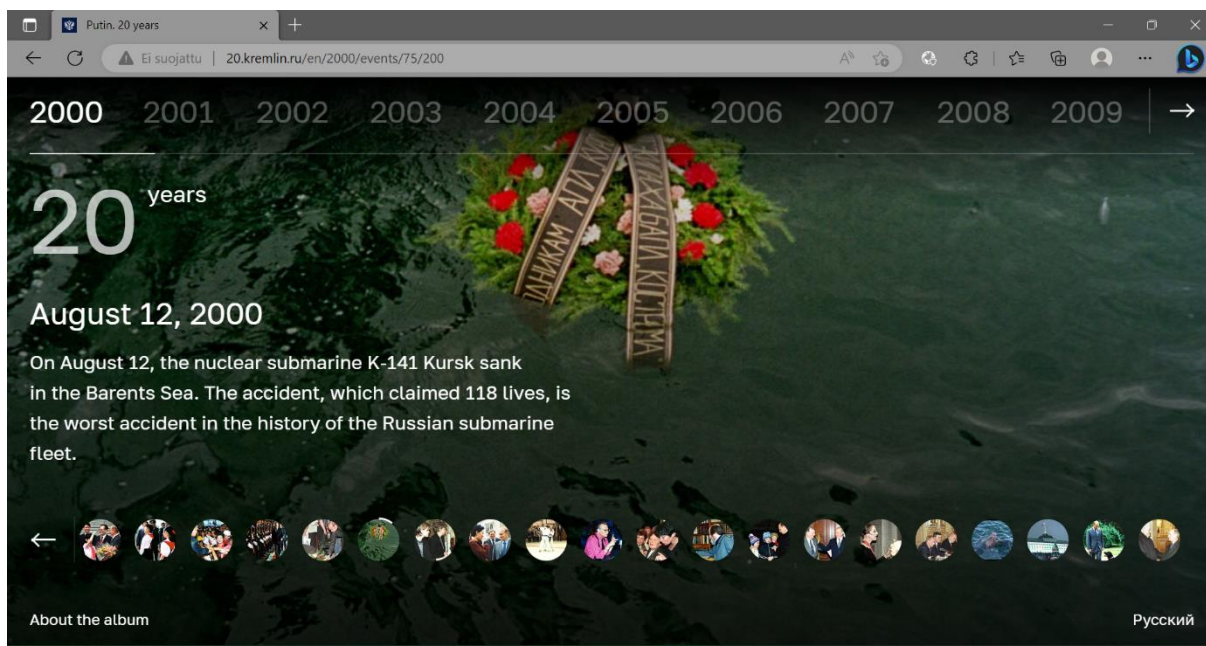


Photo 5: August 12, 2000: On August 12, the nuclear submarine 1-141 Kurs sank in the Barents Sea. The accident, which claimed 118 lives, is the worst accident in the history of the Russian submarine fleet. Screen capture taken on 22.3.2023, by the author.

The next event on the website is from August 22nd, 2000, when Putin visited Vidyayevo, the base from which Kursk had embarked on its last journey.⁸⁸ In Vidyayevo, Putin met with the families of the submarine sailors and held a meeting at the local garrisons that lasted hours.⁸⁹ In the photos from this event the focus is somewhat shifted away from the tragedy itself to the families of the people who lost their lives. Interestingly women seem to be centered in these images. In photo 6 Putin is photographed side by side with a woman, widow of Kursk's commander, Gennady Lyachin, talking to an older man.⁹⁰ The widow is standing next to Putin and they both are looking at the man, creating the effect of the President and the widow being on the same side. There are people behind Putin and the widow, seemingly following the conversation. Putin is listening intently to the older man with a serious face that could be seen either as stern or melancholic. The mood of the picture is quite downtrodden as the weather is gloomy, and the weak lighting creates shadows on people's faces. The photo does not seem to be posed, rather it looks like a snapshot of a real moment. In another photo in the event, Putin is sitting with the widow and another woman inside a room, talking.⁹¹ These images, although

⁸⁸ Putin. 20 Years, 2000/events/76/201.

⁸⁹ Putin. 20 Years, 2000/events/76/201; Putin. 20 Years/events/76/526. Putin. 20 Years says that the meeting lasted for six hours, however, Barany 2007, quotes it as lasting around two hours.

⁹⁰ Putin. 20 Years, 2000/events/76/201. The widow herself is unnamed.

⁹¹ Putin. 20 Years, 2000/events/76/202.

sad in tone, hold no echoes anger. They show a president who meets his people face to face, personally hears their woes and takes care of them.⁹²

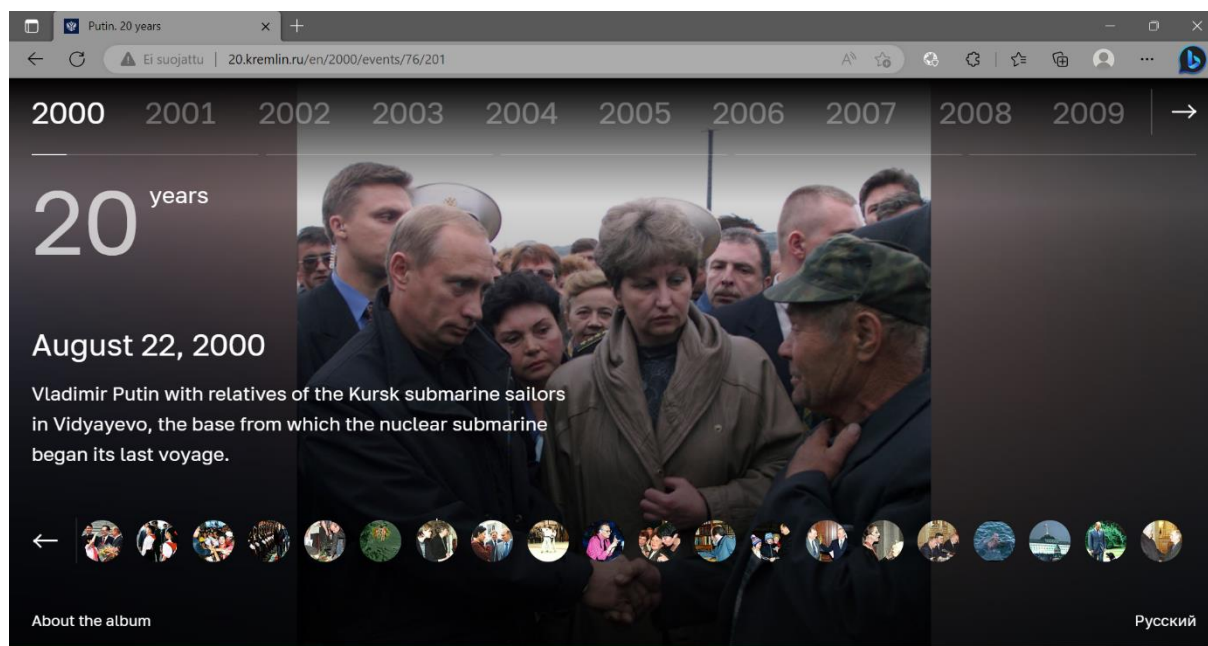


Photo 6: August 22, 2000, Vladimir Putin with relatives of the Kursk submarine sailors in Vidyayevo, the base from which the nuclear submarine began its last voyage. Screen capture taken by the author on 22.3.2023.

The Kursk disaster was an early failing of the President. His delayed handling of the situation was harshly criticized. Putin had been vacationing while the accident took place and instead of cutting his vacation short, it took him multiple days to return to work. To the public this looked like the President was emotionless and did not care for the lives of his people.⁹³ Shifting focus retroactively away from the disaster itself, to show Putin interacting with the relatives of the Kursk victims might have been the Presidential Administration's attempt to combat the view of the President's actions as callous. This accident came at an inopportune time, since Putin's mission after his election had been to achieve national unity. Now, he was faced with harsh criticism from the very same people who had elected him only months before with great fanfare. In the end Putin's popularity did not take such a huge hit but what came to the widows and families of the Kursk sailors, they were essentially paid off.⁹⁴

⁹² This facet of Putin's image was at its infancy in 2000, but it would become an important factor during the years. The most famous manifestation of this particular Putin is his Direct Line with Vladimir Putin; a multi-hour Q & A event where he answers questions sent by Russians on live TV. For more about Direct Line see for example: Ryazanova-Clarke 2012.

⁹³ Barany 2007, 28.

⁹⁴ Barany 2007, 30.

The Kursk disaster made tangible the fact that the armed forces are a part of society. The servicemen have families that could not be ignored, and neither would they stand for their loved ones dying in vain. So, as the administration worked on reforming and rebuilding military strength, they needed to make sure it had a strong foundation in society as well. The government needed to take care of the people who would, in the case that it was needed, give their life for the nation.

The group 'society' bridges the gap between regular civil society and the military in different ways. This group contains pictures of military families, military personnel outside of the line of duty, projects pertaining to military welfare, and civil military relations. It does not include themes related to veterans, though, since they make up their own group. Although this theme of 'society' is not that sizeable, as it is around thirty pictures, it is nevertheless noticeable. What unites the images in this group is that they are not really centered around Putin, yet neither are they about the military entirely either. Most of the images in this group are from Putin's first two terms, signaling that these themes were more heavily emphasized during that time. Many of these images correspond with projects aimed at either improving the image that the armed forces had in society or otherwise showing that the armed forces indeed are a part of society.

The Kursk events do deal with the relationship between society and the military but from a very specific point of view. The sinking of Kursk was obviously such a monumental event that *Putin. 20 Years* could not omit it. Tragedy is not the only way *Putin. 20 Years* portrays military families though, and photo 7 is a different example of this theme. In the picture Putin is visiting a family that lives in a residential block for officers and military personnel. In it Putin and six other people are sitting around a table in a kitchen or dining room. Two men are in uniforms, a civilian lady – presumably the wife of one of the uniformed men – is holding a toddler, a man in a dark suit is listening to her talk, while the sixth person is obscured by the suited man. The table is set for tea, and the group is enjoying their refreshments. The photo is clearly a snapshot taken somewhat unexpectedly and the bright flash adds to the feeling of unplannedness.

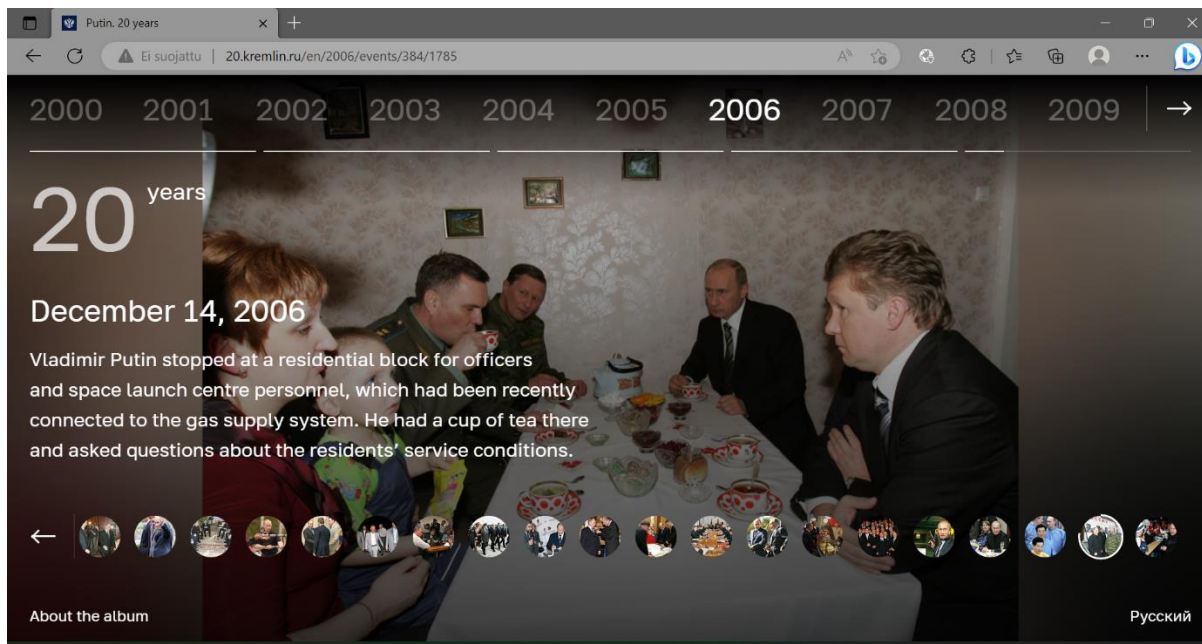


Photo 7: December 14, 2006, Vladimir Putin stopped at a residential block for officers and space launch centre personnel, which had been recently connected to the gas supply system. He had a cup of tea there and asked questions about the residents' service conditions. Screen capture taken on 13.4.2023, by the author.

Photo 7 exemplifies the society theme well, since it is clearly about military welfare, but it is not overtly focused on the military aspect. Furthermore, President Putin is not the focal point of the image, rather he is shown like a regular person just enjoying his tea with the group. There seems to be an attempt to create an air of familiarity, casualness, and even closeness. The caption also refers to the President asking questions about service conditions, an issue that was timely in the mid-2000's.

Putin took on the task of reforming the Russian military early on in his presidency, but the beginning was slow. Putin's messaging around the military focused on professionalism but he lacked a clear plan. To find solutions to a laundry list of issues the armed forces faced, a commission was set up. Based on the report created by the commission, Putin focused on military finances like pensions as well as housing. Around the same time, a shift from a large conscription service onto a professional army was explored.⁹⁵

The move from conscription to volunteer-based army had been on the table already during Yeltsin's presidency. When Putin came to power, he echoed the idea. The thinking was that a contract-based professional army would be more nimble, making it more combat ready as

⁹⁵ Herspring 2005, 138, 141, 143.

opposed to the Soviet style where reserves were big but not proficient.⁹⁶ Achieving this professional army would require people to volunteer for it though, and since military service was something people were already weary of even when it was mandatory, achieving this would require work. The Putin administration then turned to patriotism as a means to enhance the appeal of military service.⁹⁷

Patriotism needed to be based on something though, and it was not possible to simply order the nation to be patriotic, it was an idea that needed to be taught. Perhaps to combat the military's lousy reputation or to prime the nation for the patriotism push, the then Prime Minister Putin had given a speech on the Day of the Defender of the Fatherland, February 23rd, 2000, where he lauded the Russian soldier by saying that each Russian man imbibes the victories of prior generations in his mother's milk and therefore each man is a "future defender of the Motherland".⁹⁸ This somewhat blatant stoking of egos and renewed sense of military ethic would not be enough though, patriotic thinking needed to be systematic.

In 2001, the Russian government put forward plans for patriotic education. According to these plans, patriotism was to be based on Russia's military achievements, mainly against the Nazis. The program noted many problems in Russian society concerning patriotism, but one of these was the "declining prestige of military and state service".⁹⁹ Military service had of course become unattractive largely due to the poor shape the armed forces was in, so tackling the issue of young men not wanting to serve, would need more than just indoctrinating the youth. Indoctrination, however, seemed to be a major pillar in the state's effort, as reaching "children and youth" was a "priority" in the program for patriotic education.¹⁰⁰

In photo 8 President Putin is visiting a Cossack Cadet School in the Rostov region in 2008. Putin is pictured with a young boy who is wearing a cadet uniform. The President has his arm around the boy's shoulder and the pair is looking intently at a computer screen in front of them while the boy is moving the mouse around and seemingly saying something. Other people envelope the pair as there are people wearing the same uniform as the boy, another man in a suit like the President, and another photographer taking a photo from another angle. The young boy in the uniform is the most prominent character in the image. Putin is slightly

⁹⁶ Thornton 2013, 227–230.

⁹⁷ Sperling 2009, 218.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Wood 2011, 182.

⁹⁹ Sperling 2009, 219, 230.

¹⁰⁰ Sperling 2009, 235.

obscured by the header on the website, but the framing of the photo shows his left hand that is on the boy's shoulder. Putin's hand draws attention to the shoulder strap on the boy's uniform, which has some lettering on it, partly obscured by Putin's hand.

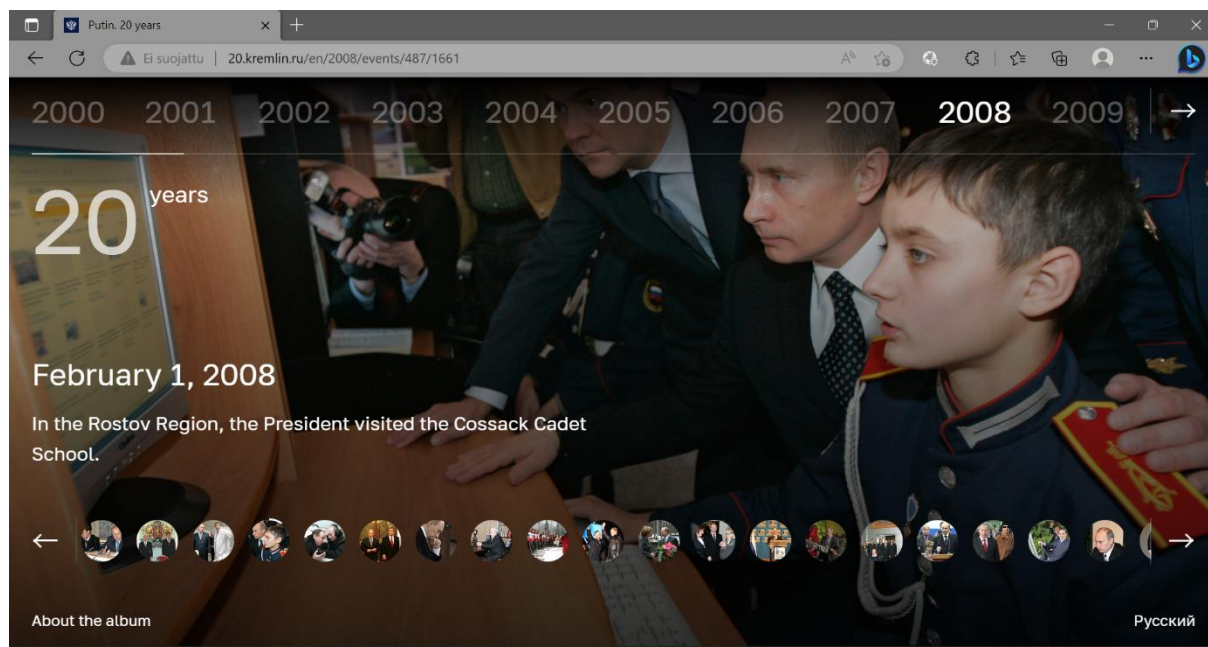


Photo 8: February 1, 2008, In the Rostov Region, the President visited the Cossack Cadet School. Screenshot taken on 29.3.2023, by the author.

