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ARTICLE

Almighty Soros? Education Reform and Foreign Influence in Post-Soviet Russia

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This article examines the reform of history education in post-Soviet Russia, paying particular attention to the influence of George Soros's foundations. It demonstrates how education reform in the field of history, particularly the production of new school textbooks, was characterised by a confrontation between liberal and nationalist forces, which echoed the clashes between these groups in the political arena. The article demonstrates that, in contrast to President Boris Yeltsin's government, liberals prevailed in the field of education and were able to promote new history textbooks despite nationalist opposition. George Soros's foundations supported Russian liberals financially but left them to lead the reform process. Despite liberal reforms in history education being a homegrown affair, the nationalist backlash concentrated on attacking foreign philanthropists such as Soros. These critiques, which were built upon the widespread rejection of Western models in the late 1990s, contributed to the discreditation of liberal politicians and their reforms in post-Soviet Russia.

Competition between different political forces, some more liberal, others more nationalistic, defined politics in Russia in the 1990s. Neither liberals nor nationalists formed cohesive ideological blocs and many political conflicts arose over state power and capacity, control of resources, personalities and attitudes towards President Boris Yeltsin and his policies. Nonetheless, Russian politics tended to polarise between more liberal forces who pushed for economic reform and democratisation, political, economic and military integration with the West led by the United States and Western Europe and a break with the Soviet past as well as nationalists (traditionalists, communists and far-right forces) who cultivated nostalgia for the Soviet Union, emphasised Russia's great power status and singularity compared to a vaguely defined West and – by and large – embraced Russian ethnic nationalism.

By the end of the decade, the nationalist forces' dominance in Yeltsin's administration, exemplified by the appointment of Vladimir Putin as prime minister in August 1999, set Russia on a trajectory towards authoritarianism in the twenty-first century. While the political clashes in the Kremlin and the State Duma have been extensively researched, the confrontations between liberal and nationalist ideas in the field of education remain understudied. Examining these debates is crucial for developing a fuller understanding of the political transition that took place in Russia in the 1990s and the failure of Russia's democratic experiment.

This article examines education reform in post-Soviet Russia and assesses the role played by George Soros, the Hungarian-American philanthropist, in this broader process. It makes two interrelated arguments. First, that history education reform in post-Soviet Russia was characterised by a clash between liberals and nationalists, which built upon tensions between these groups that had

existed since Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*. Liberals and Westernisers, politicians who admired the West and sought closer political, economic and cultural ties, failed to retain influence in the Kremlin, but they succeeded in shaping education policy-making and managed to sideline many Soviet-era history textbooks for textbooks that were critical of the Soviet past, despite a nationalist backlash. That success remained, however, incomplete because of the liberals' inability to find the state funding required to disseminate the new textbooks nationwide.

Second, this article argues that Soros played an important role in supporting Russian liberals in education reform. However, in contrast to other fields in which Western actors have been criticised for their heavy-handedness in promoting Western values and models, Soros left leadership of education projects to Russian liberals, which meant that Russian education reform in the 1990s was largely a homegrown affair. That finding is striking, especially given that Soros-associated meddling in the 1990s has become a cause célèbre for Russian nationalists. To deflect attention away from Western accusations about Russian meddling in the US elections, Putin brought up 'Soros's meddling' in 2018.[1] In 2025, Russian state media continues to blame Soros for allegedly destroying Russian culture.[2]

This article draws upon a wide range of sources, including documents from the State Duma, the lower house of the Russian parliament, and its Committee on Education, which are available online and in the State Archive of the Russian Federation. To supplement the analysis, the article also draws upon Russian liberal, far-right and communist newspapers, memoirs, reports by the Soros foundations, which are available at the Open Society Archive in Budapest, interviews with Russian officials involved with education reform and Soros's foundations.

The article begins by discussing the literature on Russia's post-Soviet transition and Western influences in that process before moving on to examine how and why Soros became involved in Russia in the 1990s. After this, the article analyses education reform in Russia from Gorbachev to Yeltsin and shows how education was a bastion of Russian liberalism. The fourth part of the article presents the history textbooks that were published with Soros's support as part of the humanities education reform. The final section focuses on the nationalist backlash to liberal reforms in education.

Russia's Post-Soviet Transition and the West

The multiple factors that contributed to deteriorating relations between Russia and the United States and Western Europe (seen collectively as the 'West' by Russian elites) in the 1990s have now been covered extensively in scholarship on the post-Soviet transition. The West's refusal to offer Moscow significant financial support is one reason that policymakers and scholars alike have invoked to explain the failure of Russia's democratic transition. In July 1991, Gorbachev spoke of the 'crucial political choice' facing the Soviet Union as he begged the West for funding at the G7 Summit in London with little results.[3] In the 1990s, the Yeltsin administration's interactions with the West were often centred on discussing the possibility of financial support for Russia. During Bill Clinton's visit to Moscow in January 1994, the Russian president discussed Russia's economic hardships and pressed the Americans for greater funds, although noting that he was requesting 'investments' rather than 'aid'. 'Aid', Yeltsin warned, could lead to 'an anti-Western flareup'.[4]

[1]'Putin napomnil, chto Soros "vmeshivaetsia vezde"', *RIA Novosti*, 16 July 2018, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, https://ria.ru/20180716/1524721299.html.

[2]'Dzhordzh Soros ritualno unichtozhal Rossiiu', *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, 12 Aug. 2025, accessed 22. Jan. 2026, https://www.kp.ru/daily/27736/5126772/.

[3]'G-7 Meeting with President Gorbachev', National Security Archive (NSA), Bush Library, 17 July 1991, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/28348-document-28-g-7-meeting-president-gorbachev-london-july-17-1991. Also, Vladislav Zubok, *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 233–54.

[4]'One-on-One Meeting with President Yeltsin of Russia', NSA, Clinton Presidential Library, 13 Jan. 1994, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30917-document-5-memorandum-conversation-one-one-meeting-president-yeltsin-russia-january.

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Another factor that contributed to the souring of relations was the prescriptive heavy-handedness of Western support, which was exemplified by the recommendations that underpinned Egor Gaidar's (Yeltsin's first prime minister) 'shock therapy' of economic liberalisation, privatisation and austerity.[5] US advisers and international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) supported Gaidar's reforms despite the fact that they led to collapsing living standards in the former Soviet Union. The combination of these two aspects – limited economic support and flawed advice – proved counterproductive in fostering democracy in the long term in Russia.

Astute observers noted the paradox that characterised Western support for Russia. Wayne Merry, the top political analyst at the US embassy in Moscow, articulated that criticism in a cable sent as a dissent channel message to Washington in March 1994. Merry pointed out how the flaws in the West's support of Russia contributed to economic crisis and the development of anti-Western sentiment that spread beyond the far-right and communist bloc. He also noted that pro-Western democratic forces were in disarray and resentful of the West for its lack of support in international affairs. As Merry wrote, the United States had to choose: 'is [its] priority in Russia a fledgling democracy or market economics?' In any case, he argued, Washington had to show respect to Russia because of its nuclear arsenal and because Russians had disposed of the reviled communist regime themselves and the vast majority genuinely wanted democracy. The United States, in particular, had to be respectful because 'Russia is [the Russians'] country to do with as they see fit, the more so as [the United States is] not prepared to match [its] advice with money'.[6]

Despite Yeltsin's frustration and Merry's criticism, Russia was, nonetheless, the largest post-Soviet and one of the largest global recipients of Western economic assistance in the 1990s. One estimate suggests that Russia received some $66 billion in international assistance by September 1998, including $22.2 billion in loans from the IMF and $7.5 billion in loans from the WB.[7] This economic aid was, however, insufficient to ensure Russia's transition to a market economy and democracy and was much less than Gorbachev and Yeltsin had hoped for. The amount paled in comparison to what West Germany had spent to support the economic transition in East Germany or to the amount of aid that Poland received in proportion to its population.[8] Aid to Russia also needed to be considered alongside the $65 billion in Soviet debt that Moscow had assumed. Moreover, part of the funding transferred from the West was absorbed by criminal structures and Russia's new elites, many of whom were former communists who had benefited from the accelerated privatisation of the state economy. The donor system itself also absorbed some of the aid through funding the salaries of Western experts and consultants.[9]

[5]Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (New York: Brookings Institution Press, 2011); Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002); Janine R. Wedel, *Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2001); Hilary Appel and Mitchell A. Orenstein, 'Why Did Neoliberalism Triumph and Endure in the Post-Communist World?', *Comparative Politics* 48, no. 3 (2016): 313–31. Some Russian decision makers stress, however, Russians' agency in economic policy. Andrey Nechayev, Interview by V. Klimentov, Dec. 2025. Nechayev was Russia's Minister of Economy between February 1992 and March 1993.

