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Entry: **Russian Political Thought**

Contributor: Peter Rutland

Russian political thought, like Russian society, has been undergoing a wrenching transition since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The old verities which had been inculcated in three generations of Soviet citizens had collapsed. This was a crisis both for the rulers, for ordinary people, and for the intellectuals. They found themselves entering a new world, one laced with threats and uncertainty.

Moreover, the Soviet collapse was not the first cataclysm to hit Russian society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Tsarist regime had also experienced a revolutionary collapse, triggering years of civil war, famine and pestilence. The collectivization of the 1930s and the near-defeat at the hands of the Nazis in 1941 were equally traumatic. Few societies had experienced so many severe tests in the course of living memory, raising doubts about the philosophical and practical bases for the very existence of Russia. Intellectuals had to come up with some explanations for *why* their society kept experiencing such shocks. Why did the soviet system collapse? Why were such radical economic reforms launched in 1992? Will Russia ever enjoy a normal, peaceful and stable existence?

In the 1990s, Russian political thinkers faced two choices, neither particularly attractive. One approach was to declare the End of History, and to embrace the values and principles of the developed West. Then, their task would be to try to customize those liberal ideas to the post-Soviet context: to somehow make them work in Russia, or to explain why they are not working. In this case, there would not be such a thing as Russian political thought per se – it would just be a branch of universal (i.e. Western) rationality.

A second approach was to look back into history and to search for something that is distinctively Russian. The whole Soviet experience was a protracted attempt to catch up with the West using imported versions of Western ideas, from Marxism to Fordism. One has to go back to the Tsarist period to find something authentically Russian. But could that rich 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition of Russian political thought be revived and re-applied to post-Soviet Russia?

In the 1990s Western observers focused on the first school, hoping that the moment had come when liberalism would triumph in Russia. They have tended to downplay the search for an authentically Russian political world view. Few Western academics have published on Russian political thought since 1991. (One exception is Axel Kaehne: *Political and Social Thought in Post-Communist Russia*, 2007) In most Western studies of Russian in transition, it seems as if Russia has political culture and political values, but not political thought.

### **The Soviet legacy**

For seven decades, the Soviet state was committed to a massive program of indoctrination in the official ideology of Marxism-Leninism and Scientific Communism. These principles were drummed into all citizens – in the schools, army, workplace and mass media. Over time this became a complex conceptual framework, and in the hands of sophisticated practitioners some interesting ideas could be discussed, typically in small-circulation publications using arcane language. Western political concepts were forbidden from circulation, **except for some critiques in specialist publications**. Pre-Soviet Russian thinkers were either suppressed or skewed to fit into the official Soviet version of Russian historical evolution. Some Soviet intellectuals and reform-minded officials were strongly influenced by developments in Eastern

Europe, such as the consumer-friendly “goulash communism” of Janos Kadar in Hungary; the 1968 “Prague spring”; and the Solidarity workers’ movement in Poland.

There were a small number of intellectuals who openly condemned Soviet ideology, and paid the price in imprisonment and exile. These ‘dissidents’ attracted a lot of attention in the West, but censorship limited their public visibility inside the Soviet Union. Some of them embraced Western liberal values, such as the **writer** Andrei Amalrik and the famed scientist Andrei Sakharov. Others, notably author Alexander Solzhenitsyn, turned back to traditional Russian spiritual values. This division echoes a long-standing debate among Russian intellectuals, who divided in the 19<sup>th</sup> century into Westernizers advocating the rapid assimilation of Western values of individual freedom and limited government, and Slavophiles, who argued for the uniqueness of Russian civilization and the need to chart an independent path for the evolution of Russian institutions. Beneath the radar screen of the official ideology, ordinary Russians developed their own private set of values, based around friends and family, and retreated from the realm of public politics.

Soviet ideology did slowly evolve over time, embracing new slogans in the 1960s such as “developed socialism”: the idea that the Soviet Union had entered a new intermediate stage, and was not yet ready for full communism, the endpoint of human history according to Karl Marx. But it was not until Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 that the Communist Party made a serious effort at structural reform. Gorbachev’s program of ‘restructuring’ (in Russian, ‘perestroika’) included economic reforms, a new approach to political thinking, and a new foreign policy. Gorbachev promoted reconciliation with the West, proclaiming a universality of human values. Domestically, he encouraged citizens to criticize state officials through a new policy of openness (or glasnost) in the media. However, Gorbachev’s reforms undermined the monolithic unity of Soviet ideology, and triggered a process of political and economic unraveling that led to the state’s collapse in 1991.