Cossacks are an ethno-social group from southern Russia and eastern Ukraine whose historical frontier lifestyle values things like horsemanship and skills needed for battle. Originally Cossacks were people who had fled from religious persecution and then settled in autonomous tribal groups along the Don and Dnieper rivers. Cossack people were involved in many conflicts in the area, and they were often in service of the czars fighting in alliance with the Russian Imperial army.¹⁰¹ Revival of the Cossack culture came about after the fall of the Soviet Union and although it largely stemmed from the people themselves, the Russian government has supported it and in recent years the Cossack movement has come under more direct control of the Kremlin. The purpose of this has undoubtedly been to take advantage of the results of the widespread Cossack education. Cossack educational institutions were first established in the south of Russia, but they have spread further than just the original Cossack lands. In 2022 there were 622 Cossack educational organizations with the number of students

¹⁰¹ Kerr & Wright 2015.

being over 100 000. Furthermore, many regular schools in Russia have implemented Cossack-themed classes into their curriculum.¹⁰²

Photo 8 is quite innocuous in the sense that there does not seem to be much going on. It is hard to decipher what Putin and the boy are looking at on the computer screen, but it looks like there are some small pictures and text, hardly anything nefarious. Putin's visit to the Cossack school stands out for a couple of reasons though. For one, Cossacks were a part of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine during the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ensuing war in Eastern Ukraine.¹⁰³ As Cossack culture is something that is shared by Russia and Ukraine, there might be a need to tie Cossacks to Russia by showcasing the good relationship between them and the state.

Another interesting factor in photo 8 is that the following picture in the event is one of the President having a meeting discussing the state of Russian education.¹⁰⁴ Nothing in that image or its caption refers to the military or patriotic education in the slightest, therefore it is interesting that it has been paired in the same event with photo 8. Although these two events likely happened on the same day, it does not mean that they both need to be showcased on *Putin. 20 Years*, let alone together. Furthermore, photo 8 stands out in the material in that it is a rare example where actual patriotic education is somehow shown on the website. The only other example from the material is Putin's 2016 visit to the Vladivostok Presidential Cadet School, which is a branch of the Nakhimov Naval Academy.¹⁰⁵

During Putin's rule, there have been plenty of different projects aimed at promoting patriotism. These include groups like Nashi, a youth movement founded in 2005. Nashi was founded as an anti-fascist youth movement, focused on rallying support for the government and restoring Russia's Great Power status. Nashi's messaging was largely based on Russia's heroic past and although it was presented as a grassroots initiative, in reality Nashi operated closely with the Kremlin.¹⁰⁶ Even though Nashi was a firm supporter of Putin's regime and in turn the regime Nashi's, the movement is not visible on *Putin. 20 Years*. Neither is Yunarmiya, a military-patriotic youth movement established by the Minister of Defense,

¹⁰² Arnold, 2022a; Arnold, 2022b, 4.

¹⁰³ Arnold 2022c. Russian Cossack groups were apparently also used as paramilitary forces during 2014 and in the following years in Eastern Ukraine.

¹⁰⁴ Putin. 20 Years, 2008/events/487/1662.

¹⁰⁵ Putin. 20 Years, 2016/events/749/2898. The Nakhimov Naval Academy was established in Leningrad in 1944, and it has branches located at all of Russia's naval fleets.

¹⁰⁶ Mijnsen 2014, 17–18.

Sergei Shoigu, in 2015. Yunarmiya's mission, according to the organization itself, is to raise active patriotic citizens. Even though civic life is highlighted, according to Shoigu, the organization also needs to foster a willingness to serve in Russia's young population.¹⁰⁷

Yunarmiya is a governmental project, created to boost patriotism in Russia's youth. By all accounts it has the support of Putin's regime, yet it does not appear on *Putin. 20 Years*.

These different youth movements are prominent establishments in Russia and therefore the omission of them seems purposeful. As the website is public diplomacy, the reason for the omission is very likely optics. Perhaps the administration recognizes that although attempts to indoctrinate the youth exist, these should not be highlighted in its messaging. The Presidential Administration would rather focus on lifting the memory of the previous generation that fought and not draw attention to the molding of a new generation that will fight.

2.3 A History of Greatness

There is a joke that in Russia there is a holiday for everything. Truly, the country hosts a large array of celebrations all throughout the year. Unsurprisingly, Russia's military history and different branches of the armed forces also have their holidays. In the Soviet and post-Soviet era, the existence of some holidays fluctuated, for example the October Revolution Day ceased to be an official public holiday following the end of the Soviet era. The issue with this holiday was that it was not usable for nation building purposes and it put too much emphasis on revolution.¹⁰⁸ Today, only a few different military-related celebrations are public holidays, but they are still celebrated with varying fervor.

The broader theme of 'remembrance' is one of the largest inside the material. Overall, there are over a hundred pictures that correspond with this category. The subgroups of this theme include veterans, different celebrations of war history and remembering victims, and of course Victory Day celebrations. Why is 'remembrance' such a large thematic at around a fourth of the material? Well, it is a large thematic group covering multiple different important things. This, however, does not explain why there is so much material even in these smaller thematic groups that are inside the larger umbrella of remembrance. Giving so much weight to this subject points to the theme's inherent significance in the Russian culture and consciousness.

¹⁰⁷ Alava 2021, 258–260.

¹⁰⁸ Stewart 2021, 1879.

Essentially, 'remembrance' ties back to the idea of a long history and tradition of military victories. These victories and the people who helped gain them are celebrated with anniversaries and holidays. The group for these holidays is quite large as there are around forty pictures and temporally it runs the length of the website, with only the Tandem years absent from the material. During that time President Dmitri Medvedev was naturally the one making public appearances as the head of state instead of Putin.

Undeniably the era that is referenced the most in the material is the Second World War and it is covered from many angles so as not to minimize it. For example, the 60th and 70th anniversaries of the liberation of Auschwitz are both commemorated on the website and the captions make sure to mention that it was the Soviet Red Army that liberated the camp.¹⁰⁹ In photo 9 Putin is awarding a veteran with a medal celebrating the 60th anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War. Photo 9 is part of a six-item event covering the President's trip to Poland on the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau in 2005. In the photo Putin is in the midst of placing a medal on the lapel of the veteran while the pair stands in front of a white curtain. The caption does the heavy lifting here as it quotes Putin: "Krakow still stands thanks to the courage and selflessness of Soviet soldiers—".

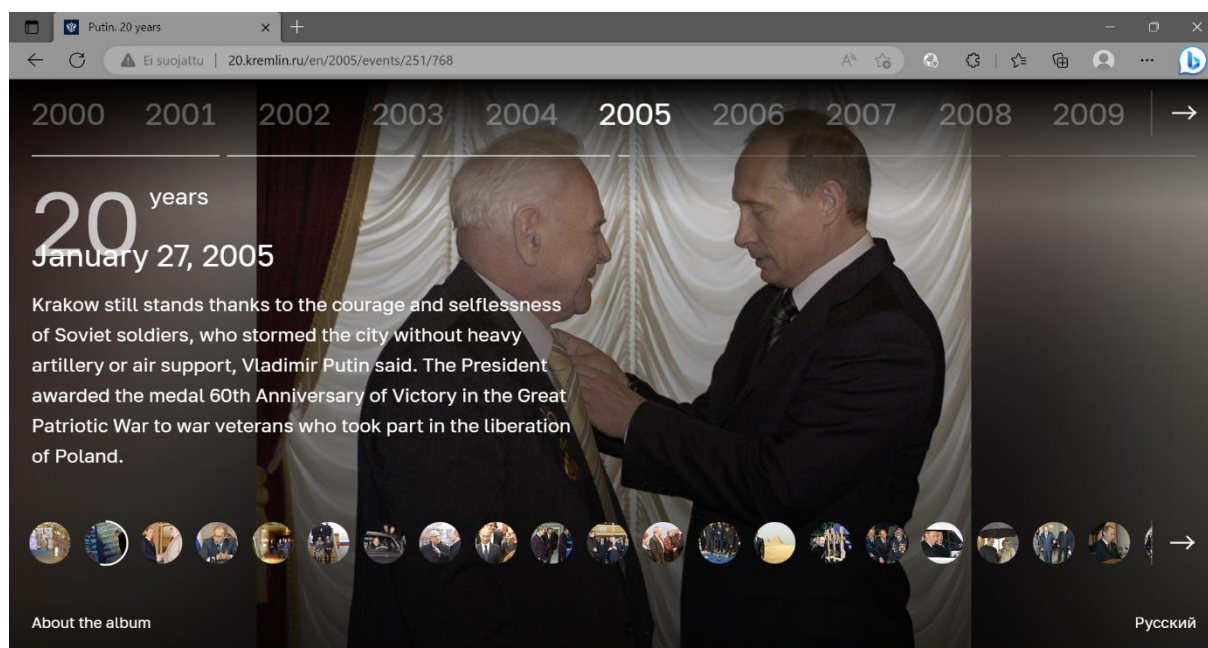


Photo 9: January 27, 2005, Krakow still stands thanks to the courage and selflessness of the Soviet soldiers, who stormed the city without heavy artillery or air support, Vladimir Putin said. The President awarded the medal 60th Anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War to war veterans who took part in the liberation of Poland. Screen capture taken on 13.4.2023, by the author.

¹⁰⁹ Putin. 20 Years, 2005/events/251/1006; Putin. 20 Years, 2015/events/673/2319.

Many holidays are repeatedly on display on the website, signifying that they cannot be forgotten and a mere singular mention of them is not enough. Days like these include the anniversary of the lifting of the Siege of Leningrad, anniversary of the Battle of Stalingrad, and perhaps a bit surprisingly, Russian Navy Day. The fact that the Battle of Stalingrad and the Siege of Leningrad, both famous events from the Great Patriotic War, are featured so prominently, further highlights the importance of the era. The fact that the Kremlin holds the Second World War era in a high accord is of course not news to anyone even slightly familiar with the ways in which Russia has built its image in the last decades. Yet, the constant need to bring forth the memory of the war might also suggest some insecurity around the issue.

In the ‘holidays’ group there are also events and anniversaries that do not deal with the Great Patriotic War and come up only once, suggesting that although worthy of a mention, they do not hold the same significance for image building purposes. One of these holidays is National Unity Day. Established in 2005, National Unity Day was created as a sort of substitute for the Day of the October Revolution. Although the name ‘Day of the October Revolution’ had not been used between 1996–2004, the day had still been a public holiday under the name Day of Reconciliation and Accord.¹¹⁰ National Unity Day decided to forego the memory of the revolution and rather highlight Russian unity against foreign powers; the day was established in memory of the events of 1612 when local militia liberated Moscow from foreign interventionists.¹¹¹ This new holiday that highlighted unity instead of revolution, domestic in opposition to foreign, fit into the image of Putin’s Russia.

In photo 10 Putin is pictured outside the Kremlin walls, a bouquet of red roses in hand, walking towards something outside of the frame. Beside him is Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, also holding a bouquet of roses. The framing of the photograph is quite awkward as both men’s heads are obscured by the website’s layout. The picture is very much unposed and taken in a moment while the two men are just walking towards a monument as the captions suggests. Perhaps there were no better pictures of this moment and therefore this one was used. In most cases it seems that images selected for *Putin. 20 Years* were chosen so that they fit the template of the website. However,

¹¹⁰ Malinova 2017, 57.

¹¹¹ Putin. 20 Years, 2015/events/713/2465.

exceptions do appear every now and again. The inclusion of photo 10, even if it fits the template awkwardly, is possibly due to the fact that it includes Patriarch Kirill.

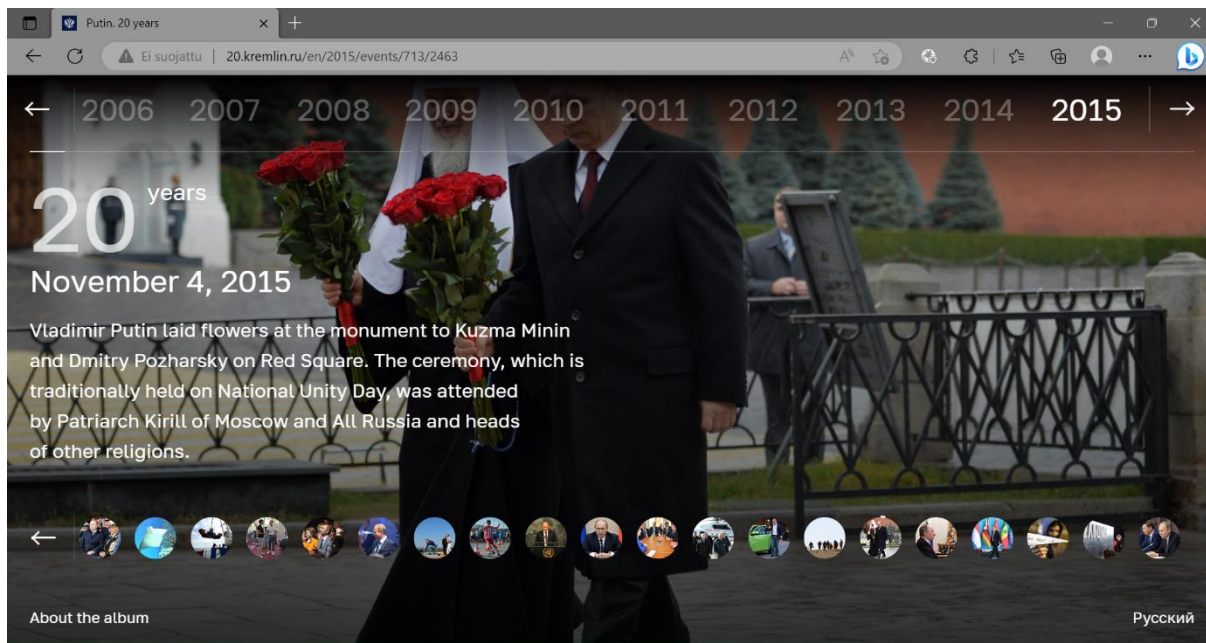


Photo 10: November 4, 2015, Vladimir Putin laid flowers at the monument to Kuzma Minin and Dmitry Pozharsky on Red Square. The ceremony, which is traditionally held on National Unity Day, was attended by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia and of other religions. Screen capture taken by the author on 18.4.2023.

Patriarch Kirill was enthroned as the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia in 2009, ever since then he has been a staunch supporter of the Kremlin. The relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church became even more intertwined than before when Putin returned to the presidency in 2012. Following this return the Kremlin became increasingly conservative and traditional values became a focal point.¹¹² The church led by Kirill became a natural ally in domestic but also foreign politics, as Kirill has been a prominent supporter of the ‘Russian world’ ideology.¹¹³ Kirill himself believes in bringing together ‘Holy Rus’, a religious concept of unity in the post-Soviet space and particularly between Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Horsfjord 2024, 368.

¹¹³ Russian world or Russkiy Mir, has been a leading political concept inside the Kremlin beginning in the early 2000’s. The concept of Russkiy Mir is used to justify Russia’s leading role in the post-Soviet area and especially in regard to Russian speaking minorities outside the borders of the Russian Federation. Russkiy Mir is then not so much an ethnic concept but a cultural and historical one used to claim superiority and even justify the use of force. For more on Russkiy Mir see for example: Feklyunina 2016; “Russkiy Mir: ‘Russian World’”. *DGAP*. <<https://dgap.org/en/events/russkiy-mir-russian-world>> [Accessed on 19.4.2025].

¹¹⁴ Przebinda 2014, 9.

What is interesting is that Kirill does not appear much in the material. Surprisingly Kirill is actually not that present on the *Putin. 20 Years* website altogether. Omitting him from the militarism adjacent material though feels purposeful as his close relationship with Putin is well known. One explanation could of course be that Kirill has been most vocal in regard to Russia's actions in Crimea and Ukraine and these subjects are pretty much non-existent in the material. Furthermore, the ways in which *Putin. 20 Years* decided approach military related subjects maybe just left no room for religion. Perhaps Kirill is shown in photo 10 since he as the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church can be used to signal cohesion and unity inside the nation.

National Unity Day has not become a popular holiday. Originally meant to restore continuity of Russian history, the day was eventually coopted by ultranationalists and right-wing extremists.¹¹⁵ Interestingly, in the next picture in the event, Putin is pictured posing for a selfie with a group of teenagers all dressed in military attire.¹¹⁶ The teenagers are wearing camouflage jackets and blue berets with pins reminiscent of the Soviet Red Star as well as Russian flag pins. These kids are not identified in the caption of the image in any way, but further investigation reveals that they are members of the Vympel military and patriotic centre. Members of this centre often take part in National Unity Day celebrations.¹¹⁷

The fact that holidays like the National Unity Day are mentioned but not repeated in the material suggest that they are not mainstays in the image the Presidential Administration wants to create. Although some days are useful in highlighting a long history – National Unity Day celebrates events of 1612 while the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Borodino also gets a nod in the material – they are not cornerstones of the narrative. As days celebrating events from the Great Patriotic War appear frequently, it is clear that those are the historical touchstones on which Russian image is built upon.

¹¹⁵ Malinova 2017, 57.

¹¹⁶ *Putin. 20 Years*, 2015/events/713/2465.

¹¹⁷ “Laying flowers at the monument to Kuzma Minin and Dmitry Pozharsky”. *President of Russia*. <<http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64332/photos>> 4.11.2020 [Accessed on 19.4.2025].

2.4 A Celebration of Victory

Russia's claim for Great Power status is by and large based on the idea that it has a moral right to be a guardian of international order owing to its victory over the Nazis.¹¹⁸ The issue with this victory is that there has been another great war and victory after it; the West winning the Cold War. Although very few believe in “the end of history” anymore, by nature people only remember things that happened last. Soviet victory over the Nazis is not fresh in people's minds. What the public remembers is the Berlin Wall coming down. Perhaps that is why Russia has to keep reminding people that in essence, it was thanks to them as the heir of the Soviet Union, that the world did not succumb to Nazism.

Putin, just as Yeltsin before him, had an issue when he came to power; what is the national identity of Russia? Under what can Russians be united?¹¹⁹ Chechnya had given Putin his own legitimacy and helped shape his image into the shape of a warrior, but it would not work as a long-term solution to what Russia stood for. Memory of war, however, worked. Eventually it was the Second World War and more specifically the Great Patriotic War, as the Soviet Union's battle against Germany in 1941–1945 is known as, that became the ground on which Russian unity was built on.¹²⁰ The Soviet Union's integral participation in the Second World War made it a Great Power on the world stage and furthermore, the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany created a legacy worth upholding. The Great Patriotic War was the perfect morality tale since it includes suffering and sacrifice but also redemption and rebuilding.¹²¹ The Second World War and the Great Patriotic War also worked since they have iconicity, everyone knows what they are and why they are important. Therefore, everyone also understands the nation's suffering to have similar iconicity.¹²²

Few holidays are celebrated with the same fervor as Victory Day on May 9th.¹²³ Although just one of the military and war related holidays in Russia, Victory Day's significance in Putin's Russia justifies a closer assessment of this celebration. There are 25 pictures specifically about the Victory Day parades and celebrations. Somewhat surprisingly, there are only four Victory Days that are represented through the parade and official celebrations: 2004, 2005,

¹¹⁸ Malinova, 2017, 59.