[6]'Whose Russia Is It Anyway? Toward a Policy of Benign Respect', NSA, Department of State, 28 Mar. 1994, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32704-document-1-wayne-merry-dissent-channel-cable-american-embassy-moscow.

[7]US General Accounting Office, *International Efforts to Aid Russia's Transition Have Had Mixed Results* (GAO–01–8) (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, 2000), 9, 28–9, accessed 22 Jan. 2026 https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-01-8.pdf.

[8]Zubok, *Collapse*, 336–65; 'Russian Federation, Presentation to Foreign Official Creditors', World Bank (WB) Group Archives, Paris Club – 95-04 (30 May–2 June 1995 meeting), accessed 22 Jan. 2026, https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/088121323246174422-0560011995/original/WorldBankGroupArchivesfolder1294806.pdf. Poland received $36 billion in international assistance from 1989 to 1994.

[9]Catherine Belton, *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took On the West* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020); Sarah L. Henderson, *Building Democracy in Contemporary Russia: Western Support for Grassroots Organizations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Stephen Kotkin and Jan T. Gross, *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the*

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Domestic political dynamics also prevented Russia from overcoming its communist past. While the collapse of the Soviet Union and the failed August 1991 coup, in which communist hardliners had tried to forcibly seize power from Gorbachev, had discredited leading Soviet apparatchiks, many mid- and senior-level communists were appointed to positions in Russia's new institutions.[10] Many of these communist party cadres had not backed Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost* and had not been supportive of the dissolution of the Soviet empire. In the 1990s, these communist, far-right and traditionalist groups – whom Yeltsin's first minister of foreign affairs, Andrei Kozyrev, called the 'red-brown' opposition – grew in strength and fought against the liberals.[11] These groups returned to power, benefiting from the discreditation of pro-Western liberals after the failure of Gaidar's economic reforms, the tragedy of Russia's war in Chechnya (1994–6) and Yeltsin's reluctance to conduct lustration out of fear of undermining the continuity of the state.[12] By 1995, communist forces were the largest bloc in the State Duma and numerous nationalists became Duma deputies. Because of their parliamentary power, they were able to assert considerable pressure on the Yeltsin administration, even though the new 1993 constitution had greatly reinforced presidential power over the State Duma. The appointment of Yevgeny Primakov, a former director of foreign intelligence and Soviet-era apparatchik, as minister of foreign affairs (1996) and then prime minister (1997) marked the symbolic victory of conservative reactionaries in the Kremlin.

The international context also played a role in stimulating communist, far-right and traditionalist forces in Russia and fostering a challenging environment for liberals. The 1990s were marked by debates over the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) enlargement and by conflicts in the Balkans that, ultimately, led to NATO bombing Serbia.[13] Both developments undermined Russia's integration with the West, seemingly supporting the arguments made by communist and far-right critics of Yeltsin on how Western leaders were taking advantage of Russia's weakness to advance their geopolitical interests. Indeed, Russian liberals and nationalists alike saw Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic joining NATO in 1999 as breaching James Baker's assurance to Gorbachev that NATO would not move eastward. They similarly opposed the partition of Yugoslavia, regarding the process as a dangerous precedent for Russia.[14]

By the late 1990s, Russia's international standing had rapidly plummeted. Military failure during the First Chechen War combined with the further devaluation of the rouble and decision to default on domestic debt during the financial crisis in 1998 generated strong feelings of crisis within the country. These events generated a moral crisis and fervent discussion around Russian national identity within this new unstable geopolitical environment.[15] The Yeltsin administration attempted to forge a new national narrative through introducing new state symbols, such as a new Russian national anthem, but these initiatives never gained widespread public support.[16] Tensions over the construction of

Communist Establishment (New York: Modern Library, 2009); Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom, *Funding Civil Society: Foreign Assistance and NGO Development in Russia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

[10]Mark Beissinger and Stephen Kotkin, *Historical Legacies of Communism in Russia and Eastern Europe* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Vassily Klimentov, 'Not a Threat? Russian Elites' Disregard for the "Islamist Danger" in the North Caucasus in the 1990s', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 24, no. 4 (2023): 817–38.

[11]'Andrei Kozyrev: You Can't Expect Angels to Appear Overnight', *Time*, 11 July 1994.

[12]Nechayev, Interview. Also, Zubok, *Collapse*, 289–91.

[13]Paul D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Liviu Horovitz and Elias Götz, 'The Overlooked Importance of Economics: Why the Bush Administration Wanted NATO Enlargement', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 6-7 (2020): 847-68.

[14]'Memorandum of Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and James Baker', NSA, 9 Feb. 1990, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16116-document-05-memorandum-conversation-between. Also, Mary Elise Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

[15]Ayse Zarakol, *After Defeat, How the East Learned to Live the West* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[16]Kathleen E. Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics and Memory in the Yeltsin Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

a new national narrative filtered into discussions about history education, which both liberals and nationalists saw as a central part of defining the new Russia.

Soros's Involvement in Post-Soviet Russia

With *perestroika* underway in the late 1980s, Soviet reformers and their Western supporters began discussing how to support political and economic change in the Soviet Union. Within this context, Soros became one of the earliest and most enthusiastic advocates for funding projects to reform communism within the country. Because he insisted on relying on local initiatives as much as possible and favoured a gradual path, Soros's approach to reforming the Soviet Union, and later Russia, contrasted with that of most Western institutions.

Soros was Jewish and had survived the Second World War in Nazi-allied Hungary before fleeing to London in 1947. He settled in the United States in the 1950s where he made his fortune on the stock market. He later gained international prominence thanks to his philanthropic work in post-communist states and, subsequently, in the Global South. Soros created a foundation in Hungary to promote exchange with the West and advance human rights in 1984. He drew his inspiration from Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, which argued, in the vein of the French-Jewish philosopher Henri Bergson, that political pluralism, the rule of law, support for minority rights and cultural and economic exchanges represented safeguards against totalitarianism.[17] Soros's foundation built on the democratising trend that began spreading through Eastern Europe in the wake of the Helsinki Accords in 1975.

Soros visited the Soviet Union soon after Gorbachev allowed Andrei Sakharov, a famous dissident, to return to Moscow in 1987 at a time when *perestroika* and *glasnost* were rapidly accelerating. Soros then endeavoured to secure the support of Sakharov, who he hoped would head up a Soros-organised foundation in the Soviet Union. Yet, Sakharov did not share Soros's optimism or strategy and told the American philanthropist that his 'money would end up in the coffers of the [Committee for State Security] (*Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti*; KGB)'.[18] Not easily deterred, Soros assembled a governing board for his organisation that was comprised of Soviet reformers and democrats such as historian Yurii Afanasev and sociologist Tatiana Zaslavskaia and more nationalist-minded figures such as writer Valentin Rasputin. In 1988, Soros reached out to Andrei Gromyko, the former minister of foreign affairs and now chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, about his foundation.[19] Finally, in 1989, the Cultural Initiative Foundation (CIF), which would become the Open Society Foundation (OSF) in 1995, was established in Moscow. Ironically, the CIF and the fledgling *perestroika* it supported then faced a backlash from hardliners in the communist party.[20]

In 1988, on a trip to Moscow, Soros had also discussed the activities of the CIF and economic liberalisation in the Soviet Union with Aleksandr Yakovlev, a career Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) official who became a member of the Politburo CPSU and one of the architects of *perestroika* in the 1980s. Soros told Yakovlev that 'foreign support for *perestroika* could and should have been significantly greater', noting that he personally favoured a 'Marshall Plan' for Russia that would be supported by Western governments.[21] To him, closed societies like the Soviet Union lacked the

[17]Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1935); Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 1945).

[18]George Soros, *Soros on Soros: Staying Ahead of the Curve*, ch. 6, 18, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, https://www.georgesoros.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/soros_on_soros-chap-6-2017_10_05.pdf.

[19]Ibid.