### **The birth of a new Russia**

During the brief years of perestroika and glasnost there was a flourishing of political debate. The dull conformity of the official communist ideology gave way to a bewildering array of political views. The opposition ideologies were rather amorphous and poorly defined: each was more a moral stance than a political program. Three major groups emerged during the perestroika years, and persisted through the 1990s:

- 1) Liberal democrats, who favored the extension of press freedom, democratic elections, and protection of individual rights.
- 2) Communists, who wanted the preservation or restoration of the Soviet Union’s political and economic institutions as they had existed prior to Gorbachev, including social guarantees for workers, pensioners and other vulnerable groups.
- 3) Nationalists, who rejected both the liberals’ efforts to import Western ideas and the Communists’ desire (as they saw it) to subordinate the Russian nation to a radical, secular, internationalist agenda.

These three groups had sharply differing attitudes towards the collapse of the Soviet Union. The liberals more or less accepted it as inevitable, in that the old regime was no longer sustainable. The Communists blamed Gorbachev’s reforms for destabilizing an otherwise viable system. Most of the nationalists thought a common state could have been preserved, but not under Communist leadership.

In the 1990s Westerners typically sorted the political actors in Russia into two categories – reformers and reactionaries, with reform understood uncritically to mean movements towards a Western-style liberal democracy and market economy. (Maybe they would be able to choose between Swedish social democracy and Anglo-American neoliberalism.) Gorbachev failed in his effort to build a coalition for change, largely because he was trying to hold together the multi-ethnic Soviet Union. His successor in the Kremlin, Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin, was more successful. Yeltsin faced down the August 1991 coup by Soviet hardliners at the head of a coalition of liberal democrats and moderate nationalists.

However, Yeltsin's subsequent embrace of "shock therapy" caused a split in the ranks of the pro-democracy coalition. Most of the nationalists and even many liberals blamed the reforms for the economic chaos the country experienced in 1992. The anti-Yeltsin opposition controlled the parliament until October 1993, when Yeltsin dissolved the legislature by force. Yeltsin's decision to attack Chechnya in December 1994 alienated many of the remaining liberals, and the ham-fisted way in which the war was fought further angered the communists and nationalists.

Most of the political elite that rallied behind Yeltsin were simple pragmatists who recognized that he had won the struggle for state power; they did not have any political philosophy to speak of. Those officials were typified by the former gas industry executive Viktor Chernomyrdin, who served as Yeltsin's prime minister from 1992 to 1998. His cynical observation "We hoped for something better and ended up with the usual," captured the disillusion of the Yeltsin years. Political philosopher Aleksei Kara-Murza even argued that the shift from ideology to pragmatism was a major achievement for Russia and a necessary component of social modernization.

The main opposition force was Gennadii Zyuganov's Communist Party. They did not really have a clear alternative program, defining themselves by what they were against rather than what they were for. They were against the present, and in favor of the past. In the 1990s they became the main defenders of parliamentarism, because it gave them the opportunity to criticize Yeltsin – without being responsible for coming up with policies of their own. Zyuganov did not radically redefine Communist philosophy – for example, by moving towards social democracy. His main innovation was to introduce nationalist symbols and rhetoric.

The nationalists (or, as they style themselves, the "patriots") were the group that seemed to have the greatest potential to fill the ideological vacuum of post-communism – as evidenced by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's surprise victory in the December 1993 parliamentary election. A country that had lost its empire and seen its economy shrink by one-third seemed to be fertile soil for politicians raising the specter of national betrayal. After Zhirinovskiy's electoral success, both democrats and communists swung in the nationalist direction. Note that the rationale for Yeltsin's invasion of Chechnya was the defense of Russia's "territorial integrity."

In the 1990s the political discourse was sharply polarized: communists vs. democrats, patriots vs. traitors who have sold out to the West. The issues were presented as Manichean alternatives: the choice was between right and wrong, good and evil. Politics was seen as a Darwinian struggle for power in which the winner took all, including the head of the opponent. Yeltsin himself deployed such tactics in his narrowly-won presidential race in 1996, claiming that his communist opponents wanted to turn the clock back to the Stalin years.

The Yeltsin team never really came up with a new political formula to replace the anti-communist theme of the early 1990s. One of the challenges was that liberal state formation seems to presuppose the existence of a nation-state. Russia had been an empire, then an internationalist project, but never a nation-state. Yeltsin toyed with the resurrection of the "Russian Idea": a quest to pin down the essence of Russian civilization. (There was even a national competition launched for the best essay on the topic in 1998.) But Yeltsin's rule was indelibly associated with a cynical fire-sale of Russia's assets to insider cronies, so his half-hearted efforts to orchestrate a new sense of Russian national identity failed to materialize. And the fact that one in five citizens of the

Russian Federation are not ethnic Russians (and many of them are Moslems), constrained the Kremlin's ability to formulate a new ethnically exclusive identity for Russia.