¹¹⁹ Wood 2016, 334

¹²⁰ Wood 2011, 173; Reese 2018, 203.

¹²¹ Wood 2011, 173.

¹²² Wood 2011, 175.

¹²³ In Russia the name that is often used for the holiday is May 9th (9 мая), alongside the official name of Victory Day (День Победы) in this work I refer to it as Victory Day.

2014, and 2015. The first Victory Day parade on the website is 2004. However, there is really only one picture about it in the six-item event. Much more attention is given to bomb attack that had happened in Chechnya on the same day, killing Akhmat Kadyrov, president of the Republic of Chechnya.¹²⁴ Poignantly, the 2014 Victory Day is represented on *Putin. 20 Years* through pictures of celebrations in Sevastopol. In 2014 official celebrations which Putin attended were held not only in Moscow, but in Sevastopol, Crimea. The annexation of Crimea had taken place just a couple of months prior and undoubtedly having an official celebration where the President was present was done on purpose to underline Sevastopol's and Crimea's long and storied history as part of Russia.¹²⁵

The 60th and 70th anniversaries of the Great Patriotic war were celebrated in 2005 and 2015 respectively. There is a stark difference between the years 2005 and 2015, owing to changes in international relations. The 2005 event was filled with Western leaders, with George Bush Jr. and the first lady right alongside Vladimir Putin and Lyudmila Putina. In fact, heads of 53 states joined Putin in Moscow in celebration of the 60th anniversary.¹²⁶ This was a lavish party remembered on the site with an eleven-item event. Pictures from the 2005 Victory Day clearly highlight the fact that so many other leaders were in attendance. In photo 11 we see Putin alongside foreign dignitaries placing flowers on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, a tradition that happens after the Military Parade on Red Square is done. Present in the picture are leaders of multiple countries ranging from Russia's near abroad to countries like Japan and Canada. Standing in a row formation, the leaders are each preparing to lay two red carnations on the tomb, a Soviet era tradition, while another row stands behind them waiting for their own turn.¹²⁷ In front of them a group of soldiers is setting down a massive wreath made of red roses.

¹²⁴ Putin. 20 Years, 2004/events/212/628.

¹²⁵ I analyzed the Presidential Administration's official pictures from the Sevastopol Victory Day celebrations in my bachelor's thesis. Major themes that came up in the pictures were naturally the Great Patriotic War, but also the Crimean War of 1853-1856. Vladimir Putin's personal popularity was also on display in the pictures. This was likely in an attempt to further the narrative that the Crimeans themselves had voted to join the Russian Federation.

¹²⁶ Putin. 20 Years, 2005/events/284/884.

¹²⁷ Danilova 2013, 143.

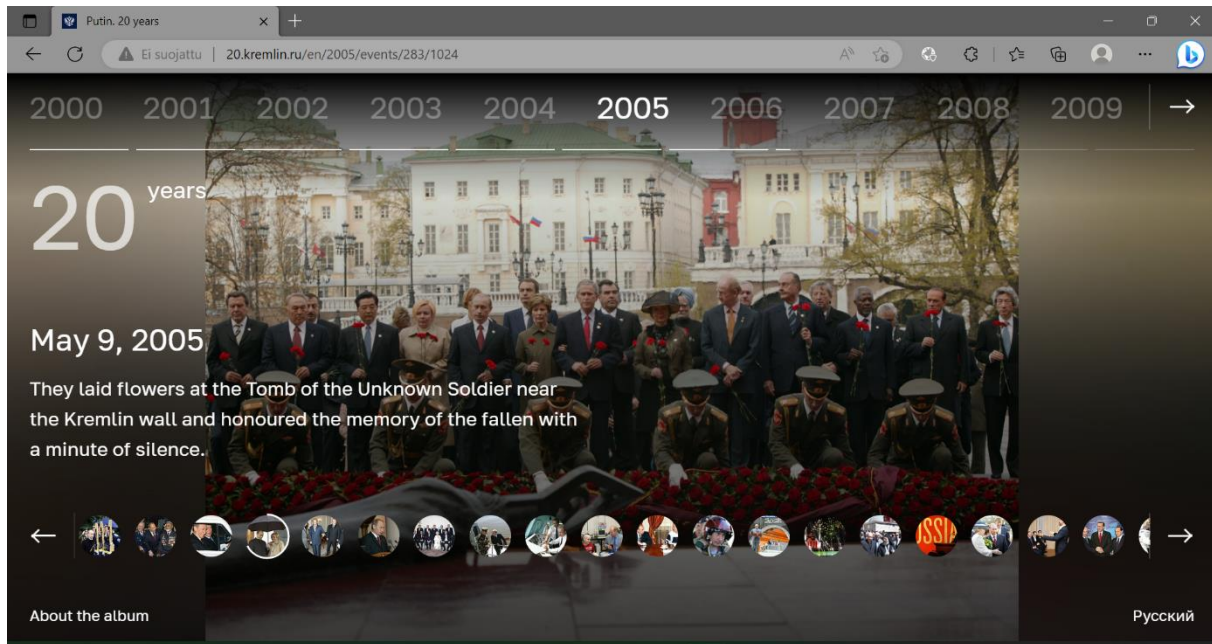


Photo 11: May 9, 2005, They laid flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier near the Kremlin wall and honoured the memory of the fallen with a minute of silence. Screen capture taken on April 13th, 2023, by the author.

Photo 11 is not unusual in the sense that the framing and positioning in the picture is very classic. Attention is drawn to the people approaching the memorial rather than the memorial itself, style that is often employed when leaders are photographed in such activities. However, it is interesting that right at the center of the frame is not President Putin himself but President Bush. Furthermore, Putin is not even next to Bush since the First Lady Laura Bush is standing between the two presidents. There does not seem to be much logical reasoning as to why President Bush would be in the center instead of President Putin, making it likely that this was done for appearances.

During Putin's first two terms Russia's relationship with the United States could even be described as good. There are many anecdotes about how Bush had seen into Putin's soul and how he had been moved by Putin's faith.¹²⁸ Apart from those stories though, in the first years of Putin's presidency Russia–US relations looked to be on a good footing with the two countries sharing efforts in the fight against terrorism, for example. The deterioration of the relationship would begin in earnest in 2004 with the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. Bush's remarks in his second inauguration speech in early 2005 about supporting the freedom agenda

¹²⁸ Condoleezza Rice interview 2022.

in the world perhaps did not sit well with Putin.¹²⁹ However, even before Ukraine there were some signs that things might be going sideways. The Iraq War had begun in 2003 as the US had invaded the country. Russia was very much not on board with the war as Putin denounced it and asked for an immediate end to the war.¹³⁰

Out of the ten pictures in the event covering the 60th anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War, foreign dignitaries are shown or mentioned in four. Although not mathematically a majority, these pictures do occupy some space. Furthermore, the central role of US president Bush seems to be especially poignant. Comparatively, in the pictures from the 70th anniversary in 2015, no Western leaders are present at the parade. This coordinated boycott was an answer to Russia's annexation of Crimea a year prior as well as the war in Eastern Ukraine.¹³¹ So, in 2015, Putin was most closely accompanied by the Chinese president Xi Jinping. Unlike the 60th anniversary, where the emphasis truly seemed to be on all the foreign leaders that had come to celebrate, in the eight-item event celebrating the 70th anniversary, veterans are equally, if not more, central. Out of the eight pictures veterans are somehow on display in all but two.

Another significant element that is present in the event for the 70th anniversary is the Immortal Regiment, a parade where people walk with pictures of their relatives who perished in the War. The event got its start in Tomsk, Central Russia, in 2012 when local journalists came up with the name Immortal Regiment.¹³² The idea quickly spread to other Russian cities, and in 2014 over 400 000 people marched in the Immortal Regiment marches.¹³³ What started out as a grass-roots movement was embraced by the Kremlin in 2015 when the Immortal Regiment was included in the official program for celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Great Patriotic War, meaning that marches were supported by local authorities.¹³⁴ More importantly though, in 2015 the Immortal Regiment got Putin's seal of approval as he marched in Moscow with a photo of his father in hand.¹³⁵

¹²⁹ Condoleezza Rice interview 2022, 13, 11. Rice talks about the relations being mainly focused on counterterrorism in the first years. Tsygankov 2019 also writes about Russia's relationship with the West being "pragmatic" and focused on terrorism during the US's War on Terror. See: Tsygankov 2019, Chapter 5 *The World after September 11 and Pragmatic Cooperation, 2000– 2005*.

¹³⁰ Condoleezza Rice interview 2022, 15; Putin. 20 Years 2003/events/142/396.

¹³¹ "Russia's WW2 parades overshadowed by Ukraine crisis". *BBC News*, St Petersburg, 9.5.2015 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32663109>> [Accessed on 23.4.2025].

¹³² Kurilla 2021, 311.

¹³³ Kurilla 2021, 312; Wood 2021, 261.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Putin. 20 Years, 2015/events/688/2390.

Photo 12 is of Putin marching in the Immortal Regiment at Moscow's Red Square. The President is pictured among people, in the middle of the marching group. He is holding a picture of his father who, according to the Kremlin, served in the Great Patriotic War. Although the picture is taken from an angle that does not show the full scale of the parade, there clearly is a crowd around Putin. The previous picture in the event shows the size of the procession and its caption says that around 500 000 people marched through Red Square.¹³⁶ Almost all of the people in photo 12 are holding pictures of their passed relatives and most people's faces are obscured by these sizeable posters. Putin is slightly off-center, but he is the clear focal point of the image. Along the row of people, a couple of children can also be seen. The children are wearing memorabilia related to the Great Patriotic War in the colors of the St. George Ribbon, which President Putin is wearing on his lapel.

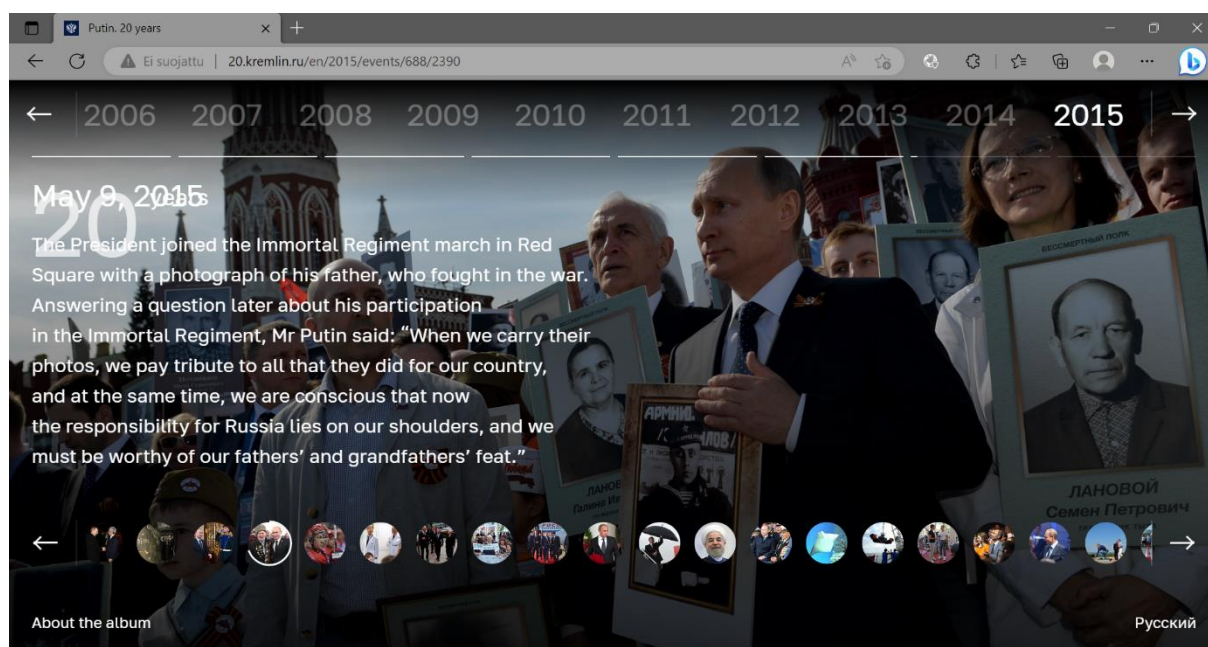


Photo 12: May 9, 2015, The President joined the Immortal Regiment march in Red Square with a photograph of his father, who fought in the war. Answering a question later about his participation in the Immortal Regiment, Mr Putin said: "When we carry their photos, we pay tribute to all that they did for our country, and at the same time, we are conscious that now the responsibility for Russia lies on our shoulders, and we must be worthy of our fathers' and grandfathers' feat." Screen capture taken on 18.4.2023 by the author.

Putin's strong personal identification with the Great Patriotic War is perhaps a bit odd, considering he was not even born when the war ended. The Kremlin has, however, built a strong narrative around Putin's family history and how he and his kin, too, have been touched by the ravages of war. According to the President his father left for the front as a volunteer

¹³⁶ Putin. 20 Years, 2015/events/688/2389.

right after the war broke out, getting wounded during the siege of Leningrad.¹³⁷ Perhaps against this background it is no surprise that the Immortal Regiment that had started out as a grassroots movement, was something that Putin would like to be associated with. Him taking part in the procession not only shows Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin as the dutiful son remembering his father, but also the President as someone who stands with his people in their grief.

After 2015, the Immortal Regiment has become a mainstay in the Victory Day celebrations in Russia, as well as a part of the government's Russian World program, making it a global event.¹³⁸ Today opinions have somewhat soured towards the procession, since officializing the Immortal Regiment in the way that the government has, is seen by some as the Putin regime coopting the movement and thus monopolizing the grieving of the fallen.¹³⁹ In 2015 though, Putin's involvement in the march was a new feature of Victory Day celebrations. It is not surprising then that this would be immortalized on the *Putin. 20 Years* website. Showcasing the Immortal Regiment march could also signal a shift in focus in how Victory Day is celebrated.

The 2015 Victory Day shows the Kremlin slightly shifting away from ceremonial elite celebrations where foreign heads of states are invited to follow a soulless military parade, towards a more organic way of remembering the fallen. Of course, this shift was not done entirely on Russia's own terms since the events in Ukraine did result in the isolation of Russia and declining of relationships. Despite the budding isolation and the Victory Day celebrations being boycotted by Western leaders, the image that *Putin. 20 Years* presents in the event for the 2015 Victory Day is one of resilience, self-sufficiency, and enduring military glory. What is being communicated is that Russia does not need the international community, especially the West, as Russia is strong internally.

2.5 Russia Was Built on the Shoulders of Veterans

It is not rare for Vladimir Putin to associate himself with veterans, namely veterans of the Great Patriotic War. Veterans are mainly associated with Russia's past and in fact, the word

¹³⁷ Gevorkyan & Timakova & Kolesnikov 2000, 15–17.

¹³⁸ Kurilla 2021, 313

¹³⁹ Kurilla 2021, 314.

veteran is almost exclusively used in official Kremlin communications for soldiers who fought in the Second World War. People who served in Afghanistan in the 1980's are practically never mentioned and even veterans of the two wars in Chechnya are not a part of any official narratives.¹⁴⁰ This way the administration might try to distance more recent wars from being wars altogether or then it shows that only veterans of one kind are usable for image building.

Throughout the 2000's, veterans of the Second World War era have been a living, breathing legacy of the war. As this, they could not be sidelined while the administration simultaneously glorified the war itself. The visibility of veterans has, however, been mainly tied to the war effort and different holidays commemorating it. Outside of this they serve little purpose for the Putin administration and have even become a nuisance since the President has repeatedly made promises about improving the social benefits of the veterans, but these promises have often lacked action.¹⁴¹

Against this background the portrayal of veterans on *Putin. 20 Years* does not differ much from the norm as veterans are mainly shown in relation to anniversaries of the war. Every now and again welfare topics do come up as well; for example, in photo 13 Putin is seen visiting a Leningrad siege survivor who got a new apartment as part of a state housing program for veterans. In the image the then Prime Minister Putin is pictured with the older woman in her apartment. The pair is standing in a foyer, and the lady is holding a bouquet of flowers, undoubtedly given to her by Putin moments earlier. The woman is clearly in the midst of saying something while the Prime minister is listening. They are standing opposite each other, and the photograph has been taken from the side and the pair is not posing for the camera.

¹⁴⁰ Based on the official Presidential Administration websites.

¹⁴¹ Reese 2018, 201.

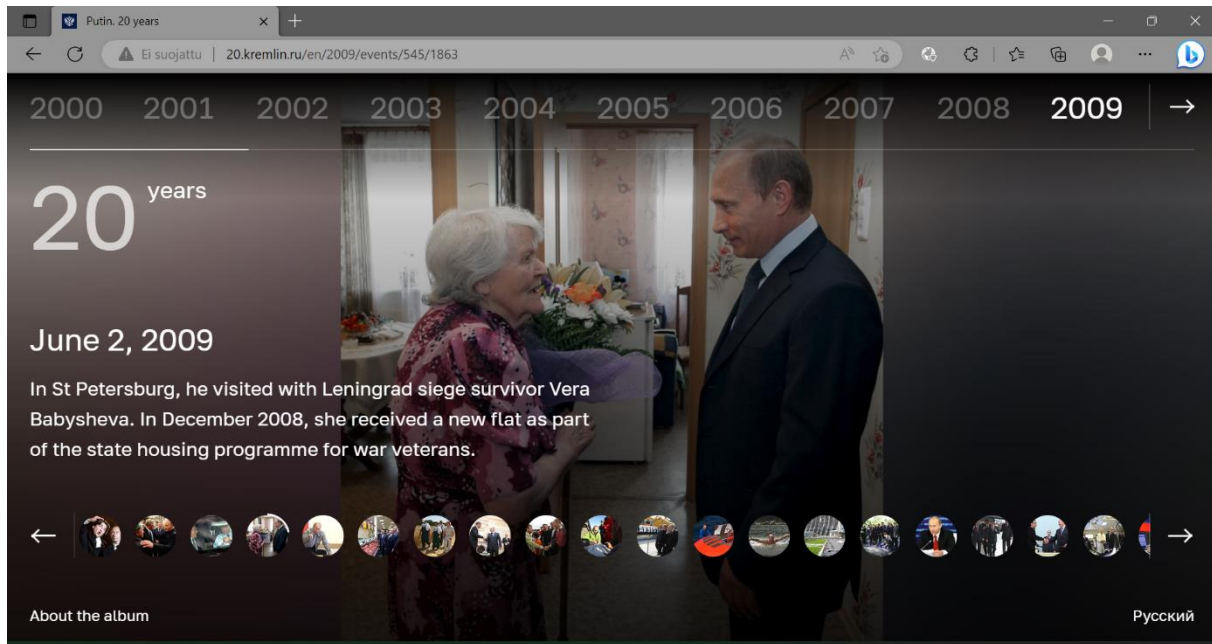


Photo 13: June 2, 2009, In St Petersburg, he visited with Leningrad siege survivor Vera Babysheva. In December she received a new flat as part of the state housing programme for war veterans. Screen capture taken on 16.4.2023, by the author.