[20]'O deiatelnosti na territorii SSSR sovetsko-amerikanskogo fonda "Kulturnaia initsiativa"', Dec. 1988–Feb. 1989, State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), file (f.) R5446, opis (op.) 150, delo (d.) 1825, listy (l.) 15–25; Klimentov, *Slow Reckoning*, 181–226; Zubok, *Collapse*, 126–78.

[21]'Zapis besedy A. N. Yakovleva s predprinimatelem i obshchestvennym deiatelem SShA Dzh. Sorosom', 17 May 1988, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, https://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/fond/issues-doc/1023715.

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institutions to build a market economy by themselves. Without Western expertise and financial aid, Russia risked 'robber capitalism' with predatory monopolistic actors prospering in a lawless society.[22]

In this context, the CIF offered to help reform the Soviet economy and assisted in developing the so-called 500 Day Programme in 1990. Engineered by Stanislav Shatalin, Grigory Yavlinsky and other economists, the programme advocated for price liberalisation, economic decentralisation, the privatisation of state property and the introduction of new regulations to stimulate private business and the broader transition to a market economy. Unlike later reforms, the programme was devised on the assumption that the Soviet Union would remain an integrated economic entity and included measures to shield ordinary Soviets from the worst effects of rapid economic reform. To refine the economic programme, the CIF helped Yavlinsky and his team to travel to the 1990 IMF–WB meetings in Washington, DC. Soros personally encouraged Soviet reformers and Western experts to back the 500 Day Programme instead of the alternative programme that had been developed by Nikolai Ryzhkov, a senior Soviet politician and chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union. Although Soros supported economic liberalisation, he believed in reforming the Soviet Union rather than liquidating it, just like Gorbachev himself. In 1995, Soros even publicly lamented the Soviet collapse.[23]

At the 1988 Potsdam security conference, which was sponsored by the New York-based Institute for East–West Security Studies, Soros called again for 'large-scale economic assistance to the Soviet bloc'. Yet, by Soros's own account, his call was met with 'laughter' by the assembled policymakers and experts.[24] In 1989, Soros similarly appealed to the George H. W. Bush administration, warning that 'only the promise of large-scale Western assistance to the Soviet Union could prevent [its] descent into the abyss'.[25] Soros's calls for substantial Western financial aid to be delivered to Soviet Union contrasted with the prevailing attitudes of US politicians. The Bush administration first doubted Gorbachev's commitment to reform and then assessed that the country's economic and political difficulties ought to be leveraged to extract geostrategic concessions from the Soviets. The United States government never seriously considered providing significant aid to the Soviet Union, which it saw as having lost the Cold War.[26] Certain Western governments did provide Moscow with aid. For example, Germany offered assistance in exchange for Gorbachev's acquiescence to reunification, but Western aid never reached the levels requested by Moscow and advocated for by Soros.

In the 1990s, Soros became a major aid donor to Russia and a critic of Western approaches in supporting Russia's democratisation and market transition. In contrast to the Washington Consensus on market reforms followed by the IMF and the WB, which emphasised fiscal discipline, privatisation and trade liberalisation as first steps towards a market economy, Soros argued that loans should be directed first to less economically secure Russian citizens, particularly elderly citizens and poor households who had been most affected by the economic collapse and only after that should loans be used for macroeconomic reforms.[27] This, he argued, was necessary for aid to reach ordinary citizens, rather than elites, and consolidate their support for the democratic transition.[28] To Soros, Russian civil society and politicians ought to direct and, eventually, co-fund the reforms to ensure their sustainability even if Western funding were to end.

[22]Soros, *Soros on Soros*, ch. 7, 14, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, https://www.georgesoros.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/soros_on_soros-chap-7-2017_10_05.pdf.

[23]Ibid.

[24]George Soros, *Opening the Soviet System* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1990), 28.

[25]Ibid., 32.

[26]Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996); Sarotte, *Not One Inch*.

[27]George Soros, 'A Cold-Cash Winter Proposal for Russia', 12 Nov. 1992, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, https://www.georgesoros.com/1992/11/12/a-cold-cash-winter-proposal-for-russia/.

[28]Zubok, *Collapse*, 321–2.

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Alongside the larger IMF and the WB, Soros 'wanted to demonstrate that foreign aid could [also] be successful' when delivered by a small organisation such as the CIF, which relied on local initiatives in Russia and on collaborations with Russian citizens to implement its projects.[29] The CIF hired local activists and intellectuals and involved them in determining programme priorities and, in doing so, granted its regional offices autonomy from the central office in Moscow. Endeavouring to empower grassroots actors, Soros claimed that he would fund 'everyone who had a good project that fit [the CIF's] criteria' in Russia.[30] Soros-backed projects, which together represented over US$200 million over the course of the 1990s, ranged accordingly from ancient language studies, to ethnographic research on Romani communities, to retraining of former military personnel and to addressing the tuberculosis epidemic in Russian prisons.[31]

In 1992–3, amidst the further collapse of state services in post-Soviet Russia, Soros launched an emergency programme for science and education in collaboration with Russian academic institutions. The CIF and later the OSI were the first to support school education in Russia, contributing over $24 million to secondary education between 1992 and 2000.[32] While limited considering Russia's size, the combined total of the philanthropic initiatives of Soros's foundations was far larger than other forms of foreign aid that were directed to the Russian education system in the 1990s. For example, the WB would only provide a loan of $50 million for education reform in Russia in 2001.[33]

In 1992–5, the CIF funded several major projects in education, science and publishing, activities for which it is most frequently remembered in today's Russia. Designed to have a longer-term impact, these 'mega-projects' included grants for researchers and teachers, support for authors and translators, funding for libraries and further funding to introduce internet access within schools and universities. For all of these projects, Soros insisted on securing additional funding from the Russian government to ensure institutional backing and stability. As public funding failed to materialise, the OSI brought many large-scale projects to an end by the late 1990s.

Education Reform from Gorbachev to Yeltsin

Educational institutions in the Soviet Union were integral in disseminating Marxist–Leninist ideology within the broader population, which had the long-term effect of discrediting history research and teaching among Soviet citizens. With the advent of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, reformers and dissidents alike subjected history education to sharp criticism and called upon the Soviet authorities to liberalise history education to allow for interpretations that diverged from Marxist–Leninist thought and that were critical of the Soviet past. Many Soviet reformers and their Western supporters saw history education reform as vital to post-Soviet Russia's political and economic transition, subscribing to the link between education and civic participation that is central to democratisation theory.[34]

[29] George Soros, 'Who Lost Russia?', *New York Review of Books*, 13 Apr. 2000, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, https://www.georgesoros.com/2000/04/13/who-lost-russia/.

[30] Soros, *Soros on Soros*, ch. 6, 37.

[31] See annual reports of the Open Society Institute–Russia, held in the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary, HU OSA 25–2–8.

[32] Soros Foundations Network, *The Soros Foundations Network: Transformation of the Humanities Project, Russia*, 1 February 1994, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, https://www.georgesoros.com/1994/02/01/the-soros-foundations-network/. Soros had allocated US$12.6 million by Feb. 1994. The additional funding for 1996–2000 has been calculated based on OSI–Russia's annual reports, HU OSA 25–2–8.

[33] 'Project Appraisal Document on a Proposed Loan', Report no. 21,782–RU, WB, April 2001, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/743531468759300039. Also, Nechayev, Interview.

[34] Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernisation, Cultural Change and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Karina Korostelina, 'Legitimising an Authoritarian Regime, Dynamics of History Education in Independent Russia', in *(Re)Constructing Memory: School Textbooks and the Imagination of the Nation*, ed. James H. Williams (Boston: Sense Publishers, 2014), 293–310; Elena Lisovskaya and Vyacheslav Karpov, 'Russian Education Thirty Years Later: Back to the USSR?', *Problems of Post-Communism* 67, no. 6 (2020): 456–70.