The welfare angle does seem sidelined in comparison to the war remembrance angle, though. Unlike active military personnel, whose welfare has also been on the table, veterans have little value to the administration aside from a symbolic one. As ruthless as it sounds Putin's administration has likely played a waiting game with them, parading the veterans around publicly, almost making them holy due to their sacrifices in the war, while simultaneously emphasizing the horrors of the war making current grievances seem minor.

Interestingly, in the material many images featuring veterans include women. Aside from pictures of families of military personnel, women are not otherwise visible in military related images. No female soldiers are ever shown although they do exist in Russia.¹⁴² Considering that during the Putin era Russia has become increasingly conservative and portraying itself as a bulwark against the decadent West and its depraved ways, it is no surprise that the Kremlin does not want to associate women with something so manly like military service.¹⁴³ But why can female veterans then be shown on *Putin. 20 Years*? And not just shown but even paraded?

¹⁴² In May 2020 there were approximately 41,000 women enlisted in the Russian Armed Forces according to then Minister of Defense, Sergei Shoigu. See: "Women in the Russian Military" CSIS Blog Post, 18.9.2020, <<https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/women-russian-military>> [Accessed on 23.3.2025].

¹⁴³ For example, Fish 2017 writes about *Putinism* being conservative and in promotion of traditionalist social agenda and resisting things like women's equality. Fish 2017, 61–62.

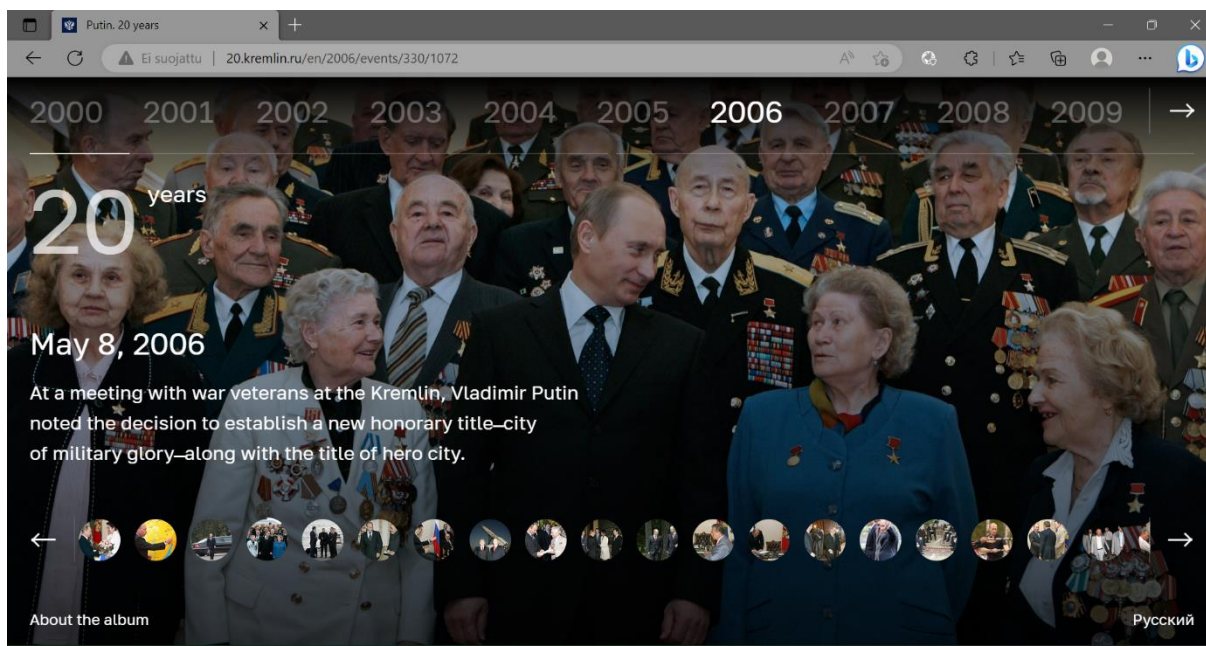


Photo 14: May 8, 2006, At a meeting with war veterans at the Kremlin, Vladimir Putin noted the decision to establish a new honorary title – city of military glory – along with the title of hero city. Screen capture taken on 13.4.2023, by the author.

In photo 14 Putin is pictured with a large group of over twenty veterans. The group is gathered in multiple rows with Putin in the middle of the first row, closest to the camera. There are female veterans placed prominently in the first row on either side of the President. Most of the male veterans look to be wearing their full-dress uniforms with their medals, while the women are dressed in a more informal manner, but they too are donning their medals. The tone of the picture is casual and although the group is clearly set for an official photo, this does not seem to be that one. The group is relaxed and one of the women seems to be in the middle of saying something to the President as he and a couple of the other women seem to be listening to her speak.

According to the caption, this picture was taken in the Kremlin a day before Victory Day 2006. At the meeting with the war veterans Putin had noted the decision to establish a new honorary title: City of Military Glory.¹⁴⁴ This new title would accompany the older Hero City

¹⁴⁴ City of Military Glory is an honorary title awarded in the Russian Federation. It was established by the Federal Law of May 9, 2006. The title is awarded to Russian cities whose defenders displayed courage, steadfastness and mass heroism in fierce battles in the cities themselves or in their environs. The title is also awarded to the Hero Cities of the Russian Federation. See: “Ceremony conferring title of City of Military Glory”. *President Of Russia*. 22.6.2015 < <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49746> > [Accessed on 23.4.2025].

title, established in the Soviet Union.¹⁴⁵ The female veterans in the picture might have something to do with this newly established title. One of the women is only wearing two medals, the other being the Hero of Socialist Labor -medal while the other is unidentifiable. As this woman is much less decorated than the others in the picture, she might very well be in the Kremlin representing a City of Military Glory. These cities were not necessarily as involved in the war effort and therefore the woman next to Putin might not be a war veteran exactly. Nevertheless, she has been placed on the same level with the other women, at least in the picture.

One explanation for the prominence of women in the context of picturing veterans could be the need to use the memory of the Great Patriotic War as a uniting force. At least half a million women fought for the Red Army in the Great Patriotic War while the number for the total of women who joined the Soviet Armed Forces was around one million.¹⁴⁶ Although these women made up only a small part of the humongous Red Army, their participation could not be swept under a rug. Even though today's female soldiers are not in the public eye, female veterans offer the administration a chance to further the message of unity. The war and the victory in it were a common effort of the Soviet people.¹⁴⁷ As the event celebrates the establishment of a new honorary title as well as the upcoming Victory Day, it also furthers the idea of the war effort as unifying force.

Another reason for why female veterans are pictured so prominently on *Putin. 20 Years* might be the mere fact that Putin's image has always contained an aspect of closeness to women. Putin is pictured as a macho-strongman with very little feminine traits himself, but at the same time he is the perfect gentleman, always greeting women with bouquets of flowers. Furthermore, women have often been Putin's core constituency.¹⁴⁸ In photos 13 and 14 Putin

¹⁴⁵ There were thirteen original Hero Cities inside the Soviet Union: Murmansk, Leningrad, Moscow, Smolensk, Minsk, Brest Fortress, Tula, Kiev, Odessa, Stalingrad, Kerch, Sevastopol, and Novorossiysk. The title was awarded to cities which had endured the longest, bloodiest, and costliest battles during the war and therefore shown exceptional bravery. For more on Hero Cities see for example: Mijnsen, 2021.

¹⁴⁶ Estimates of the total of women who saw battle are around 500,000 while around 800,000 joined the Army and up to 1,000 000 women joined the Soviet Armed Forces altogether. See: Markwick 2008, 403; Eglitis & Zelce 2013, 988; Fieseler & Hampf, & Schwarzkopf 2014, 116.

¹⁴⁷ In an event for May 8th, 2005, Putin is pictured with a group of veterans, two of the men next to him are wearing tokis, traditional caps from Tajikistan. Although veterans are rarely seen in traditional clothing on the website, the inclusion of this image reminds that the Soviet Union included many nations, and they took part in the war effort as well. See: Putin. 20 Years, 2005/events/281/875.

¹⁴⁸ For example, according to one survey done in February 2018, 76% of women wanted to vote for Putin in the March Presidential Elections. See: "Vladimir Putin is counting on female turnout". *DW, Politics*, 17.3.2018, <<https://www.dw.com/en/russia-votes-vladimir-putin-is-counting-on-female-turnout/a-43025834>> [Accessed on 23.3.2025].

exemplifies what a gentleman he is by again bringing flowers and featuring the women in the group prominently.

Aside from the parading of female veterans, this group of people is almost exclusively mitigated to objects of military glory or recipients of state assistance. It is no wonder then that there are not many examples of them in different roles on the website *Putin. 20 Years*. One peculiar example stands out in the material, though. On September 17th, 2012, Putin is photographed on the sidelines of the Kavkaz 2012 military exercise. In the image Putin is talking with veterans who have joined the President in watching the maneuvers.¹⁴⁹ The image shows five veterans who, judging by the uniforms, represent different branches of the armed forces. The group is listening intently to President Putin and the picture is taken in a way that it is impossible to say where the conversation is taking place. The proceeding nor succeeding image in the event give no clue as to whether the veterans have any actual function at the exercise or if they were invited to observe the exercises as a courtesy. The inclusion of this image feels poignant, especially when there is so little explanation as to why it has been included. As the Kremlin seemingly holds veterans to a high accord, they might have been used to lend some of their gravitas to the modern Russian armed forces.

¹⁴⁹ Putin. 20 Years, 2012/events/474/2312.

3 Russia is a Great Power with a Great Military

After the fall of the Soviet Union the Russian Federation inherited most of its remaining military capabilities. The new Russian military, however, was smaller, poorer, and riddled with problematic Soviet era culture. The First Chechen War in 1994–1996 had proved to be a disaster for the Russian Army as its inefficiency and ineptitude had been uncovered by the poor performance against a much smaller adversary.¹⁵⁰ The war in Chechnya had damaged the reputation of the Russian military and so, as President Yeltsin stepped down at the turn of the millennia, reforming the armed forces would be Vladimir Putin's job.

The project of bringing the Russian armed forces up to date fit well with the claim that Russia is a Great Power. The claim for this status did not rise only from the victorious past Russia had but also from what it possessed, natural resources, vast landmass, high position not only in its neighborhood but in international organizations, as well as a mighty nuclear arsenal. Propping up Russia's Great Power status was not only about Russia, though. Lifting Russia's standing in international relations also served the purpose of increasing multipolarity in the world.¹⁵¹ Call for a multipolar world comes from Russian foreign policy papers, but also from the President's mouth; the Munich speech in 2007 perhaps being the most famous call for a world less dominated by the United States. Russia, however, needed to make it abundantly clear to everyone that it deserved the status it wanted, and that the country was not to be belittled.

3.1 The Righteous Path of Anti-Terrorism

A phrase that comes up very often in the captions on the *Putin. 20 Years* website is “anti-terrorism”. Not only is virtually all use of force framed as anti-terrorism, but it is also brought up often. Russia, of course, is a country that has experienced many terrorist attacks and one such case even gave the pretext for the Russian government to go into Chechnya for the second time.¹⁵² Since many terrorist attacks on Russian cities throughout the years have been due to the wars in Chechnya, perhaps they could be called self-inflicted in one sense. These attacks, however, have provided Russia a reason under which it has taken the fight against

¹⁵⁰ Galeotti 2017, 5–14.

¹⁵¹ Oldberg 2007, 13–15, 17.

¹⁵² Galeotti 2017, 16.

terrorism upon itself. Especially in the 2000's Putin made the war against terrorism central to Russian foreign and domestic policy.¹⁵³ To Putin, the Second Chechen War was his war on terrorism. Russian security services, Putin, and the people around him were apparently worried about the rise of Islamist extremism and its repercussions in an area stretching from North Africa all the way to the Caucasus.¹⁵⁴ As Russia was then battling against a global threat, it would surely be useful in the long run for Russia's wishes to further its standing in the global arena.

The theme of 'terrorism' is a large group at around a fourth of the pictures. This is of course somewhat down to the way this group was gathered as it contains both images commemorating terrorist attacks inflicted upon Russia as well as "anti-terrorist operations" performed by Russia. The theme of terrorism could very well be cut into smaller groups as it contains pictures pertaining to the war in Chechnya, for example, but the larger theme itself is fascinating to reflect upon. The theme of terrorism being so ample in the material is interesting since one could assume that showing a country as a victim would be a sign of weakness that is not desirable. Upon further review, it is clear that the inclusion of terrorism on the website serves a purpose as well.

Putin. 20 Years does not shy away from showing Russia as the victim of terrorist attacks, on the contrary, multiple attacks are remembered on the website, and they span almost the entire timeline of the website. In some cases, terrorist attacks are mentioned only briefly, but often they are accompanied by pictures of grieving people and makeshift memorials. Putin is also often pictured in relation to terrorist attacks. He is either seen receiving the news, visiting the survivors, or ordering instructions on how to deal with the situation. The representation of terrorist attacks then seems to be twofold; Russia is regularly a victim of these vicious attacks, but it has the ability to heal and also combat the threat.

Judging by *Putin. 20 Years*, terrorism seems to be a constant part of the narrative of Putin's rule. Photo 15 is one of Putin paying his respects to the victims of a terrorist attacks that had taken place in Volgograd in the last days of 2013. In the photo the President is laying a bouquet of roses among hundreds of flowers brought to the scene of the attack. The dark and solemn photo embodies one way in which *Putin. 20 Years* deals with terrorism: it shows the victimhood but also how the people are remembered. Although victims of terrorist attacks do

¹⁵³ Oldberg 2007, 17.

¹⁵⁴ Trenin 2005, 102–103.

not possess the same iconicity as the soviet people who suffered in the Great Patriotic War, the ways in which attacks are covered have echoes of it.

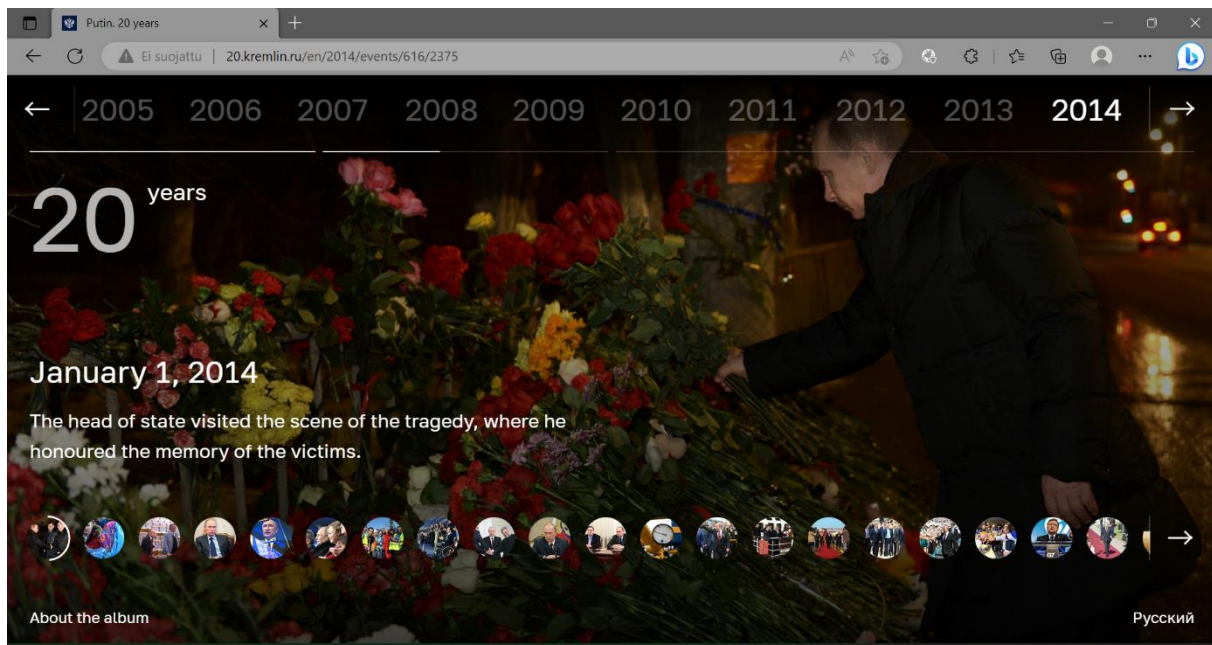


Photo 15: January 1, 2014, The head of state visited the scene of the tragedy, where he honoured the memory of the victims. Screen capture taken on 18.4.2023, by the author.

The most well-known attacks Russia has suffered are probably the Dubrovka theater siege in Moscow in 2002 and the Beslan school attack in 2004. In the Dubrovka theater siege, around fifty Chechen militants seized a Moscow theater on October 23rd, 2002, and took hundreds of hostages.¹⁵⁵ Negotiations with the terrorists lasted for three days, during which two hostages were killed. Following the deaths and otherwise failed negotiations, Russian security services stormed the theater in an attempt to free the hostages. A gas that was used in the rescue operation ended up killing over a hundred of the hostages, prompting critical discussions over the handling of the crisis.¹⁵⁶

Beslan was another hostage crisis. On September 1st, 2004, the first day of the school year in Russia, militants commanded by a Chechen warlord, took over a thousand hostages at a school in Beslan, North-Ossetia. The hostage situation lasted for three days and negotiations with the terrorists were unsuccessful. On September 4th, explosions were heard inside the school after which Russian forces stormed the building. Almost four hundred people died

¹⁵⁵ Pringle 2015, 89.

¹⁵⁶ Pilch & Dolnik 2003, 578.

during the ensuing firefight and following the crisis the authorities' actions were criticized for a lack of professionalism and regard for the hostages.¹⁵⁷

Dubrovka and Beslan were both large scale hostage crises, perpetrated by extremist militants and apparently on the orders of the same Chechen warlord.¹⁵⁸ Both cases were the result of the Second War in Chechnya, and both displayed the ineptitude of the Russian security services. Furthermore, both were major media events at home and abroad and they were engraved in the collective consciousness as traumatic events for the whole nation. As one could assume, both of these events are covered in *Putin. 20 Years*. The events are somewhat similar in structure, although the Dubrovka event is more comprehensive.

The event for October 23rd-26th, 2002, contains nine items including six images. They follow the structure of Putin finding out about the hostage situation, seemingly ordering the operation to free the hostages, visiting the injured at a hospital, a Russian flag flown at half-mast, and finally Putin with survivors in a memorial-like setting a while later.¹⁵⁹ Interestingly though, the second photo in the event, the one of Putin presumably getting the info on the situation in the theater, is a repeat of an earlier photo. The same photo appears in the event for May 9th, 2002, where the caption refers to a deadly attack in Kaspiisk, Daghestan.¹⁶⁰ One must assume that the repetition is a mistake although a strange one as it does not happen in the material otherwise. This is an instance that does exemplify the trickiness of the material; authentication is not easy. However, it is not some absolute truth we are after here, rather it is the narrative we want to analyze.