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Civil society initiatives and media campaigns began challenging Soviet education programmes, especially in history, in the early days of *perestroika*. Following Gorbachev's call for reforming the Soviet political system during the Plenum of the Central Committee (CC) of the CPSU in April 1985, articles in *Uchitelskaia Gazeta* (*Teachers' Newspaper*) called for the reform of the education system.[35] In 1986, a diverse group of teachers and scholars, including Shalva Amonashvili, a child psychologist from Georgia; Evgenii Ilin, a Russian literature teacher in Leningrad; Sofiia Lysenkova, a primary school teacher in Moscow and Viktor Shatalov, a teacher of physics and mathematics from Ukraine, wrote a joint pamphlet entitled 'The Pedagogy of Cooperation' with the support of the editors of *Uchitelskaia Gazeta*. They advocated for greater autonomy in defining education priorities and teaching methods in schools by drawing on Russia's pre-revolutionary and early Soviet models.[36]

A turning point in education reform came when historian Eduard Dneprov, after publishing several articles in *Pravda* that criticised the Soviet schooling model, was invited to the Politburo, the highest organ of the CC CPSU, in 1987. Dneprov was then tasked with reporting on the problems within Soviet schools and making recommendations to improve the system before the next CC plenum. At the plenum in 1988, Yegor Ligachev, who oversaw education in the Politburo, endorsed Dneprov's proposals.[37] He approved the merger of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Special Education into a new State Committee for Public Education under the leadership of Gennadii Yagodin, the former Minister of Higher Education. The reform was implemented with the aim of integrating research and education while eliminating part of the redundant bureaucracy. Alongside school education, university education then faced political and ideological pressures in a context where most researchers still expected the Soviet system to survive.[38]

Yagodin, a savvy political operator who backed *perestroika*, welcomed a broader reform of education in line with the Politburo's wishes. Critical of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, a Soviet institute responsible for developing school curricula that had unsuccessfully attempted to reform the education system, Yagodin invited Dneprov to develop a comprehensive education reform programme. Dneprov then set up the Temporary Scientific Research Committee 'Basic School' (VNIK 'Shkola') within the Soviet Committee for Public Education. In December 1988, taking to heart *perestroika*'s goal of stimulating (limited) grassroots democracy, the Committee for Public Education convened the first All-Union Congress of Teachers. The congress's delegates, who had been elected in Soviet regions with little interference from Moscow, approved the reform programme on education that was presented by VNIK 'Shkola'. Building on this success, Dneprov became Yagodin's deputy and, additionally, the minister of education of Soviet Russia in 1990.

As the minister of education of Soviet Russia, Dneprov highlighted the importance of education during the country's transition to market economy in his speeches. He lamented the underfunding of education and what he saw as structural inequalities within the Soviet system that economically disadvantaged the Russian republic, a critique that was also advanced by Yeltsin to support claims for Russia's independence from the Soviet Union.[39] Building on Dneprov's ideas, Yeltsin issued a decree that made education a national priority in Russia.[40] Yet, money was lacking amidst the country's economic collapse, and the promised funding increases for education, including for teachers' salaries, did not materialise.

[35]Ben Eklof and Edward Dneprov, eds., *Democracy in the Russian School: The Reform Movement in Education since 1984* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 36–64.

[36]*Pedagogika sotrudnichestva. Manifest* (Moscow: Izdatelskii dom 'Pervoe sentiabria', 2016).

[37]Eklof and Dneprov, *Democracy*, 12.

[38]Maia Chankseliani, *What Happened to the Soviet University?* (London: Oxford University Press, 2022), 4.

[39]'Doklad ministra na kollegii MO RSFSR', 5–16 Oct. 1990, GARF, f. 10,244, op. 1, d. 135, l. 2.

[40]'Obrashchenie Prezidenta RSFSR B.A. Eltsina', 28 July 1991, GARF, f. 10,244, op. 1, d. 145, l. 1–13.

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Despite these challenges, Dneprov managed to appoint allies from VNIK 'Shkola' to positions within the Russian Ministry of Education and pressed ahead with his reform programme, provoking resistance from communist hardliners at a time when Soviet and Russian institutions competed for prominence and funding. Members of the Soviet Committee on Education and the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences opposed the prohibition of Marxist–Leninist ideology in schools. Criticism of Dneprov's reforms spread to the military, where leaders opposed ending compulsory military education in schools in 1990. Mikhail Moiseev, chief of the general staff of the Soviet Armed Forces, and Valentin Varennikov, deputy minister of defence and former head of the Soviet contingent in Afghanistan, opposed Dneprov in inter-ministerial debates surrounding the Council of Ministers in 1990–1, seeking to impede the adoption of new education legislation.[41]

The communist opposition to Dneprov crystallised during the August 1991 coup, which the aforementioned Moiseev and Varennikov helped organise. The Ministry of Education then became a bastion of Russian state-building and liberalism, aligning itself with Yeltsin's Russian government. It urged its regional education offices to support Yeltsin and printed leaflets in his support.[42] In the aftermath of the coup, Dneprov, having proved his loyalty, gained greater freedom to pursue his reforms and dismantle communist institutions, including the State Committee for Public Education in November and the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences in December 1991.

The passage by the State Duma of a new law on education in 1992 was Dneprov's crowning achievement.[43] The law promoted democratisation and decentralisation by ending the state monopoly on education and encouraging the pluralism of curricula and teaching methods in schools. Inspired by Russian pre- and early Soviet thinkers and Western models, the law emphasised child-centred learning, critical thinking and civic responsibility. To Dneprov, who was influenced by democratisation theory, these aspects were critical in fostering a democratic society.[44] The new law did not, however, solve the issue of funding for education in post-Soviet Russia. In this context, Dneprov and his team faced criticism from not only nationalists but also increasingly other disgruntled social groups. In 1992, Russian teachers went on strike to protest their falling living standards. Beyond this, it became clear that the ambitious reform of education had led to unintended problems. By shifting funding from the centre to the regions, the Ministry of Education lost control over regional education policy at a time of acute political and cultural battles across post-Soviet Russia.

In parallel, the communist and far-right opposition organised itself against the Russian Ministry of Education. Former collaborators of the dismantled Soviet State Committee for Public Education, Soviet Ministry of Education and Academy of Pedagogical Sciences joined State Duma commissions on education that opposed Dneprov's reforms and accused the liberals of cutting the education budget and lowering teachers' salaries.[45] Facing backlash, Dneprov was pushed out of the Ministry of Education in December 1992 as part of a larger reshuffle that saw Gaidar lose his job as prime minister.[46] He transitioned into academia while retaining an informal advisory role to Yeltsin on educational matters.

The nationalist reaction strengthened following elections to the State Duma in 1993, which saw far-right groups and communists increase their representation. On education, nationalist critiques blamed the Yeltsin administration for nationwide shortages in school textbooks. This criticism intensified after the start of the First Chechen War in December 1994, which resulted in the siphoning off of already limited government resources. As a communist deputy complained in summer 1995:

[41] Eklof and Dneprov, *Democracy*, 17.

[42] 'Rukopis vystupleniia na avgustovskoi konferentsii v Moskve', 19–29 Aug. 1991, GARF, f. 10244, op. 1, d. 146, l. 1–15, 26–7.

[43] 'Ob obrazovanii', Russia, Federal Law, no. 3266–1, adopted on 10 July 1992.

[44] Eduard Dneprov, *Obrazovanie i politika* (Moscow: VShE, 2006), 51–7.

[45] 'VII Sezd narodnykh deputatov Rossiiskoi Federatsii', *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, 9 Dec. 1992.

[46] Elena Lenskaia, Interview by D. Khokhlova, Oct. 2025. Lenskaia headed the Directorate for International Cooperation in Russia's Ministry of Education between 1991 and 1996.

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'there is no money in the budget to publish textbooks. [But] for the war, where children are killed, money is available.'[47] Yavlinsky, now a leader of the Yabloko party, the largest pro-Western and liberal opposition party in the State Duma, similarly wondered how the same government that had enough resources to pursue 'a bloody and hopeless war in Chechnya' could 'fail to print textbooks for children by 1 September', the start of the school year.[48] Criticism of Yeltsin's policies hence spread across the political spectrum amidst widespread opposition to the Kremlin's handling of Chechnya. Because Yeltsin remained associated with pro-Western and democratic politics, his failures tended to discredit liberals at large, even though most of their leaders, including Yavlinsky and Gaidar, were out of government by 1995.[49]

Ultimately, neither the president, who had made education a priority only on paper, nor the State Duma, which had criticised the lack of funding for education but approved state budgets, was ready to prioritise education over other social and security matters in a country that remained embroiled in economic crisis. In September 1995, the government managed to provide school textbooks for only first-year schoolchildren and, even then, could not print them for all subjects.[50] The situation especially impacted on poorer households and schools in remote regions that, at times, returned to using Soviet-era textbooks. In 1996, the state budget was still insufficient to fully cover teachers' salaries, as well as teacher training and the maintenance of public schools.[51]

Education remained one of the most visible failures of the Yeltsin administration and one for which various political opponents attacked the Kremlin. Communist and far-right groups could easily make the point that the educational situation was better in the Soviet period and blame Russian liberals and the West for the Soviet Union's collapse and subsequent demise of the education system. These critiques particularly resonated with the broader population because Dneprov and other architects of the education reform had openly stated their pro-Western stances and proposed emulating the West as a model. In addition to criticising education's underfunding, the nationalists also began attacking the content of the new textbooks that had been promoted by the Ministry of Education and supported by Western donors such as Soros.

Soros's History Textbooks

Throughout the 1990s, history textbooks were at the frontline of liberal and nationalist battles over education reform. Yet, calls to revise the history curriculum had begun before the Soviet collapse. At the Congress of Public Education Workers in March 1988, Dneprov advocated for the removal of authoritarian principles in education as he prepared his reform programme for the Plenum of the CC CPSU later that year. In the following months, support for a comprehensive reform of history education gained traction among Soviet history teachers, which led to the repeal of the history curriculum and the cancellation of end-of-the-year history exams in schools in summer 1988.

To adjust to the reformist trend born out of the *perestroika*, Soviet-era authors tried to revamp their earlier work. For example, the work of Iurii Kukushkin, whose *History of the USSR* (1984) had become

[47]'Khronika zasedaniia Gosudarstvennoi Dumy', 7 June 1995, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, http://api.duma.gov.ru/api/transcriptFull/1995-06-07.

[48]'Khronika zasedaniia Gosudarstvennoi Dumy', 19 July 1995, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, http://api.duma.gov.ru/api/transcriptFull/1995-07-19.

[49]Vassily Klimentov, 'Coping with Defeat: The Russian State Duma's Views of Chechnya After the First Chechen War', in *State-Building and Historical Memories in Chechnya*, ed. C. Druey, M. Shogenov and V. Tanailova (Bern: Peter Lang, 2024), 211–41.

[50]Vladimir Pokrovskii, 'My uchim rebenka zhit v mire neopredelennostei', *Segodnia*, 20 Sept. 1995.

[51]'O federalnom biudzhete na 1996 god', Russia, Federal Law no. 228, 31 Dec. 1995.

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widely popular, was reissued by the Soviet state publisher Proveshchenie in 1989.[52] The reissue of the textbook resulted in a backlash from history teachers who refused to teach what they saw as outdated materials or 'Kukushkin's old stuff' (*kukushkinskoe starie*).[53] After this, students were permitted to use any materials to prepare for exams, including foreign books.[54]

In this context, Dneprov issued a decree in April 1992 alongside the new law on education entitled 'On the Renewal of Humanities Education'. Education, the decree stated, was meant to promote democracy, human rights, political pluralism and critical thinking. It called for new school curricula, better teacher training and, markedly, the introduction of new textbooks. Despite these broad claims, funding was an issue, so Soros's CIF stepped in and offered to support the 'Renewal' programme. In May, a committee with members from the CIF and the Ministry of Education was created to oversee the programme, and it launched an open call for new textbooks.[55] Both Dneprov and Soros agreed that education reform would be vital for Russia's democratic transition. Over the next three years, the CIF spent more than $15 million on the 'Renewal' programme, and these costs included the development and publication of new history textbooks.[56] Unlike other donor organisations operating in Russia, the CIF left the leadership of the projects that it funded to domestic actors.

In 1992–3, the CIF spent $5 million on a call to develop books in the humanities. Experts invited by the Ministry of Education and approved by the CIF selected 250 applications for funding after an anonymous peer-review process in which 2000 applications were evaluated.[57] This call did not consider applicants' academic affiliation and provided opportunities for authors from outside Moscow's academic institutions and traditional publishers to have their work published. Despite the call's broad focus, the publishing market for history textbooks remained dominated by Soviet-era authors. In 1992, the former Soviet state publisher Prosveshchenie still published major history textbooks, and one of the co-authors of the discredited Kukushkin textbook continued to publish throughout the 1990s.[58] To provide opportunities for new authors, Soros therefore proposed to Dneprov that the CIF organise a new call to fund the publication of textbooks in the humanities by independent authors through small publishers.

Most of the submissions to this new call were for teaching aids and manuals, rather than textbooks. Some proposals introduced new theoretical and methodological approaches and new subjects in anthropology, sociology and history. The most promising submissions that the CIF and the Ministry of Education thought could be developed into textbooks were tested in selected schools. Based on these pilot programmes, the CIF allocated another $5 million for revising the submissions. The process had become well known in Russia by this point, which led publishers to acquire the publishing rights for some textbooks even before the Ministry of Education ended the competition.[59] With the CIF's support, up to 10,000 copies of the award-winning manuscripts were published and distributed to over 100 schools across Russia. Participating schools signed agreements with the CIF for pilot

[52]Vladimir Esakov, Iurii Kukushkin and Albert Nenarokov, *Istoriia SSSR: uchebnik dlia 10 klassa srednei shkoly* (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1984).

[53]Iurii Korabliov, Iurii Kukushkin, Ivan Fedosov and Iurii Borisov, *Istoriia SSSR: uchebnik dlia 10 klassa srednei shkoly* (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1989); Inna Kostiuchenko, 'Modernizatsiia gumanitarnogo obrazovaniia v usloviiakh perestroiki', *Gosudarstvennoe upravlenie, Elektronnyi vestnik* 34 (2012), 18.

[54]Ivan Kurilla, Interview by V. Klimentov, Dec. 2025. Kurilla taught history in schools in Russia in the 1990s and participated in CIF/OSA activities.

[55]Open call advertisement in *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 29 July 1992, 7.

[56]George Soros, 'The Soros Foundations Network', *Open Society Foundations*, 1 Feb. 1994, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, https://www.georgesoros.com/1994/02/01/the-soros-foundations-network/.

[57]Tatiana Slavina, 'Shag za shagom: Direktor programm obrazovaniia Mezhdunarodnogo fonda "Kulurnaia initsiativa"', *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 31 Mar. 1993.

[58]Vladimir Dmitrienko, Vladimir Esakov and Vladimir Shestakov, *Istoriia Otechestva: XX vek. Uchebnoe posobie dlia 11 klassa obshcheobrazovatelnykh uchebnykh zavedenii* (Moscow: Drofa, 1996); Lidiia Zharova and Irina Mishina, *Istoriia Otechestva. 1900–1940* (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1992).

[59]Nina Braginskaia, 'Dva mneniia ob odnom proekte Dzhordzha Sorosa', *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 6 July 1994.

use of the new textbooks in the classroom. Teachers were then free to choose textbooks among the competition-winners and received financial compensation for providing feedback on the textbooks. In 1995, the Ministry of Education approved new textbooks for use in schools, increasing their chances of being included in regions' procurement for schools and published at a large scale.

Dneprov presented this programme in emphatical terms as 'one of the largest educational projects in the history of national education' in Russia.[60] He insisted that the project, in addition to the textbooks, had fostered the development of publishing networks, school evaluation systems and training for teachers. The 'Renewal' programme had also created many regional pilot projects and built a community of experts.

Despite these achievements, the programme also had a number of limitations. For one, the textbooks' adoption depended upon the initiative of individual schools and people, in addition to regional procurement. Private publishers released the CIF-funded textbooks, after which they were sold on to schools and students. This market-driven approach amplified regional inequalities; many schools and poor households across Russia could simply not afford the new textbooks, notwithstanding their political or ideological orientation. To address this issue, the CIF allocated another $5 million to subsidise the purchase and delivery of the new textbooks to schools in the Moscow, St Petersburg, Ekaterinburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Samara, Krasnoyarsk, Novosibirsk and Cheboksary regions where local authorities were more open to collaboration with Western actors and liberal Russian politicians in the sphere of education.[61] This, however, only reinforced Russia's political and ideological fragmentation. Without continued public funding, the 'Renewal' programme ultimately could not transform the entire textbook market, and other actors, including from the Soviet era, continued to publish textbooks.