¹⁵⁷ Pringle 2015, 44.

¹⁵⁸ Biberman & Zahid 2019, 178.

¹⁵⁹ Putin. 20 Years, 2002/events/128/342-250, 482.

¹⁶⁰ Putin. 20 Years, 2002/events/107/289.

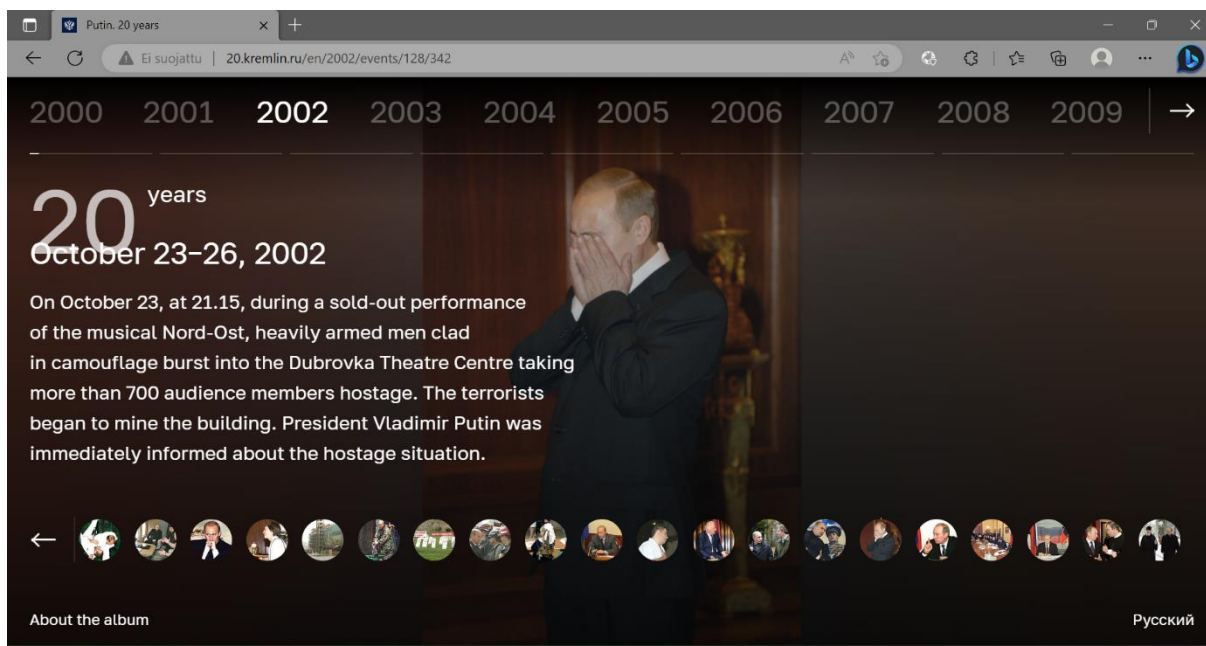


Photo 16: October 23-26, 2002, On October 23, at 21.15, during a sold-out performance of the Musical Nord-Ost, heavily armed men clad in camouflage burst into the Dubrovka Theatre Centre taking more than 700 audience members hostage. The terrorists began to mine the building. President Vladimir Putin was immediately informed about the hostage situation. Screen capture taken on 29.3.2023, by the author.

In photo 16 Putin is pictured presumably after learning about the situation in the Dubrovka theater. It is the first photo in the event and in the dramatic image Putin is covering his face with his hands, so that only his forehead is showing. The vertical photo does not show anything other than the President from the thighs up, but he is clearly in a dark room, likely his office. The pose the President has assumed is one of disbelief, perhaps sorrow, and even defeat. It is hard to say whether this photo is a candid shot or completely set up. The caption would suggest that the photo was taken at the exact moment that Putin heard of the hostage situation, but one has to question whether this is true. It seems unlikely that the President would have a photographer with him in his office at all times. If this is a genuine reaction, it would be quite delayed, assuming that the photographer would need to be called in from somewhere. Nevertheless, opening the event concerning Dubrovka with this image sets the tone for the rest of the event; this is a great tragedy, and the President is personally devastated by it.

The event for September 1st-4th, 2004, covering Beslan, on the other hand begins when the crisis is already over. The six-item event contains four pictures. The first picture is of the destroyed school building with flower bouquets in the foreground. The following pictures are

of Putin visiting a hospital where the survivors were recovering. In the final picture of the event Putin is back in his office reading a letter from the Kyrgyz author Chingiz Aitmatov.¹⁶¹

In photo 17 Putin is photographed visiting a hospital where the people injured in the Beslan attack are being treated. In the photo Putin is standing over a bed where a small child is laying, possibly asleep. The President is touching the child's shoulder over the bedsheet and looking sorrowfully down at the child. Putin is clad in a black turtleneck and black suit jacket, his informal uniform during the early years.¹⁶² The photo is cropped tightly showing only Putin and the hospital bed with the child. The lighting, possibly a flash, casts a shadow of Putin's side profile on the wall behind the bed, making the photo almost cinematic. Although black is very much the color of grief, here it does look somewhat menacing. Photo 17 does not look like a quick snapshot but rather like the pose was planned. A shot this dramatic must have been attention grabbing in a newspaper at the time, but it does lack some authenticity. Subtlety rarely is the Kremlin's cup of tea though.

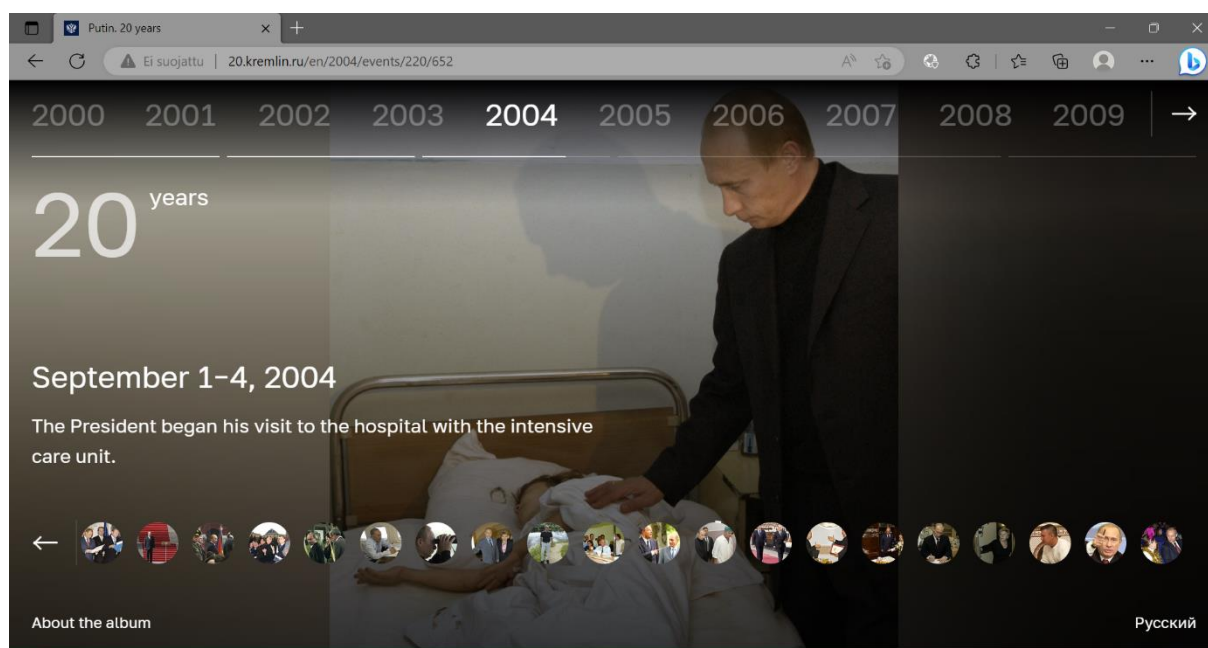


Photo 17: September 1-4, 2004, The President began his visit to the hospital with the intensive care unit. Screen capture taken on 12.4.2023, by the author.

When it comes to picturing Russia as a victim of terrorist attacks, this motif of Putin visiting hospitals where survivors are treated is very common. Unlike the mourning angle in photo 15,

¹⁶¹ Putin. 20 Years, 2004/events/220/650-658.

¹⁶² Nepomnyashchy 2007, 26–27.

this motif of hospital visits is much more focused on recovery and rebuilding after the attacks. It repeats itself in different contexts as it is used in connection to both the “counterterrorism operation in North Caucasus” i.e. the war in Chechnya, as well as random attacks on Russian cities, in this case both Beslan and Dubrovka. Photo 17 does differ from the rest of these hospital visits in how dramatic it is in its tone. The event for the Dubrovka theater siege also contains photos of Putin visiting a hospital with survivors but these are starkly different from the Beslan pictures.

No matter how heavy handed the messaging, the event for Beslan focuses mainly on the immediate aftermath while the Dubrovka event covers the situation more holistically. This is most likely due to the fact that President Putin was enjoying his holiday in Sochi when the Beslan hostage situation began. The President did return to Moscow upon learning the news, but similar images of Putin learning about the situation probably were not available. Perhaps the Beslan event’s focus on just the aftermath and the survivors reflect the Presidential Administration’s attempt to de-center any responsibility the government had over what ended up happening. Whereas the event for Dubrovka shows it as a situation in which Putin was participating, Beslan is shown as something that happened, and after it happened the President came to see, what happened. If one did not know anything about Beslan and only went off from what the website shows, one could imagine that the President had no hand or any opportunity to affect the outcome of the situation. Beslan is only shown as a terrible trauma inflicted upon the whole of Russian nation by the terrorists, who are very much the other.¹⁶³

Framing Russia as a victim of terrorism, and more importantly Islamist terrorism, can perhaps draw Russia closer to the West. As the United States began in its War on Terror, these two powers worked together against the *other*.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, as Europe came under terrorist attacks in the mid-2010’s, *Putin. 20 Years* was here to remind everyone that Russia too, is a victim. Undoubtedly, bringing up terrorism serves the purpose of creatin a victim narrative that legitimizes the war against Chechnya but also creates pretext for further use of force.

¹⁶³ Putin. 20 Years, 2004/events/220/655/description. In an address to the Russian people, Putin says “We were and always will be stronger than *them*, stronger through our morals, our courage and our sense of solidarity. -- Today we must be together, for it is only together that we will vanquish the *enemy*.” Emphasis added by the author.

¹⁶⁴ Trenin 2005, 105; Condoleezza Rice interview 2022, 6–7.

3.2 Defending the Motherland

For Russia, force seems to be an end in and of itself rather than just a means to an end. Having military capabilities and the ability to use force if needed creates power and influence. As Russia has come to see, it cannot recreate NATO or the EU, a union on based on common goals or common enemies. In lieu of a strong union, Russia has aimed to make others respect or fear it, especially in its near abroad.¹⁶⁵ Russia currently has a military presence or a military base in nine different countries outside of its borders. Some of these bases have been established by a common understanding with the host nation while some others are disputed and encroaching on national sovereignty. Either way, most all are remnants of the Soviet past one way or the other.¹⁶⁶

Majority of Russia's foreign bases are set up under the auspices of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a regional security organization of mainly Eurasian countries established following the fall of the Soviet Union.¹⁶⁷ Less harmonious though is Russia's presence in breakaway regions of Georgia, Moldova, and annexed Crimea. Russia has also operated a naval base in Tartus, Syria since the 1970's. The size and the scale of Russia's presence varies with some of the bases being just test grounds and some having troops as large as 3,500.¹⁶⁸ Russian military presence abroad perhaps evokes the air of a regional superpower, but not a global one. Russia of course does not have tool like NATO in its repertoire as the CSTO is only a regional actor. In the decades following the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has had an interest on the surrounding areas and securing the vast country's physical borders. This is reflected in the bases Russia has outside its own area.

In *Putin. 20 Years*, attention is drawn to Russia's enforcing of its borders particularly in the south. A theme of Putin visiting different troops located on Russia's southern border is constant during his first two terms, likely due to the then still ongoing Second War in Chechnya. This reasoning is referenced on the website as well. The event for October 23rd, 2003, memorializes the opening of the Kant Military Air Base.¹⁶⁹ This Russian airbase located in Kant, Kyrgyzstan, is one of the permanent CSTO establishments and it has been the largest airbases in the whole region. At best the airbase has housed over 80 aircraft, giving

¹⁶⁵ Kerrane 2022, 78.

¹⁶⁶ Dyer 2020, 1.

¹⁶⁷ The CSTO is often seen as a way for Russia to exert dominance in the region as well as bind the member states together. For Russia's relationship with the CSTO see for example: Kropatcheva 2016.

¹⁶⁸ Dyer 2020, 1; Soulemainov & Dzutsati 2018, 44.

¹⁶⁹ Putin. 20 Years, 2003/events/164/508.

Russia a significant presence in the area.¹⁷⁰ In the event on *Putin. 20 Years*, the military-political situation in Central Asia is described as stable, however, terrorist attacks remained a possible threat, which made the opening of the base “necessary”.¹⁷¹ Although *Putin. 20 Years* addresses Kant from the point of view of terrorism the establishment of Kant Air Base was undoubtedly also motivated by the need to balance NATO’s presence in the area. The United States had started using the Manas Airport in Kyrgyzstan for security operations in the area beginning from 2002.¹⁷²

Just a year after the opening of the Kant airbase, the 201st Motorized Division that had been stationed in Tajikistan was renamed as the Russian 201st Military Base and given a long-term base in the capital of Tajikistan, Dushanbe. In *Putin. 20 Years*, the President is shown visiting the then 201st Motorized Division. In photo 18 Putin is pictured playing backgammon with two soldiers inside the base while visiting Dushanbe. The image shows the President fraternizing with the servicemen in no way above them. The two soldiers are in uniform while Putin is wearing a suit showing that they are not quite the same even if the photo itself does not show any kind of hierarchy. Despite the casualness, the photo does seem a little staged. Backgammon is a two-player game and as Putin is sat next to one soldier with one on the other side of the table, it is very likely that the President merely sat down for a photo opportunity.

Putin’s fraternal relationship with the soldiers does not seem to be the main focus of the event though. The caption for photo 18 references Putin attending meetings of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) and the Collective Security Council. EurAsEC was a regional economic organization between Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. The short-lived organization was established in 2000, and it was succeeded by the Eurasian Economic Union in 2014.¹⁷³ The Collective Security Council on the other hand is the highest deciding organ of the CSTO. What the event then actually is about is regional cooperation between Russia and its neighbors while the President’s joviality towards soldiers is secondary. Furthermore, the next picture in the event talks about the renaming of the base

¹⁷⁰ Frost 2009, 84, 86.

¹⁷¹ *Putin. 20 Years*, 2003/events/164/508.

¹⁷² Buszynski 2005, 547.

¹⁷³ ”What is the Eurasian Economic Union?” *Chatham House* 12.10.2022.

<<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/07/what-eurasian-economic-union>> [Accessed on 12.5.2025].

in 2004 and refers to the 201st Military Base as the “largest Russian base located outside the country”.¹⁷⁴

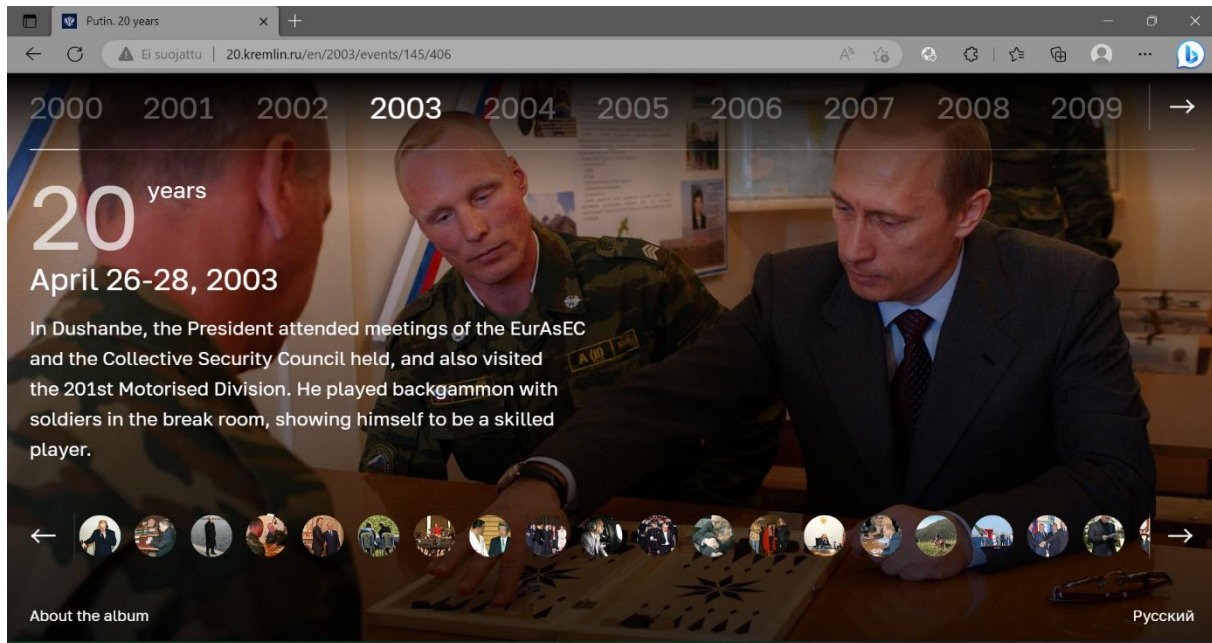


Photo 18: April 26-28, 2003, In Dushanbe, the President attended meetings of the EurAsEC and the Collective Security Council held, and also visited the 201st Motorised Division. He played backgammon with soldiers in the break room, showing himself to be a skilled player. Screen capture taken on 12.4.2023 by the author.

Both the Kant airbase and the 201st Military Base are substantial military installations outside the borders of The Russian Federation. Such a significant foothold in the Central Asian region is important to Russia of course for actual strategic reasons like the reported purpose of countering terrorist threats, but certainly also to bolster its standing as hegemon in the region. In September 2012 Russia and Kyrgyzstan came to an agreement that gave Russia the rights to the Kant airbase until 2032. Furthermore, in October of 2012 agreement was signed with the Tajik-government that allowed Russia to keep and grow its 201st Military Base until 2042.¹⁷⁵ These agreements solidified Russia’s position in the region for the mid to long-term future.

A base that has major significance to Russia, but is not highlighted on the website, is the Black Sea Fleet’s basing in Sevastopol, Crimea. Sevastopol has been the home of the Black Sea Fleet since the time of the Russian Empire and after Russia and Ukraine both declared

¹⁷⁴ Putin, 20 Years, 2003/events/145/405.