After 1995, after concluding that its core goal of developing new textbooks had been met, the CIF scaled back its support to the national textbook component of the 'Renewal' programme and switched to backing local initiatives, such as the co-funding of retraining programmes for teachers and school administrators in Russian regions. At this point, several CIF-funded history textbooks had become popular in Russian schools. These textbooks often critically examined Russian and Soviet history and offered alternatives to Soviet-era narratives. In particular, they presented positive perspectives on the West and were supportive of Russia's integration within Western political and economic structures.

For example, Igor Ionov's textbook, evocatively entitled *Russian Civilisation and the Origins of Its Crises*, emphasised how specific elements in Russian history, such as the persistence of serfdom into the second half of the nineteenth century and of an absolutist monarchy into the twentieth century, had hindered the development of democratic institutions.[62] Likewise, Vladimir Khoros's *Russian History in Comparative Perspective* analysed Russian history through modernisation theory.[63] The textbook argued that Russian rulers from the tsars to the Soviets had centralised power and exploited the population, thereby suppressing entrepreneurship and incentives for economic growth.[64] Given that the Ministry of Education was a bastion of liberalism in the Yeltsin era, the pro-Western stance of these textbooks was not surprising.

Alexander Kreder's *The History of the Twentieth Century* was the most well known and popular of the CIF-funded textbooks.[65] Whereas most textbooks sold fewer than 100,000 copies, *The History of the Twentieth Century* sold over two million and further private copies were also circulated.[66] Kreder, who was a history professor from the mid-size city of Saratov, had never written a textbook before.

[60] Eduard Dneprov, *Noveishaia politicheskaia istoriia rossiiskogo obrazovaniia: Opyt i uroki* (Moscow: Marios, 2011), 110.
[61] Open Society Institute in Russia, *Annual Report*, 1995, 10, HU–OSA–25–2–8.
[62] Igor Ionov, *Rossiiskaia tsivilizatsiia i istoki ee krizisa* (Moscow: Interpraks, 1994).
[63] Vladimir Khoros, *Russkaia istoriia v sravnitelnom osveshchenii* (Moscow: Tsentr gumanitarnogo obrazovaniia, 1996).
[64] Ibid., 36–54.
[65] Aleksandr Kreder, *Noveishaia istoriia. XX vek* (Moscow: Tsentr gumanitarnogo obrazovaniia, 1995).
[66] Sergey Grishachev, 'Izdatelstvo ne otkazyvalos i ne otkazyvaetsia ot izdaniia uchebnikov Kredera', *Pervoe sentiabria*, 2001, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, https://ps.1sept.ru/article.php?ID=200109121.

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With no links to the Russian Academy of Sciences or the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, he was as far removed as possible from the Soviet-era elites who used to be responsible for writing history textbooks. The CIF's decision to support his textbook proposal showed how the textbook project challenged traditional power networks in the sphere of education.

Certain aspects of Kreder's *History of the Twentieth Century* followed established patterns in Russian history education. For example, the textbook focused primarily on the history of foreign countries and was supposed to be used alongside a textbook on Russian history, which thereby continued the Soviet-era tradition of treating national and foreign histories as separate and distinctive. Despite this, Kreder's textbook also featured important points of divergence from earlier trends. *The History of the Twentieth Century* insisted on the importance of human rights and individual freedoms while providing a critical reading of the Soviet past and describing the communist regime as totalitarian and repressive. In international relations, the textbook emphasised the importance of international institutions and norms in promoting peace and criticised Soviet foreign policy.

Kreder's textbook sharply diverged from Soviet-era traditions in its discussions of the outbreak of the Second World War. This was a highly sensitive topic ever since the secret protocols to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact had been revealed to the Soviet public by Gorbachev's government. Acknowledging the alliance between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, Kreder's textbook described Stalin and other Soviet policymakers as 'arsonists of war' who had enabled Hitler's aggression.[67] The textbook explained how the Soviets had failed to secure an alliance with Western European powers in the 1930s while also portraying the Soviet Union as partly responsible for the war.[68] The textbook also offered a new interpretation of the war's outcome. Unlike Soviet-era textbooks that downplayed Allied victory and insisted upon the Soviet Union's leading role in defeating the Nazis, Kreder's textbook sought to strike a balance between celebrating the achievements of the Red Army and reflecting upon the horrors of Stalinism. As the textbook noted, 'all those who [had] fought against [the Nazis and their allies] were engaged in a just struggle'.[69] However, it underlined, 'among the countries of the anti-Hitler coalition was a totalitarian state, the Soviet Union'.[70] The Second World War had 'contributed to the strengthening of Soviet totalitarianism', even though that did 'not diminish the Soviet Union's contribution to the defeat of fascism'.[71]

In many ways, Kreder's textbook reflected broader attempts by Russian reformers to offer a new national narrative for post-Soviet Russia as it sought integration with the West. Kreder's interpretation of the Second World War aligned with the commemorative narrative that was promoted during Yeltsin's presidency, including the idea of 'double victimhood'.[72] This idea emphasised the suffering of the Soviet people under Nazi occupation and stressed how the Red Army had won the war despite the incompetence of Stalin.[73] This new collective memory sidestepped discussions of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe after the war's end. Despite being promoted by Yeltsin in his official speeches and public commemorations connected to the Second World War, this narrative never fully took hold within the Russian population.[74] In fact, when Kreder's book was released, this narrative was already being challenged by communist and far-right

[67] Aleksandr A. Kreder, *Noveishaia Istoriia, XX Vek: Uchebnik Dlia Osnovnoi Shkoly*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Tsentr gumanitarnogo obrazovaniia, 1996), 128.

[68] Ibid., 119–28.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Ibid., 130–1.

[72] Olga Malinova, 'Political Uses of the Great Patriotic War in Post-Soviet Russia from Yeltsin to Putin', in *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, ed. Julie Fedor et al. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 27–54.

[73] Boris Yeltsin, 'My dolzhny chtitsvoiu Konstitutsiiu', *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, 26 May 1995.

[74] Smith, *Mythmaking*.

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forces who played on nostalgia for the social and economic stability of the early 1980s and anti-Western feelings in Russia. Within this context, fewer and fewer Russians supported integration with the West and the adoption of Western models in education and other fields.

The Conservative Backlash Against Liberal Education

Communist-led attacks against Soros started during *perestroika*. According to Yakovlev, after Soros set up the CIF in 1988, the KGB sent a memorandum to the CC CPSU accusing him of undermining the communist party and colluding with Western intelligence agencies.[75] Vladimir Kryuchkov, the last head of the KGB and an architect of the August 1991 attempted coup, branded Soros a 'foreign agent of influence' and claimed that Soviet leaders had plotted with Western intelligence agencies to undermine national security.[76] Criticism of Soros in *Pravda* and *Sovetskaia Rossiia* (*Soviet Russia*), as well as in regional communist-controlled media, gathered pace after the CIF expanded its projects in the spheres of science and education in 1992. As Yakovlev observed, an article on Soros and the CIF in *Sovetskaia Rossiia* repeated earlier KGB accusations.[77] A 1993 article in .. claimed that Soros wanted to 'completely reshape the [Soviet] consciousness according to the American mould' and portrayed *perestroika* as the end result of Soros and his Soviet allies' plan to engineer the collapse of the Soviet Union.[78]

Denunciations of Soros drew on staples of Soviet propaganda about foreign meddling and emphasised Soros's Jewish background, thereby drawing upon established tropes within Soviet-era antisemitism.[79] These denunciations of Soros were accompanied by blanket attacks on foreigners working in Russia, including humanitarians in the North Caucasus during the First Chechen War. To communists and nationalists, all foreigners had hidden agendas and were spies sent to destabilise Russia.[80] The anti-Soros rhetoric in Russia echoed similar attacks against the philanthropist in other East European countries, such as Hungary and the Czech Republic. In addition to advancing antisemitic critiques of Soros, numerous groups of nationalists and neo-communists complained about the growing influence of Soros and other (mostly) foreign, non-state actors whom they saw as undermining national sovereignty.[81]

Likewise, communist-led criticism of foreigners spread to Russia's civil society, particularly journalists and the liberal politicians who were collaborating with them.[82] The remarkable ease with which

[75]Aleksandr Yakovlev, *Omut pamiati* (Moscow: Vargius, 2000), 384. Also, 'Kak ia byl amerikanskim shpionom', interview with Aleksandr Yakovlev by E. Cheporov, *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 24 Feb. 1993, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, https://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/fond/issues-doc/1009479; Vladimir Kryuchkov, 'Posol bedy', *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, 13 Feb. 1993; Vladimir Kryuchkov, *Lichnoe delo* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2003), 316–43.