¹⁷⁵ Javaid 2017, 10623.

independence from the Soviet Union, the two countries came to a settlement over the fleet which allowed Russia to lease the Naval Base for its fleet. The last lease agreement before Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula had been signed in 2010. This agreement extended Russia's hold over the Naval Base for a period of 25 years after 2017, when the previous agreement would have run out.¹⁷⁶ Sevastopol Naval Base was one point of contention in Ukraine's apparent warming relations with the West and especially in Ukraine's potential moves to become a NATO member.¹⁷⁷

There are only a handful of images correlating with the Black Sea Fleet, or the Sevastopol Naval Base specifically, although the Russian Navy gets surprisingly a lot of attention overall. Interestingly, in most cases where the Sevastopol Naval Base appears, it is shown through a lens of cooperation and partnership. For example, Putin is seen visiting the base with his Ukrainian counterpart Leonid Kuchma in 2001.¹⁷⁸ A conclusion that could be made is that the Kremlin wants to show the relationship between Russia and Ukraine as anything but contentious when it comes to this sharing of military resources.

As the website moves towards current day the appearances of the military bases lessen, the only exception being Syria. This might be completely innocuous. What has ended up on the website is of course dictated to a large degree by what has been photographed in the first place. Yet, it begs the question of why were these pictures present in the beginning? One explanation could be that the Russian military was in a rebuilding phase in the 2000's, so showcasing military capabilities in different ways might have been important to the Presidential Administration. The Kremlin might have also felt the need to minimize the existence of Russian military installations as the website moves towards the current day. If there are intentions to use certain military assets and installations for certain purposes, it might be appropriate to not draw attention to them.

Even if some military presence is kept under wraps, *Putin. 20 Years* does not shy away from underlining that Russia has a capable military outside of its borders, but also inside.

Demonstrations of military power are all over the material, some more obvious than others. Pictures of Russian military industry and military equipment are dripped throughout the

¹⁷⁶ Kalb 2015, 138; Putin. *20 Years*, 2010/events/239/713.

¹⁷⁷ Putin mentioned Ukraine joining NATO multiple times in his March 18th, 2014, speech marking the annexation of Crimea into the Russian Federation. See: "Address by President of the Russian Federation". *President of Russia*. 18.3.2014. <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>> [Accessed on 23.4.2025].

¹⁷⁸ Putin. *20 Years*, 2001/events/50/132.

material but there is a distinct emphasis on the industry in 2009. This is likely for two reasons. One is that this was during the Tandem era when Putin as the prime minister seemingly focused more on domestic issues.¹⁷⁹ Another reason is that this is the time that the global financial crisis hit Russia as well. Russia's economy fell significantly from mid-2008 to the spring of 2009.¹⁸⁰ An economy in crisis did not bode well for Prime Minister Putin as he was now responsible for the internal situation of the country as his title as the head of government would suggest. Although it took time to apply the name of "crisis" to the situation, by spring of 2009 the Russian government had used hundreds of billions to prop up the failing ruble.¹⁸¹

The financial crisis hit at an inopportune time as Russia was in the midst of a military reform. Russia's 2008 War with Georgia had revealed weaknesses in the military, many of these equipment related. As a result, the government had planned a much overdue overhaul that would make the military more agile and, once again, professional.¹⁸² However, in February 2009 the defense budget had been cut by 15%.¹⁸³

From late 2008 to early 2009 Prime Minister Putin toured Russian arms factories, personally inspecting the production of military equipment. This follows the tone that *Putin. 20 Years* overall takes in the Tandem years: Putin comes closer to the Russian public as he tours Russia. The events for January 15th, 2009, and February 11th, 2009, cover Putin's visits to the production site of the Tactical Missile Weapons Corporation and MiG Aircraft Corporation respectively.¹⁸⁴ Both events show Putin touring the factories while the captions tell what the factories produce. The most important part comes at the end; at both locations Putin had held a meeting where he reaffirmed that the state would not reduce its defense orders and support would be given to defense companies.¹⁸⁵ The message is that even amid a huge financial downturn the defense industry was a priority to the government, and to Putin personally.

In photo 19 Putin is pictured at an airfield in Moscow. On June 17th, 2010, Putin was following the test flight for the fifth-generation fighter jet Su-57. In the photo Putin is seen strutting down the tarmac towards the camera, with the jet, some of its crew, and some officials in the background. The photo, although dynamic as Putin is walking and the hem of

¹⁷⁹ This is very much reflected in *Putin. 20 Years*.

¹⁸⁰ Aleksashenko 2018, 6.

¹⁸¹ Russia and the financial crisis 2009, 1.

¹⁸² Cooper 2016, 130.

¹⁸³ Russia and the financial crisis 2009, 1.

¹⁸⁴ *Putin. 20 Years*, 2009/events/525/1796-1797; *Putin. 20 Years*, 2009/events/530/1811-1813.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

his suit jacket is moving with the breeze, is clearly very posed. The setting itself is also quite dramatic as dark clouds gather in the sky and Putin's face has a stern look to it. Going off of just the context clues in the photo, one could imagine that Putin had just flown the fighter jet himself, bringing to mind other pictures of him seemingly doing just that. Photo 19 then continues the tradition of picturing Putin as a strongman even if the image and event itself would be about something else.

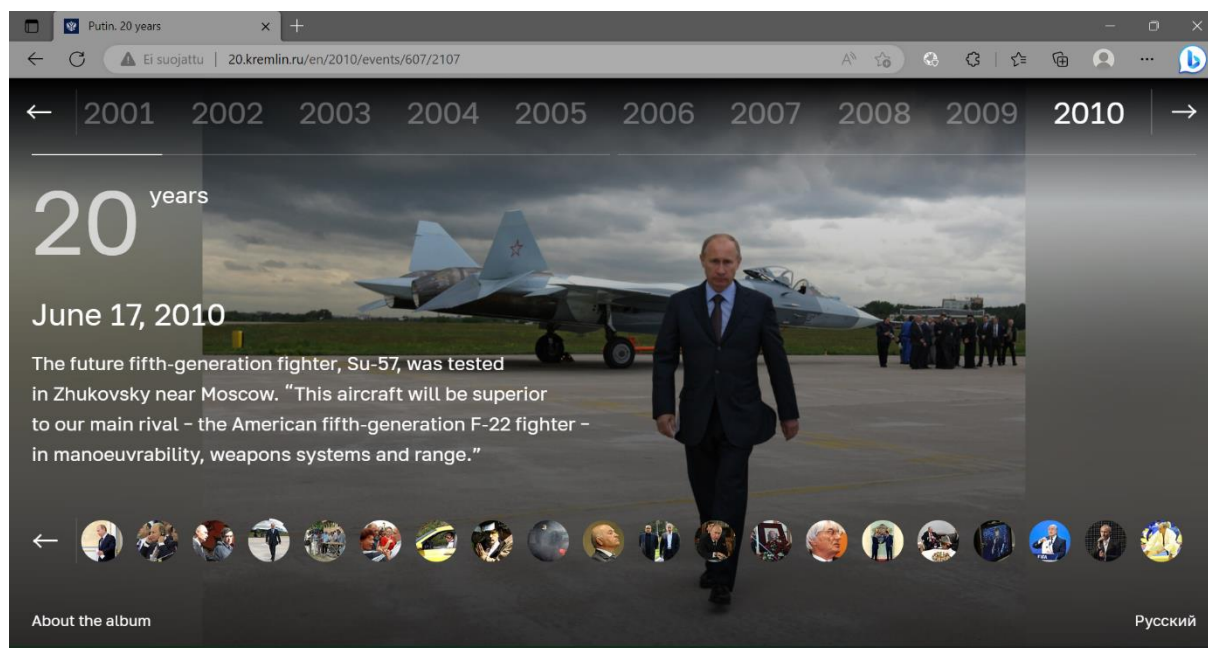


Photo 19: June 17, 2010, The future fifth-generation fighter, Su-57, was tested in Zhukovsky near Moscow. “This aircraft will be superior to our main rival – the American fifth-generation F-22 fighter – in manoeuvrability, weapons systems and range.” Screen capture taken on 17.4.2023, by the author.

Putin, however, should not be the focal point of this image even if that would seem to be the case on first glance. This event for June 17th, 2010, is actually about the new fighter jet developed by Sukhoi. The caption in photo 19 describes the new jet as “superior to our main rival – the American fifth-generation F-22 fighter—”. In the caption of the next photo in the event the Su-57 is also described as cheaper in comparison to the American F-22.¹⁸⁶ Russia's economy was very slow to recover from the global financial crisis, yet the government was eager to go forward with the rearmament plan for the military which was financed from the fiscal reserves.¹⁸⁷ Despite financial issues, the armament program was not a failure. The best results were perhaps seen in the air force and navy as between 2011 and 2015 they got almost

¹⁸⁶ Putin. 20 Years/events/607/2108.

¹⁸⁷ Aleksashenko 2016, 7.

330 new fixed wing aircraft, including more than 225 combat planes, and over 500 helicopters.¹⁸⁸ Although dozens of new missiles were also produced during these years, very little attention is given to them in *Putin. 20 Years*. In fact, when it comes to military equipment the website has an apparent focus on aircrafts. This might be explained with just their media sexiness; they look more impressive. They can be viewed as being powerful and technically advanced machines but the focus on the carriers rather than what can be carried by them is also likely intentional. Picture of a fighter jet that can be equipped with a nuclear missile feels less warmonger-y than a picture of the actual missile.

Although photos of the different military bases are a smaller group at around twenty pictures, the group for military industry and equipment is quite significant at around fifty. A part of these military industry images explicitly advertise the capabilities while others are more innocuous in their messaging. It is made clear that the country is very much able to supply itself with equipment. Simple mentions of Russian made tanks and corvettes happen, if not frequently, repeatedly.¹⁸⁹ Russia is also hailed as a place for innovation in the field, indicating that Russian military industry can keep up with the times and is not old-fashioned.¹⁹⁰ It is clear that the Kremlin wants to underline that not only does Russia have reach with its military, but it also has capabilities. Furthermore, it has abilities.

3.3 A Show of Power is Necessary

Russia is one of the countries that holds regular military parades. A foreign concept for many Western audiences but a common among authoritarian states. In Russia they are held on the pretext of celebrating Victory Day on May 9th every year. Nonetheless, these military parades are quite ceremonial, and do not offer a chance to actually demonstrate military capabilities, they are much more *show* and not *tell*. Military exercises, on the other hand, are a common occurrence in almost all countries, and they have an important role in not only testing readiness but signaling a country's strength. Military exercises are an important way of

¹⁸⁸ Cooper 2016, 133.

¹⁸⁹ Putin. 20 Years, 2011/events/612/2134; Putin. 20 Years, 2017/events/799/2817.

¹⁹⁰ In 2018 in his Annual Address President Putin said that Russia had developed a novel strategic and hypersonic weapons system. According to Putin there was nothing like it in the world. Putin. 20 Years, 2018/events/846/2998, Putin. 20 Years, 2018/events/846/2999.

communicating to multiple audiences both home and abroad and they support political, military, and geopolitical intentions.¹⁹¹

Military exercises are featured on the *Putin. 20 Years* website right from the beginning. Although many pictures from military exercises prominently feature the President cosplaying a soldier, they naturally also serve the purpose of broadcasting Russia's military capabilities. Photo 20 is part of a nine-item event covering the Northern Fleet's exercises. In it, Putin is photographed candidly but portrait-style wearing pilot gear as he has just flown on board the Pavel Taran Tu-160 strategic bomber.¹⁹² During the flight, the crew had successfully tested a new long-range precision cruise missile.¹⁹³ Although the photo shows Putin once again as a strongman, the message is focused on Russia's military industry and its abilities to produce new weapons systems.

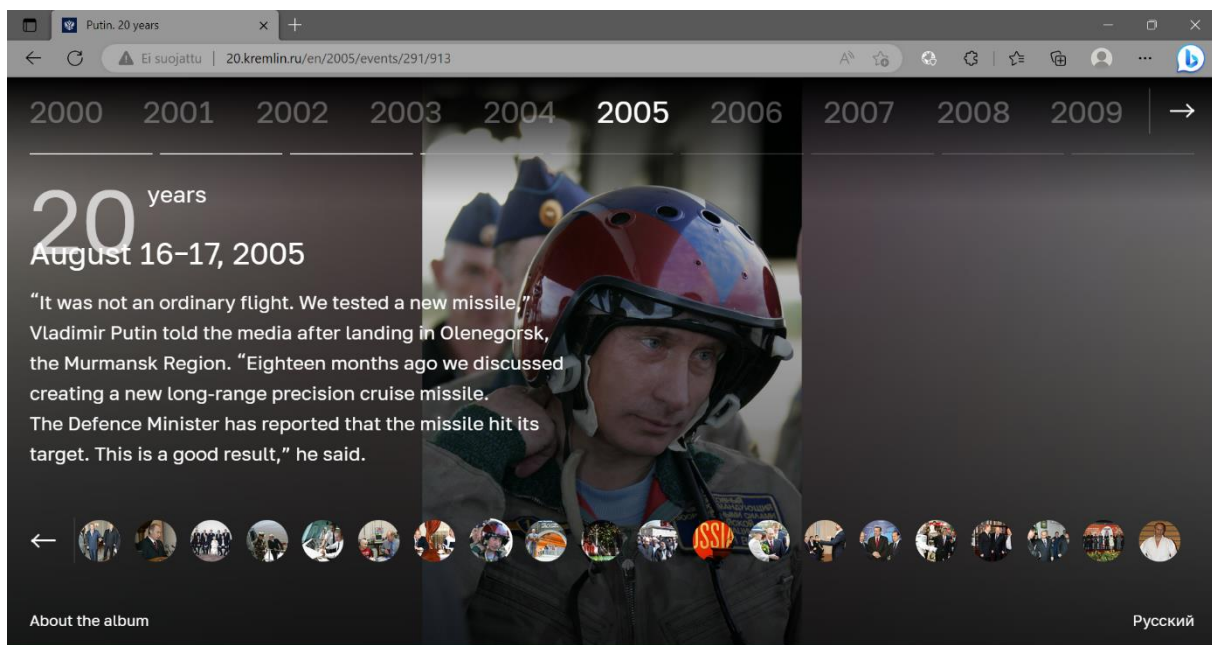


Photo 20: August 16-17, 2005, "It was not an ordinary flight. We tested a new missile," Vladimir Putin told the media after landing in Olenegorsk, in the Murmansk Region. "Eighteen months ago we discussed creating a new long-range precision cruise missile. The Defence Minister has reported that the missile hit its target. This is a good result." he said. Screen capture taken on 13.4.2023, by the author.

Photo 21 is part of the same event. In it, Putin is photographed on board the heavy nuclear cruiser *Pyotr Velikiy*. In the photo Putin is standing on the deck of the cruiser, leaning on the railing or something similar. He is photographed from the side as he is looking ahead at the

¹⁹¹ Ratsiborynska & Petraitis & Akimenko 2021, 8.

¹⁹² Putin. 20 Years, 2005/events/291/911.

¹⁹³ Putin. 20 Years, 2005/events/291/913.

horizon. Behind him is only the grey sea and the photo overall is quite monotonous. From the photo it looks like Putin is clad casually. He is seemingly wearing a black sports jacket or something similar, with a cardigan thrown over his shoulders. The following pictures in the event reveal that under the jacket he is wearing a striped shirt, likely a *telnyashka*, and on his head the President has a side cap.¹⁹⁴ Putin's head is, however, awkwardly cut off by the framing and the website's layout in photo 21, suggesting that the picture itself is not necessarily the point. The caption references President Putin watching a launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile from the submerged submarine Yekaterinburg.

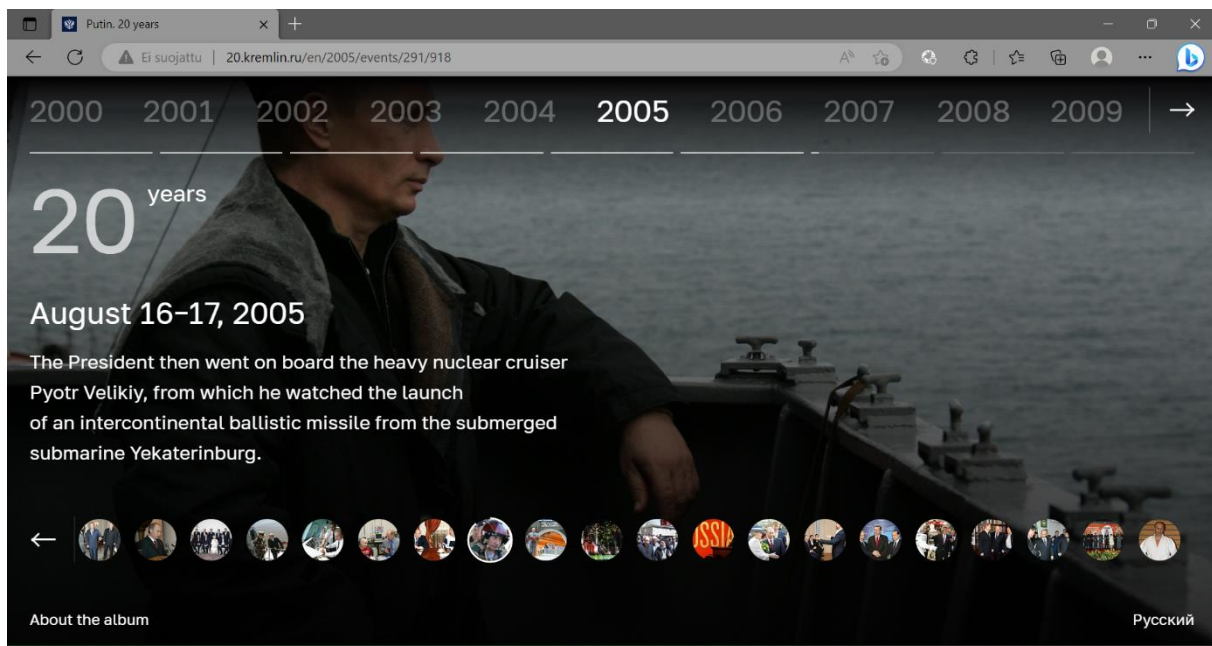


Photo 21: August 16-17, 2005, The President then went on board the heavy nuclear cruiser Pyotr Velikiy, from which he watched the launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile from the submerged submarine Yekaterinburg. Screen capture taken on 13.4.2023, by the author.

All of the pictures in the event for August 16-17th, 2005, are of Putin, first in the pilot get-up and then in his naval look. The captions, however, reveal the actual significance of the event. Photos 20 and 21 are very similar to photo 3 in the sense that they are all of Putin, while the event is about a military exercise, and the caption refers to a missile launch. None of them show the missile launch itself though, it is merely mentioned in the caption. It is of course very possible that there were no pictures of the actual launch, but another possibility is that the Presidential Administration decided to illustrate these events with these pictures since they

¹⁹⁴ Putin. 20 Years, 2005/events/291/919.

mitigate some negative connotations a missile launch might have. If someone were just leafing through the images, they would not see anything special, just a photo of the President. However, the mention of a launch is of course a signal to the outside world.