[76]Julie Fedor, 'Chekists Look Back on the Cold War: The Polemical Literature', *Intelligence and National Security* 26, no. 6 (2011): 842–63, 854.

[77]Alexander Yakovlev, 'Vystuplenie na prazdnovanii 10-letiia raboty Fonda Sorosa v Rossii', Moscow, 7 Oct. 1997, Arkhiv Aleksandra N. Yakovleva, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, https://alexanderyakovlev.org/personal-archive/articles/7310.

[78]Boris Slavin, 'Gumanizm po Sorosu', *Pravda*, 21 Jan. 1993.

[79]Gerard Clarke, 'The New Global Governors: Globalization, Civil Society and the Rise of Private Philanthropic Foundations', *Journal of Civil Society* 15, no. 3 (2019): 197–213.

[80]Fedor, 'Chekists Look Back', 852; Vassily Klimentov,'"All Types of 'Telefonists", 'Humanists', 'Doctors without borders', and 'Observers'": Humanitarian Aid and War in Post-Soviet Chechnya', paper presented at the 'Historicizing the Transition' workshop held at the University of Amsterdam, March 2025.

[81]Nicolas Guilhot, 'Reforming the World: George Soros, Global Capitalism and the Philanthropic Management of the Social Sciences', *Critical Sociology* 33 (2007): 447–77; Tereza Pospíšilová, 'Giving and Refusing: The Contested Reception of Transnational Philanthropy in the Case of the Prague Central European University Foundation', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (2019): 266–82.

[82]Neil McLaughlin and Skaidra Trilupaitytė, 'The International Circulation of Attacks and the Reputational Consequences of Local Context: George Soros's Difficult Reputation in Russia, Post-Soviet Lithuania and the United States', *Cultural Sociology* 7, no. 4 (2012): 431–46; Peter Plenta, 'Conspiracy Theories as a Political Instrument: Utilisation of Anti-Soros Narratives in Central Europe', *Contemporary Politics* 26, no. 5 (2017): 512–30. Liberal politicians and journalists were notably accused of

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Soviet-era propaganda about foreign meddling resurfaced in the 1990s illustrates strong continuities in public discourse between the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. Many hardline communists remained in the KGB, the army, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, academia, regional parliaments and other Russian state institutions.[83] By the middle of the decade, they occupied influential positions in the State Duma and the Kremlin and Russian liberals became further discredited.

In January 1995, *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* (*Independent Newspaper*) published documents that allegedly came from the Federal Security Service (FSB, a successor agency to the KGB) describing the CIF as a 'branch of the CIA' and an 'external threat' while presenting inflated numbers related to Soros's projects in Russia.[84] Following these accusations, the State Duma Committee on Education, Science and Culture held parliamentary hearings and submitted an official request for comment to the FSB, but this was ignored.[85] According to Nikolai Vorontsov, the committee's chair, the documents had most likely come from one of the FSB-linked research institutes where operatives still retained a 'Cold War' mentality and regarded foreigners as 'enemies of the people'.[86] After the inconclusive hearings, Vorontsov and the committee thanked Soros for supporting Russian science and recommended that the government provide tax breaks to the CIF.[87] Disgruntled, the FSB reacted by stating that it would keep the CIF under surveillance because it posed a threat to Russian security.[88]

Communist and far-right attacks on Soros continued after these incidents. In May 1995, Viktor Ilukhin, a former Soviet prosecutor from Penza region and chair of the State Duma Committee on Security, circulated a note accusing Soros of attempting to 'change the mentality of Russian society and its public consciousness'.[89] Vorontsov identified multiple errors in the document. By that point, the State Duma's polarisation was evident in debates over education reform and Soros's role in it. While competing for power, liberals and nationalists disagreed over Russia's national identity and both sides regarded history education as central to promoting their vision of Russia. This strong perception explains the intensity and frequency of the attacks against Soros. For liberals and nationalists, determining the content of history textbooks meant shaping post-Soviet Russia's national identity.

In another parliamentary debate, nationalist deputies criticised Soros-funded history textbooks alongside a lesser-known history textbook on the twentieth century written by two Crimean authors in 1992. Although not benefiting from Western funds, the latter was seen as too critical of the Soviet Union, in particular of its nationalities policy.[90] In July 1995, far-right and communist deputies passed a law banning foreign institutions and nationals from participating in the development of school history curricula.[91] The Ministry of Education argued that international assistance was crucial for Russia, but more conservative forces now controlled the State Duma and were able to discount the

colluding with Western non-governmental organisations and Chechen separatists during and after the First Chechen War. 'Sdacha. Situatsiia v Groznom', *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, 10 Aug. 1996.

[83] Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The New Nobility: The Restoration of Russia's Secret State and the Enduring Legacy of the KGB* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010); Ilya Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018); Eliot Borenstein, *Plots Against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

[84] Daima Timergalieva, 'Soros planiruet podorvat rossiiskoe obshchestvo', *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 15 Jan. 1995.

[85] 'Stenogramma rasshirennogo zasedaniia Komiteta GD', 20 Feb. 1995, GARF, f. 10,261, op. 1, d. 80, l. 8–9.

[86] Nikolai Vorontsov, 'O vklade "chekistov" v otechestvennuiu nauku', *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 25 Jan. 1995.

[87] 'Stenogramma rasshirennogo', 20 Feb. 1995.

[88] Nataliia Kuznetsova, Aleksandr Safronov and Olga Tarasova, 'Gosduma o rabote Fonda Sorosa', *Kommersant-Daily*, 21 Feb. 1995.

[89] Nikolai Bondarchuk, 'Topornaia rabota', *Izvestia*, 18 May 1995.

[90] Zharova and Mishina, *Istoriia Otechestva*.

[91] 'O neobkhodimosti priniatiia ekstrennykh mer po obespecheniiu shkolnikov Rossiiskoi Federatsii uchebnikami otechestvennogo proizvodstva, razrabotannymi rossiiskimi avtorami', *Uchitelskaia Gazeta*, 19 July 1995.

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Ministry's arguments.[92] Ironically, however, the new law did not apply to Soros-funded textbooks because they had been written by authors who were Russian citizens.

Tensions between liberals and nationalists crystallised in discussions about Kreder's textbook, the most popular of the Soros-funded textbooks. Communists attacked Kreder for allegedly downplaying the Soviet Union's role in defeating Nazi Germany and providing only succinct analysis on the battles of Stalingrad and Kursk while presenting Allied actions in Africa and the Atlantic in detail.[93] Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the communist party, criticised *The History of the Twentieth Century* for omitting the names of Soviet generals and the major battles on the Eastern Front.[94] The communists, more generally, objected to the textbook's criticism of Stalin and his policies. To them, Kreder's textbooks, like all the post-Soviet textbooks that had been developed by the Ministry of Education, were far too critical of the Soviet past.[95]

In response to these attacks, Kreder and his publisher explained that the limited coverage of the Eastern Front was due to the textbook's focus on foreign history; the Red Army's actions were to be covered in a companion textbook on Russian history.[96] This was not unusual. Even during the Soviet period, textbooks on foreign history routinely omitted the Battle of Kursk and the names of Soviet generals.[97] Nonetheless, later editions of *The History of the Twentieth Century* included additional analysis of the Eastern Front, which is indicative of the power of criticism from conservative forces and the new defensive position adopted by liberals.[98]

Attacks on Soros-funded textbooks fit into a larger communist and far-right narrative regarding Russian liberals' alleged betrayal of the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War (*Velikaia otechestvennia voina)*, as it was and continues to be referred to in Russia. This narrative aligned with the increasing anti-Western backlash following the Russian army's defeat in Chechnya and international developments, such as NATO's enlargement and intervention in the Balkans. As the State Duma discussed Kreder's textbook, communist newspapers, far-right groups and the Russian Veterans' Council (*Rossiiskii Soiuz Veteranov*), a non-governmental organisation that advocated for a greater militarisation of society, called on the Ministry of Education to ban 'Soros's textbooks'.[99] Unwillingly, Soros-funded textbooks became a symbol of the perceived Western condescension towards Russia, as well as the broader dismissal of Russian culture, history and, by extension, Russia's alleged great power status.