The mention of an intercontinental ballistic missile is particularly significant as ICBMs are mostly used to carry nuclear warheads and as the longest-range weapons, they have a major impact on signaling military prowess.¹⁹⁵ As Russia's traditional army was quite weak following the 1990's and in the early 2000's, their military doctrine relied heavily on nuclear weapons.¹⁹⁶ Leaning on the fact that Russia is a nation with nuclear weapons has at times been about necessity, but in many cases also about underlining Great Power aspirations.¹⁹⁷

Missile launches are an effective and somewhat dramatic way to communicate capabilities, but they are in no case the only way. Russia holds annual major military exercises on rotating basis on one of its five military districts. These annual exercises are named according to which district they are taking place in: Zapad, Vostok, Tsentr or Kavkaz.¹⁹⁸ Russia has held these major strategic command staff exercises since 2009 and they are the culmination of the military's yearly training cycle. In addition to these major exercises, smaller scale combat readiness inspections and nuclear force exercises are held regularly as well.¹⁹⁹

These major exercises are what foreign audiences usually focus on, not only because of their scale but also due to assumptions and fears ascribed to them. Concerns around Russia's military exercises have not come from out of nowhere, though. Russia has utilized military exercises as a cover for preparation for offensive operations before. It has been noted that Russia utilized normal military exercises as a cover for the buildup of troops before the Georgian War in 2008, annexation of Crimea in 2014, and most recently before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.²⁰⁰ Although military exercises have been used for the purposes of readying the troops for actual use of force, it does not mean that every military exercise is

¹⁹⁵ "Intercontinental Ballistic Missile". *Federation of American Scientists Special Weapons Primer*. 25.10.1998. <<https://nuke.fas.org/intro/missile/icbm.htm>> [Accessed on 7.5.2025].

¹⁹⁶ Kanninen 2023, 1.

¹⁹⁷ Oldberg 2007, 15.

¹⁹⁸ These romanizations of the Russian names for West, East, Central, and Caucasus (South) are used often in western lexicon as well.

¹⁹⁹ Johnson 2019, 1; Bowen 2021.

²⁰⁰ Bowen 2021. Bowen's report was written before the beginning of the invasion, however, Russia had been moving troops close to the Ukrainian border already in early 2021.

an excuse for military actions. Furthermore, these exercises are far more often used as mere signals to the outside world.

Within the theme of militarism and military force, ‘show of power’ is one of the largest groups of images inside the material consisting of around a quarter of the pictures. This grouping mainly includes images from military exercises and images showcasing the defense industry. In a numerically smaller role are images where focus is on Russia’s different military bases. The fact that this ‘show of power’ grouping is this large, is perhaps not that surprising when viewed against the project of reforming and raising the Russian military from its abject state in the 1990’s. *Putin. 20 Years* shows a capable military and perhaps even more significantly, a defense industry that can support the military.

There are around thirty pictures dedicated to military exercises inside the material. Although it is not in any way the biggest group, it is significant and spans most of the timeline of the website. There are two noticeable gaps in the coverage of these events though. One is the Tandem years as military exercises were likely President Medvedev’s responsibility, but the other is a six-year gap from 2012 to 2018. As military exercises are covered quite steadily throughout the years, this gap jumps out. Interestingly, this group covering military exercises shows an evolution that mirrors politics and policies. Many of the early pictures focus heavily on Russia’s nuclear forces, mirroring the doctrines while traditional military exercises come in later in the material.

Out of the annual main military exercises the 2018 Vostok exercise is featured most prominently on the website. Vostok 2018 took place in the Eastern (Vostok) and Central (Tsentr) Military Districts from July to September 2018. The exercise brought together the armed forces of Russia, China, and Mongolia.²⁰¹ The main *stage* of the exercise took place on September 13th, 2018.²⁰² This was when a large-scale military demonstration with live fire activities was carried out with President Putin and the Chinese Minister of Defense Wei Fenghe, overlooking the event. This part of the exercise was perhaps the least important for the actual working of the defense forces since an event like this is more of a carefully choreographed piece of theater than actual exercise.²⁰³ For image creation though, reality does not necessarily matter. Rather, it is more about what things look like.

²⁰¹ Ratsiborynska & Petraitis & Akimenko 2021, 12.

²⁰² Putin. *20 Years*, 2018/events/877/3151. Italics added for emphasis by the author.

²⁰³ Johnson 2019, 4–5.

The event for September 13th, 2018, contains four images. In the first one President Putin and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu are travelling to the Tsugol training ground in the Trans-Baikal territory where the exercise was held. The rest of the images are taken at Tsugol. In two of them Putin is pictured overseeing the exercises with Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov.²⁰⁴ Photo 22 is the last photo in the event. In the image Putin is in the process of shaking hands with a soldier who, by the looks of the uniform and badges, is from the Chinese Armed Forces. The caption tells that after the exercises President Putin awarded top-performing servicemen from each of the three militaries. Next to Putin stands another soldier in a parade-esque uniform holding a tray which we can assume held the medal that was awarded to the Chinese soldier. Further back, out of focus, more members of the armed forces can be seen. The Russian soldier next to Putin is a member of the Honor Guard from the Semyonovsky Regiment. This was one of the oldest guard regiments in the Russian Imperial army and it was disbanded by the Bolsheviks during the revolution in 1918. The Regiment was reinstated by Putin during his third term in 2013. In modern Russia the Semyonovsky Regiment is used mainly for ceremonial duties, for example presidential inaugurations, and in this case, presenting awards.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ Putin. 20 Years, 2018/events/877/3150; Putin. 20 Years, 2018/events/877/3151; Putin. 20 Years, 2018/events/877/3152.

²⁰⁵ Galeotti 2017, 16. The striking uniform catches the viewers' attention and therefore deserves a short description. The Semyonovsky Regiment is a very noticeable manifestation of Putin's revival of imperial era history. These guard members are present at many events, especially the ones held in the Kremlin palace. Suggesting that Putin has tried to revive certain imperial era things in an attempt to create resemblance to a Czar would be taking this idea too far. It is undeniable though, that Putin does surround himself with a certain amount of pompousness. This becomes evident especially when looking at how he is often photographed inside the Kremlin palace. Putin himself does not wear uniforms; on the contrary his outfits are very toned down in their appearance (even if multiple publications have written about the exorbitant price tags of his outfits). In the case of Putin his prestige comes from the surrounding elements not his own presentation. Putin's outward presentation is relatable making him seem 'one of the people', but at the same time he is surrounded by opulence, like a shining star above the country. Although the exploration of this subject is beyond the scope of this thesis it is one manifestation of the dichotomy that is present in Putin's image on multiple levels. For more on Putin's outfits see for example: Nepomnyashchy 2007.

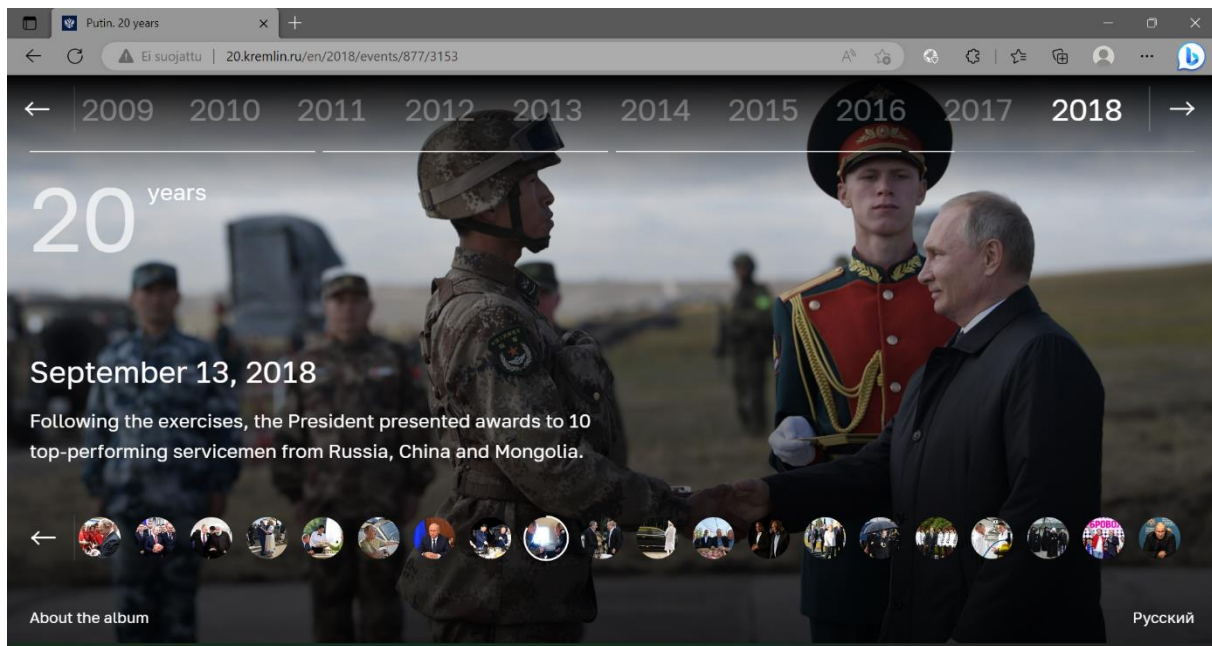


Photo 22: September 13, 2018, Following the exercises, the President presented awards to 10 top-performing servicemen from Russia, China and Mongolia. Screen capture taken on 8.5.2023, by the author.

The Vostok 2018 exercise garnered international attention and one reason for that was the description of it as the largest military exercise in the history of modern Russia.²⁰⁶ The exercise was multidimensional as several large companies also transitioned to wartime work regime for the duration of the exercise.²⁰⁷ According to Russian sources, the exercise brought together around 300 000 troops in total. There is some uncertainty around the number since it was likely more representative of the number of people taking part in the exercise overall and did not reflect the number of active troops.²⁰⁸ Inflating the numbers was undoubtedly purposeful from a messaging point of view since it highlighted the fact that Russia hosts the largest military exercises in Europe.²⁰⁹ From today's point of view Russia's large scale military exercises combined with its mode of warfare in Ukraine make it seem like Russian army is more quantity than quality.

The messaging around the Vostok 2018 exercise tried to highlight complexity as well as size. The militaries of the three countries exercised quick responses and simultaneous operations. Vostok 2018 had to accomplish the task of showing to the world that first of all, Russia is not isolated from the world. Secondly, it had to prove that Russia and China, with Mongolia

²⁰⁶ Ratsiborynska & Petraitis & Akimenko, 2021, 12.

²⁰⁷ Johnson 2019, 5.

²⁰⁸ Johnson 2019, 6.

²⁰⁹ Johnson 2019, 8.

alongside them, can consolidate their armed forces and that there is military unity between these states.²¹⁰ This message of cooperation and unity can be seen in photo 22 as well, as in the image Putin is presenting an award to a Chinese soldier highlighting the joint nature of the exercise. Even though foreign troops made up a relatively small number of overall troops taking part in the exercise, their messaging value was high.²¹¹

Although joint military exercises between Russia and China are not a new concept since they have been held under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization starting from 2003, they have become much more frequent following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.²¹² Ever since the annexation, Russia has turned more and more towards China and the two countries have started to build a comprehensive strategic partnership including military and military-industrial cooperation.²¹³

The Russia–China partnership is important to Putin's regime not only in the context of post-Crimea world where Russia was hit with sanctions, but also in the long-term project of opposing the US led world order. This partnership has been often described as asymmetrical, with Russia being the weaker of the two. Perhaps the choice of images for the event on September 13th was to combat the image of Russia being the weaker one in the partnership. Although the Chinese Defense Minister was attending the stage as well, he is not shown in the pictures on *Putin. 20 Years*. Putin is accompanied by Shoigu and Gerasimov making the event markedly Russian-led with, the president overseeing the maneuvers.²¹⁴

Photo 22 does bring forth the fact that Chinese and Mongolian forces also took part in the exercise, but the setting of the photo does not necessarily give an image of equality. The framing and setting of the image look carefully posed and curated with Putin on one side and the Chinese soldier on the other. The Semyonov guard positioned next to Putin with his eyes on the President anchors Putin in the image. The guard's uniform makes him distinct from the environment which looks like sandy and rough terrain. Putin, who is wearing just a simple suit and overcoat, is framed by the striking uniform, removing the need for the President to wear a uniform himself. The Chinese soldier's comparatively modest gear nevertheless makes

²¹⁰ Johnson 2019, 7; Ratsiborynska & Petraitis & Akimenko 2021, 17–18.

²¹¹ The number of Chinese troops was around 3 000. Ratsiborynska & Petraitis & Akimenko 2021, 19.

²¹² Ditych & Ekman 2024, 1–2. In August 2007 the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation held Peace Mission 2007 Counterterrorism Exercises in Chelyabinsk region, Russia. These exercises are commemorated with a three-item event on *Putin. 20 Years*. Putin. 20 Years, 2007/events/434/1476–1478.

²¹³ Johnson 2019, 7.

²¹⁴ Putin. 20 Years, 2018/events/877/3151.

him look understated in the image next to the power projection of Putin and the accompanying guard.

The idea that Russia is the obvious underdog in the partnership with China is perhaps slightly anachronistic, since the asymmetry in the relationship has become more obvious following the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It is not, however, out of the question that Putin's regime would like to elevate itself in comparison to China. Military exercises also allowed a setting for this, since in this regard Russia could ostensibly be thought as the senior partner. After all, China has not fought a war in close to fifty years and therefore military exercises with Russia are invaluable experience to it.²¹⁵ Russia on the other hand had been practicing war waging in Syria.

3.4 A Syria Sized Puzzle Piece

Russia and Syria's Bashar Al-Assad led regime had not been the closest of allies prior to the advent of the Syrian Civil War in Spring 2011. Despite of any political distance though, Russia got involved in the conflict quite early on, supplying Assad's regime with weapons and ammunition. Although Russia was supporting Assad by a range of less interventionist means, it had shied away from direct involvement.²¹⁶ The reasoning for Russia not getting involved in the on-ground fighting was, at least publicly, that it did not want to create the "next Afghanistan" referring to the Soviet-Afghan war in the eighties.²¹⁷ However, in September 2015, after several years of escalating civil war, President Putin requested permission from the Federation Council to employ Russian Armed Forces outside the borders of the country.²¹⁸ Following this Russia immediately launched a campaign of air strikes on Syrian territory.²¹⁹ Only a few weeks earlier US President Barack Obama had requested congressional approval for military intervention in Syria, citing alleged use of chemical weapons by the government forces.²²⁰ Russia's involvement on the other hand came after the

²¹⁵ Ditych & Ekman 2024, 2.

²¹⁶ Souleimanov & Dzutsati 2018, 42.

²¹⁷ Pieper 2019, 365

²¹⁸ Putin. 20 Years, 2015/events/708/2447.

²¹⁹ Putin. 20 Years, 2015/events/708/2448.

²²⁰ Putin. 20 Years, 2015/events/593/2063.

direct request by the Syrian government, essentially making Russia and the US opponents in the conflict.²²¹

Reasons for Russia's involvement in the Syrian Civil War were many, but the decision to get directly involved by using its own armed forces was apparently due to the fact that at that moment, the Assad regime was closest to crumbling.²²² Russia clearly had a vested interest in President Assad staying in power, if for no other reason than to show the United States that it could not just orchestrate regime changes after its own will. In addition to these slightly conspiracy minded reasons though, Russian leadership was apparently under the impression that if Assad fell, so would the entire Syrian state.²²³ As Syria was also a strategic asset for Russia, owing to the naval base Russia operated in Tartus, letting the Assad regime fall would have been detrimental to Russian interests.

Syria occupies a surprisingly large swath of the *Putin. 20 Years* galleries. There are around 20 pictures directly related to the Russian military intervention in Syria. If we were to include all pictures concerning Syria, including the ones where the focus is more on foreign policy rather than actual use of force, the number would triple. Considering that the Syrian Civil War does take up almost half of the entire timeline of *Putin. 20 Years*, it is maybe not that surprising that it comes up so often on the website. Nevertheless, the focus on it does seem somewhat oversized, making one raise the question: is Syria really this important?

There are a few factors that can explain the significance of Syria for not only Russian politics, but for the Presidential Administration's image making. First of all, use of force in Syria can be filed under the catch-all objective of anti-terrorism. Second, Syria undoubtedly served as a distraction from Eastern-Ukraine and Crimea. Third, through Syria, Putin's Russia could showcase its Great Power status, which is reflected in the coverage of the civil war on *Putin. 20 Years*. On a larger political scale the Syrian Civil War has been dubbed a proxy war and not for nothing, the extended conflict is a complicated mix of not only intra-Syrian fighting but larger events in the area as well as a power game between political adversaries.²²⁴ Therefore it is no wonder that it is given a lot of attention on the website; Syria was never just about Syria, it was about Russia.

²²¹ Trenin 2018, 60.

²²² Souleimanov & Dzutsati 2018, 43.

²²³ Trenin 2018, 47–48, 62.

²²⁴ Simons 2019, 34.

After Putin's return to power in 2012, Russia has arguably taken a more aggressive stance in the world.²²⁵ Perhaps this new more aggressive era mirrored Putin's domestic actions as he had to establish himself in a completely new way due to not enjoying the same popularity as he had before the tandem era.²²⁶ The annexation of Crimea has been theorized to have been Putin's attempt to regain his former popularity, one which worked since Putin's approval rate rose according to some sources to numbers as high as 86% following the annexation.²²⁷ What Crimea's annexation or "reunification" had also achieved was that Russia had effectively broken the US' de facto monopoly on use of force globally.²²⁸

Although this foray into using force was not novel, since Russia had gone into Georgia in 2008, for example, Crimea was still a different case altogether. The countermeasures set up by the West that followed the annexation, and the ensuing war in Eastern Ukraine, did hurt Russia's economy and diplomatic relations considerably. The US especially was trying to isolate Russia as a form of punishment for its actions in Ukraine.²²⁹ This was obviously an issue since it negated Putin's wishes of establishing Russia as a Great Power, present at important tables. By getting involved in Syria though, Putin made sure the US could not ignore Russia.²³⁰ This worked to some extent since after Russia started its military campaign in Syria, the US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken started engaging with the Russians in trying to find solutions to the situation on the ground.²³¹ Not only had Russia made sure it had a seat at the table, this was the second time in short time that Russia had went against the US led world order.²³²

Russia's involvement in Syria had begun with just airstrikes, but eventually ground forces were deployed. Although these were mainly special forces and mercenaries Russia was nevertheless on the ground in Syria.²³³ With the Russians by their side, Syrian government forces made gains and in December 2017 President Putin visited Syria for the first time.²³⁴ Photo 23 is of Putin meeting with Russian soldiers in Syria. The photo shows Putin sitting at a

²²⁵ Tsygankov 2019, 251.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ "Five Years After Crimea, Russia Has Come Full Circle at Great Cost". *The Moscow Times*. 5.2.2019. <<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/02/05/five-years-after-crimea-annexation-russia-has-come-full-circle-at-great-cost-op-ed-a64393>> [Accessed on 31.1.2025].