In November 1996, communist deputies questioned if 'the history of the fatherland' was 'objectively' represented in schools. In response, Alexander Asmolov, the deputy minister of education within Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin's government, defended the necessity for pluralism in history education and argued that the design of the history curricula should be left to experts.[100]

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[92] Alexandr Asmolov, interview by V. Pokrovskii, *Segodnia*, 22 Sept. 1995, 2. Quoted in Janet G. Vaillant, 'Civic Education in a Changing Russia', in *Educational Reform in Post-Soviet Russia*, ed. Ben Eklof, Larry E. Holmes and Vera Kaplan (London: Routledge, 2005), 221–47.

[93] 'Khronika zasedaniia Gosudarstvennoi Dumy', 15 Nov. 1996, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, http://api.duma.gov.ru/api/transcriptFull/1996-11-15.

[94] 'Khronika zasedaniia Gosudarstvennoi Dumy', 8 Oct. 1997, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, http://api.duma.gov.ru/api/transcriptFull/1997-10-08.

[95] 'Khronika zasedaniia Gosudarstvennoi Dumy', 15 Nov. 1996, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, http://api.duma.gov.ru/api/transcriptFull/1996-11-15, with criticism of three textbooks: Vladimir Dmitrienko, Vladimir Esakov and Vladimir Shestakov, *Istoriia Otechestva. XX vek. 11 klass* (Moscow: Drofa, 1995); Vladimir Ostrovskii and Anatolii Utkin, *Istoriia Rossii. XX vek. 11 klass* (Moscow: Drofa, 1995); Zharova and Mishina, *Istoriia Otechestva*.

[96] Grishachev, 'Izdatelstvo ne otkazyvalos'.

[97] Viktor Furaev, ed., *Noveishaia istoriia. 1939–1981* (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1982), 29.

[98] Aleksandr Kreder, *Noveishaia istoriia zarubezhnykh stran. 1914–1997* (Moscow: Tsentr gumanitarnogo obrazovaniia, 2005), 178.

[99] 'Spornaia tema. Urok istorii', *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, 12 Nov. 1997.

[100] 'Khronika zasedaniia Gosudarstvennoi Dumy', 15 Nov. 1996, accessed 22 Jan. 2026, http://api.duma.gov.ru/api/transcriptFull/1996-11-15.

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The comment, nevertheless, seemed to signal to the communists that they could develop their own historical narratives.

Aleksei Vodianskii, the deputy head of the Department of Secondary School Education in the Ministry of Education, similarly defended historical pluralism the next year. Kreder's textbook, Vodianskii argued, was 'written in a liberal tone' and offered a new perspective. It underlined 'the responsibility of the Soviet Union for the outbreak of the Second World War', gave 'a critical assessment of the events in the 1930s' and 'stressed the shared responsibility of both the West and the East for the Cold War'. Responding to the Russian Committee of Veterans, Vodianskii further explained that Kreder's textbook was meant to 'emphasise the importance of pluralism in approaches to historical events'.[101] Like Asmolov, he thus emphasised that other historical perspectives could be equally valid and that it could somehow be possible to both recognise and deny Stalin's responsibility for the outbreak of the Second World War. The historical pluralism that the Ministry of Education began advocating for vividly testified to the Russian liberals' failure to consolidate a new national narrative and disseminate it in the population through history textbooks.

Ultimately, despite the pressure exerted by communist and far-right groups, the State Duma did not ban Kreder's textbook and other Soros-funded textbooks nationwide. In response, the communist party, by then the strongest political force in Russia, launched a campaign to ban the textbooks through regional parliaments. As dynamic and autonomous institutions in a weak and decentralised country, regional parliaments possessed actual political power in 1990s Russia and could shape regional laws and constitutions and negotiate power with Moscow. Between 1997 and 1999, the campaign achieved modest success as parliaments in Voronezh, Tula and Ulyanovsk recommended that schools avoid Soros-funded textbooks. In practice, this led local schools to stop purchasing these textbooks because they relied heavily on funding that was allocated by regional parliaments. Liberals criticised the communist campaign against the textbooks. Asmolov countered that the Russian constitution prohibited the imposition of a state ideology and Dneprov's education law granted teachers and schools the right to freely choose curricula, teaching methods and educational materials.[102] The Ministry of Education could, though, not intervene directly because Dneprov's decentralisation reforms had given regional authorities greater freedom in deciding over school curricula. This meant that a coherent and uniform national policy on education was difficult to achieve: certain regions reverted to Soviet-era textbooks, while others, such as Saratov and Pskov, widely adopted new textbooks, including Kreder's.

In the late 1990s, communist and far-right groups in the State Duma continued their attacks on Dneprov and Asmolov, who were by this point both part of the committee supervising the 'Renewal of Humanities Education' programme. Despite their opposition, these groups were unable to revoke Dneprov's education law and reintroduce Soviet-era textbooks nationwide.[103] Nonetheless, Russian liberals' failure to implement new, uniform educational standards across Russia exemplified the enormous institutional and political barriers that prevented a clean break with Soviet-era practices and narratives. The existence of numerous history textbooks that presented widely different interpretations of the past in different regions was illustrative of Russia's political fragmentation. In some regions, the return to Soviet-era textbooks revealed the disillusionment of ordinary Russians with the liberals' promise of rapid economic growth based on the Western model following the Soviet collapse.

Conclusion

Russian liberals, building upon aspirations dating back to the *perestroika* era, were able to reform education in post-Soviet Russia despite the difficult economic situation in the early 1990s. With the

[101] 'Spornaia tema'.

[102] Aleksandr Asmolov, 'Pismo ot 29 iiulia 1998', *Uchitelskaia Gazeta*, 13 Aug. 1998.

[103] Irina Strelkova, 'O doktrine obrazovaniia i ne tolko o nei', *Moskovskaia Pravda*, 21 Mar. 2000.

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support of Western benefactors such as Soros, Russian liberals successfully brought new actors into the process of writing history textbook curricula, built expertise in textbook editing, supported small textbook publishers, trained teachers and improved the availability of textbooks across the country. Most importantly, they withdrew many Soviet-era textbooks from circulation and replaced them with new ones. Kreder's textbook, *The History of the Twentieth Century*, which offered a critical reading of the Soviet past, gained widespread popularity. Its influence in Russian education lingered beyond the 1990s because the textbook retained state approval and was used in schools until 2007. The longevity of Kreder's textbook demonstrated that not all the liberal reforms of the 1990s could be rapidly undone during the Putin era.

Foreign donors facilitated the reform of education, especially the Soros's foundations. Despite offering financial support, Soros's foundations did not shape history curricula or selected textbooks based on its patron's agenda. Russian officials, particularly those around Dneprov and Asmolov, retained control over the initiative through introducing the new history textbooks. Nonetheless, communist and far-right criticism of the liberals' education reform was centred on Soros's involvement. In a context where many Russians were growing increasingly disillusioned with the West and Western models, attacks on so-called Western meddling in education proved especially effective. Ironically, Soros's support, despite largely avoiding the pitfalls that tended to characterise Western-funded initiatives in post-Soviet Russia, was criticised in the same way and was used to discredit homegrown aspirations for change. By the end of the 1990s, the nationalist forces forced liberals into promoting a historical pluralism that accepted the coexistence of different assessments of Soviet history and thus different history textbooks. Instead of creating a new national historical narrative, the diversity in history textbooks highlighted regional and social fractures between victims and perpetrators, supporters of democratisation and those who were nostalgic for communism in Russia.

Ultimately, the political battles over education in the 1990s prefigured developments in the twenty-first century. The Putin regime has long strived to not only undo the critical appraisals of the Soviet past that emerged in the 1990s but also build a new national narrative for Russia. Despite this, the Putin administration has faced challenges when pursuing these two goals, which shows that certain segments of Russian society had absorbed the criticism of the Soviet Union that was popularised in the 1990s, including the criticism of Soviet policies before and after the Second World War that were discussed in Kreder's textbook. In fact, it was only in the 2010s that the Putin regime managed to profoundly reshape education in Russia as the campaign against 'historical falsifications' and the West's meddling in Russian affairs intensified after the beginning of the war with Ukraine in 2014.

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