²²⁸ Trenin 2018, 7.

²²⁹ Galeotti 2022, 202.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Trenin 2018, 80.

²³² Trenin 2018, 62.

²³³ Galeotti 2022, 210.

²³⁴ Putin. 20 Years, 2017/events/813/2870.

table with three soldiers, the group is enjoying their coffees or teas and some little snacks inside a simple room. Putin is clad in a dark suit while the soldiers are in their desert uniforms. The actual group appears to be bigger than just the four people photographed, since Putin's gaze is directed towards the other side of the table while the soldiers seated next to him are positioned towards the President. Most likely the President has been engaged in a conversation with someone across from him as he is smiling but seemingly silent in the image.

Photo 23 continues the tradition of picturing Putin on an equal footing with the soldiers. As Putin's image was that of a warrior himself, picturing Putin as one of the men fit this. In 2017 Putin's image had shifted slightly away from the warrior imagery, but casualness and being one of the people remained a mainstay. The material on *Putin. 20 Years* contains very few pictures where Putin is pictured physically above military personnel. Even though in most photos it is clear that he is the one in power, he is shown being at their level just as in photo 23 and photo 18. So, even though the setting in photo 23 is slightly formal, the tone is quite relaxed and content, moreover the photo does not seem posed. The contentedness of the image mirrors the caption which says the President was "thanking the Russian troops who took part in the anti-terrorist operation". Furthermore, Putin had emphasized that the troops were "returning victorious".

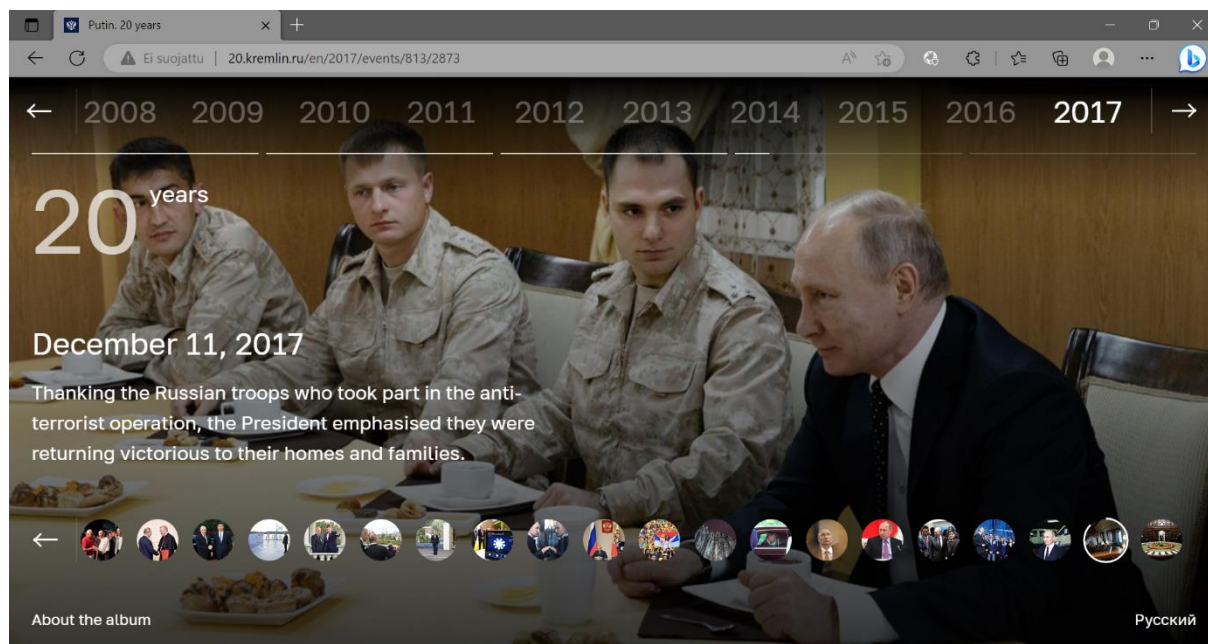


Photo 23: December 11, 2017, Thanking the Russian troops who took part in the anti-terrorist operation, the President emphasised they were returning victorious to their homes and families. Screen capture taken on 2.5.2023, by the author.

This event for December 11th, 2017, consists of five items in total containing four pictures. It is perhaps not that surprising that Putin's first visit to Syria would not come until some victories were attained since then Putin's visit could be framed in a celebratory way. The caption of the preceding photo says that the President had ordered the withdrawal of most Russian troops from Syria.²³⁵ The reasons for the withdrawal of groups were, as one would expect, political. Not only were they meant to show Al-Assad that Russia would not back his regime through everything, but they were also aimed at the Russian public.²³⁶ With Russian troops on the ground, casualties were inevitable so minimizing them was important. Besides, explaining prolonged military involvement in a country that had no actual ties to Russia itself was always going to be different from justifying involvement in Eastern Ukraine, for example. Putin's celebratory language about returning home victorious perhaps shows how the situation on the ground was being framed when the website was published in 2019. Indeed, the Syrian Army backed by the Russians had gained some victories in 2017, but the conflict was far from over even then. The recent successes in the battlefield gave Russia an out, they could withdraw troops while the situation was good, but no decisive victory nor loss, for that matter, was imminent.²³⁷

What is important to note is that Syria, like practically all other Russian military campaigns during Putin's time in power, was dubbed anti-terrorist in nature. After Russia eventually got directly involved in the conflict, one argument behind it was that thousands of Russian citizens were fighting against the Assad-regime in Syria, having joined the Islamic State. Attacking the Islamic State in Syria would then preemptively stop these terrorists so that they could not threaten Russia from the inside.²³⁸ Anti-terrorism has been the defining narrative used to justify the use of force even in cases where the need to use force was otherwise motivated. It comes as no surprise then that the Kremlin led with that narrative in the case of Syria as well. Only a couple of days before Russia began its airstrike campaign in Syria, Putin had held a speech at the UN General Assembly where he had emphasized the need to fight terrorism.²³⁹

The rhetoric around the Russian operation in Syria being about anti-terrorism and more specifically about defeating the Islamic State, an internationally condemned terrorist

²³⁵ Putin. 20 Years, 2017/events/813/2872.

²³⁶ Souleimanov & Dzutsati, 2018, 45.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Pieper, 2019, 374.

²³⁹ Putin. 20 Years, 2015/events/707/2444.

organization, could justifiably be seen as Russia position itself as the leader in the fight against terrorism.²⁴⁰ Whether anti-terrorism was actually the reason for the intervention or a mere justification does not matter. What matters is that the language of anti-terrorism could be utilized here as well. Anti-terrorism as a concept is something that other Great Powers could not really criticize Russia for, and it could be used as an excuse to use force even if the actual purpose was strategic or tied to Great Power politics.

As mentioned, if all images on the site concerning Syria would be included the group would be significantly larger. When Syria starts to be discussed as a military issue rather than a political one, it is at once framed as a success, showing that Russia's military intervention was a mere operation executed rather than a drawn-out conflict. One reason for why Syria is being portrayed more through politics might be that it was an intervention on foreign soil. Although the Syrian Civil War was important to the Russian administration, it likely held very little significance to the Russian public. The war was foreign, and the Russian nation could not be harnessed behind it.

The large focus on Syria is especially noticeable when compared to the lack of focus on Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. Crimea is only framed through a lens of "reunification" as "the most important domestic and foreign policy event of 2014" is celebrated on *Putin. 20 Years*.²⁴¹ From there on out, Crimea is brought up mainly in connection to infrastructure projects launched to tie the peninsula together with mainland Russia or Victory Day celebrations. Why is Ukraine not brought up through the use of force? After the annexation of Crimea, there is content on the website of the situation, however, the framing completely ignores any Russian use of force. References are made to 'Normandy format'²⁴² meetings and the "situation in Ukraine", but it is quite ambiguous what that means. The need to minimize the "situation" in Ukraine seems strange from today's point of view. If Russia had to start its full-scale invasion of Ukraine to stop the neo-Nazis in Kiev, why is the groundwork for this

²⁴⁰ Pieper 2019, 374-375.

²⁴¹ Putin. 20 Years, 2014/events/631/219

²⁴² The Normandy format or Normandy four refers to the group of states who met regularly between 2014 and 2022 in an attempt to resolve the war in Eastern Ukraine and the wider conflict between Russia and Ukraine. These countries were Russia, Ukraine, France, and Germany.

not laid out in the material?²⁴³ The reason for this might of course simply be that in 2019 when *Putin. 20 Years* was created, war plans were still not quite in place.

Another reason for the absence of the war in Eastern Ukraine could also be that Russia tried to minimize its participation in it, even if in 2019 it had already admitted that Russian troops were involved.²⁴⁴ Unlike Syria, it was difficult to frame Ukraine as a win in 2019. Although the Syrian Civil War did not end in 2017 when Putin visited, the situation allowed for a victorious framing; Russian troops had done their part and were returning home. The few mentions of Syria that follow the event for December 17th, 2017, approach Syria as a political conversation rather than a military ally or a conflict where Russia has boots on the ground.

²⁴³ In his almost thirty-minute address Putin gives a slew of reasons for the February 2022 invasion. One of these is the idea, often repeated by the Kremlin, that Ukraine is controlled by far-right extremists. See: “Address by the President of the Russian Federation”. *President of Russia*. 24.2.2022.

<<http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>> [Accessed on 29.4.2025]

²⁴⁴ Putin admitted Russian participation for the first time in December 2015. “Putin admits Russian military presence in Ukraine for first time”. *The Guardian* 17.12.2015,

<<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/17/vladimir-putin-admits-russian-military-presence-ukraine>> [Accessed on 29.4.2025].

4 Fifty Shades of Russian Militarism

Putin. 20 Years is an interesting project by the Presidential Administration. It is a walkthrough of Vladimir Putin's first twenty years in power, yet it is not a holistic picture of that time. What the website is, is a narrative built to deliver a message. In this thesis I have examined what the message is specifically concerning militarism and Russia's military power. As I have theorized, militarism is something we can observe from the material, while military power is something the Kremlin wants us to observe.

Although many of the pictures would also be available elsewhere, they would not be the same. On *Putin. 20 Years* these pictures are gathered as events with captions alongside them. Multiple editorial choices have been made throughout the process, choosing what events to include, what pictures to use from the events, and in what order the pictures are inside the event. When viewing the website, we are in fact viewing a story compiled by the image agents and the story is shaped by their worldview. By asking, how does the Russian Presidential Administration picture militarism and military power, we can try to reconstruct their worldview of it. Whose worldview is it then? As this material is made by the government itself, we can assume it most closely resembles the worldview of the ones at the top. Although the material could be dubbed as public diplomacy, it does not stem from the public itself, rather it represents the worldview of Putin and his inner circle.

I have approached this worldview by mapping out the different subjects and themes that come up on the militarism and military power adjacent material of *Putin. 20 Years*. The twofold approach of 'militarism' and 'military power' I have taken largely stems from the research question, with one part being more about the abstract definitions of militarism and the other more about physical force. Militarism as a term of course also covers what I have dubbed military power; however, the material supports this approach, and the analysis also naturally builds itself towards this approach. Examining the image that the Presidential Administration is creating of Putin's Russia through the lens of militarism shows that it takes multiple different shapes. Boiled down though, the way the Presidential Administration pictures militarism and military power in Putin's Russia is by remembering the past and showcasing military prowess. This of course is a crude simplification and needs some elaboration.

The themes that dominate the material are what I have called 'remembrance' and 'show of power'. Together they make up well over a half of the material. Another major theme is

'terrorism' as it covers around a fourth of the whole material. In addition to these three major themes, the material includes smaller but distinct thematical groups. However, all of the smaller groups can be tugged under one of the big three. In fact, even terrorism could be counted into the 'show of power' theme if wanted. All of these different themes portrayed are at the same time inherently connected to one another but also stem from different backgrounds. Therefore, the structure of this thesis was based on the research question, rather than the thematical categorization of the material.

The first part of the thesis focuses on the idea that "*Putin's Russia is Militaristic*". This is in reference to what we can observe about this version of Russia we are shown. As I have mentioned, I do not necessarily believe that the Kremlin's objective is to portray an image of a militarized nation, however, what the Kremlin decides to picture and in which ways does appear militaristic. Although this first half of the thesis is dominated by the theme of 'remembrance', Putin's image as a strongman is a significant part of it as well. *Putin. 20 Years* begins with a strong statement of Putin as a wartime president as he is seen flying into an active battle zone almost like a savior. Putin is constantly portrayed in the way that he is, since the image of a strongman *has* worked. The continued portrayal of Putin as a strongman stems from the fact that it was the image with which he came to power and managed to become a very popular leader. The way Putin is portrayed on the website then is one manifestation of militarism since he is pictured as the ultimate patriot.

Putin's image has been molded the way it has possibly because that is also the way in which the administration has wanted to mold the Russian citizen. Portraying a popular leader in a certain manner can possibly foster similar behavior in society. Combining the public images of Putin and Russia has been a logical move for the administration assuming it wants to steer the country in the same direction with its leader. Judging by the different projects focused on patriotic education, raising new patriots is the intention. These projects are not on display in the material, however. The human side of the military is shown to be quite simple, regular people in their homes. Yet even these people are important enough for the President to associate with, signaling that the military still has significance for the country.

Less blatant form of being a strongman is being the protector of Russian history. The long history of military glory is constantly on display especially through ceremonial grieving. This seems to tie together sacrifice and victory, two sides of the same coin. No secular public holiday is celebrated the way Victory Day is on May 9th. Celebration of the Soviet Union's

win over Nazi Germany in the Great Patriotic War has been canonized in the public consciousness the most important touchstones of Russian history. Not only that, but it is also a part of Russia's claim to Great Power status. As such the memory of the war needs to be protected and the suffering glorified. Glorification of the Great Patriotic War is driven by the administration, but it is also something regular Russians support. The fact that the Russian population genuinely cherishes the memory of the Great Patriotic War is important to the Kremlin. If the support were to disappear, it would make it harder to use the war as a reasoning for the status Russia wants. If the Russians themselves do not think that victory and suffering in the war merits a Great Power status, why would anyone else? Remembrance is at the same time directed at the Russian population but also outside of Russia. Remembrance can be interpreted in many ways as it can be taken as "it used to be worse" but also "you should be proud of your history". For people outside of Russia the message is much more "remember what we did for you".

The second part of the thesis focuses on how Russia wants to be seen in its current form; as a military superpower. "*Russia is a Great Power with a Great Military*" is clearly the message the Presidential Administration wants to send through the material as *Putin. 20 Years* is filled with displays of military capabilities, be it equipment or troops. The website does not only show readiness, though, it shows action. Importantly, action needs justification. This is done mainly through terrorism. The website does not try to cover up how violence has been inflicted upon it. Threats give the administration reasons to bulk up the country's defenses and so new weapons systems do not seem like a hostile move. Similarly, the expansion of Russia's military reach outside its own borders can be framed as anti-terrorism even if the actual reasons are strategic or political.

Glorification of suffering can also be seen as a motivating factor for why terrorism is brought up in the material. In the same vein as with the Great Patriotic War; sacrifice and victory go hand in hand. Unlike the Great Patriotic War, which grows more distant each year, terrorism is an ongoing trauma. Perhaps that is also the reason why *Putin. 20 Years* often shows terrorism from the point of view of recovery and healing. Although the website remembers the victims, it shows the survivors as often, shifting the focus from suffering to resilience.

Shows of power are not always self-defense. Significant emphasis is put on military industry and capabilities in the form of Russia's nuclear arsenal, for example. Interestingly though, these capabilities are not always outright shown. It is not uncommon for a country to keep its

military assets under wraps, but the website does illustrate an interesting push and pull between wanting to convey information yet knowing that everything cannot be shared. As the website comes closer to the current day, certain issues start dominating. Syria is a major factor in the latter parts of the material which does suggest that it was important, and it was also important to show. Framing Syria in a victorious way matters especially since major powers participated in the conflict. Through Syria Russia could show that it deserved its place at the table. During this time the material also shows Russia's Eastward move. It too is shown in good light. Vostok 2018 exercise between Russia, China, and Mongolia looks like a success, signaling that Russia is powerful but also that it has powerful allies. This signaling is not done to scare terrorist, rather it is a message directed at other powerful actors.

It is relevant to ask the question of why does the Russian Presidential Administration want us to observe Russian military power? One explanation is that since Russia has quite little to make it appealing to the outside world, in lieu of soft power, it has opted for hard power. Portrayals of power have been a part of Russia's image all throughout the Putin era and so it is clear that they are a priority in Russia's self-image. However, making some overarching claim that the Presidential Administration only tries to portray Putin's Russia through military power is not possible based on my material. The website *Putin. 20 Years* contains thousands of images of all kinds and only a part of them portray Russia through military power or even showcase militarism.

As the research material is created by the Presidential Administration i.e. the state, it is not possible to make outright conclusions about the existence of militarism in the Russian society based solely on it. This material can only show us how the Presidential Administration portrays certain themes. What conclusions can be made, however, is that this is the way the administration wants these themes to be viewed. As *Putin. 20 Years* was created for public consumption, it is the message the Putin regime wants to send. Furthermore, the audience of this message is both at home and abroad. Some photos on the website will be interpreted differently depending on who is looking at them. Similarly, some motifs are probably only meant to be meaningful for audiences that share the worldview of the people who have created the website.

Determining whether Putin only uses sentiments that already exist or if he has created them could be difficult at this point. It is clear though that supporting militaristic sentiments that might already exist in the nation has been done in order to ensure the Putin regime's survival

to this day. Cracks in this union between Putin and Russia have been forming for a quite a while and the Russian populace seems to be moving in a different direction from its leader. The exploration of this shift is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis and furthermore it could not be done with this material. *Putin. 20 Years* is the Presidential Administration's point of view and as such, does not show many cracks. Additionally, the material ends in 2019, leaving out the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a significant watershed moment for Russia and Russians. In the future it will be interesting to see, how the Kremlin chooses to portray the era of the Russo-Ukrainian War especially from 2022 onwards. Likely the extent of the glorification of suffering will depend on whether or not the outcome can be framed as a victory.

Putin. 20 Years manages to build an interesting narrative. As the website is about Putin, he is in many ways the main character who the viewer follows while looking through the story of Russia. What is shown is Putin, starting out as the leader of a weaker country that builds up its strength throughout the years. This evolution happens through suffering and remembering the painful but glorious history, and in the end ends up victorious on the battlefield again.

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