One issue that did unite all the disparate political currents in the 1990s was a belief in the importance of Russia as a factor in European and world history. Liberals, communists and nationalists alike regretted Russia's descent into a new "time of troubles," and were confident that Russia could and should regain the great power status which it had enjoyed for the previous 200 years. They just disagreed about how this could be done. However, this consensus on the idea of Russia as a great power provided the unifying theme for the political order constructed by Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin.

## **The Putin regime**

After Vladimir Putin became president in 2000, we saw a return to something like the ideological orthodoxy of Soviet times. Political debate was pushed out of the mass media, especially television, while opposing views were banished to the fringes of political life.

Putin's political philosophy was an eclectic mixture of elements from the three prevailing political philosophies. For liberals, he offered a commitment to the market economy and rule of law, and a surprising ability to forge close personal ties with Western leaders. For the Communists, he offered nostalgia for the Soviet past – while recognizing that it was *past*, and could not be recovered. He brought back the Soviet national anthem (with new words), created new youth organizations that resembled the Young Pioneers and Komsomol, and reintroduced military training in schools. For the nationalists, he offered a vigorous assertion of Russian national interests – at first against the rebel Chechens, and then against perceived Russian enemies in Estonia, Georgia and Ukraine. He was more willing than Yeltsin to address his fellow-Russians using the ethnic term *Russkii* as opposed to the ethnically neutral term, *Rossiiskii*.

What was holding together this bricolage of rival traditions was the person of Putin himself. The Russian people seemed happy to delegate to him whatever power he needed to implement policies that somehow balanced these various political elements. Putin portrayed himself as a man of action not of words, and he expressed skepticism about the need for political ideology in general. He did not write, or pretend to write, any ideological tracts. (Though he did co-author a judo manual.) Just before his election in 2000 he issued a book in the form of an extended interview with two journalists, called *From the First Person*. Biographical in focus, it did not lay out a political philosophy, it was more a personal narrative about surviving the collapse of just such a political ideology. As president, Putin excelled at thinking on his feet, firing off pithy one-liners to inquisitive journalists, or giving thorough, fact-based answers to callers during marathon live television phone-ins. More often than not, in his longer formal speeches he tended to invoke or mimic mainstream Western ideas – modernization, the rule of law, democracy, civil society. These words were not always matched by his actions in office.

Some members of the presidential apparatus under Putin did try to generate new ideological concepts to legitimate his rule and to give the Kremlin a vocabulary with which to engage outside powers. However, no coherent body of ideas had emerged by the time Putin left the presidency in 2008. One concept that surfaced during Putin's first term was that of "managed democracy." This meant that democratic institutions were the norm, but they could not be trusted to behave responsibly without some direction from the state. This was not a new idea – in the 1960s Indonesian President Suharto had devised a "guided democracy." But Putin himself did not use the phrase, and no-one seemed quite clear what it meant.

A more serious effort was made to promote "sovereign democracy," the brainchild of the Kremlin's chief ideologue, Vladislav Surkov. Surkov launched the idea in a February 2006 speech to United Russia party functionaries. A state has to be independent of foreign influence before it can truly function as a democracy – hence the West should stop trying to tell Russia how to run its internal affairs. Democracy is the most reasonable form of government, and this

rationality must be encapsulated in a cohesive ruling elite. The role of elections is not to pick leaders but to demonstrate the unity of the governors and the governed. This approach certainly has an intellectual pedigree, drawing on a conservative, anti-liberal tradition of Continental thinkers such as François Guizot (1787-1874) and Carl Schmitt (1888-1985). Putin's selective approach to the rule of law aptly fits Schmitt's notion of the "state of emergency" – that is, in moments of crisis the sovereign must be prepared to act outside the law. But in practice, "sovereign democracy" is a woolly term, and as a practical matter Russia's sovereignty was no longer under threat. Putin's chosen successor as president, Dmitrii Medvedev, explicitly stated that he did not see the need for any hyphenated versions of democracy. But the idea of sovereign democracy lives on – it even has its own website. It is the official ideology of Nashi, a Putin youth movement created in 2005 in the aftermath of the pro-Western, youth-led Orange Revolution in Ukraine.

The most serious intellectual currents are variations on the theme of Russia's historical uniqueness as a state bridging Europe and Asia with a tradition of strong centralized power. Russian thought is strongly dichotomous, structured around bipolar opposites: East vs. West, Europe vs. Asian, weak society vs. strong state. The mainstream of such analysis is well represented by the liberal academics Yuri Pivovarov and Alexander Akhiezer. Pivovarov traces the evolution of what he calls the "Russian System" of a single power center from the Mongols through the tsars. The actual exercise of power takes place through personal networks, hidden from view and not captured by formal constitutional rules. This pattern reproduces itself in all three 20<sup>th</sup> century regimes – Soviet communism, Yeltsin democracy and Putin authoritarianism. Russia will never assimilate to the European model. Akhiezer sees the core of the problem more in the specific features of Russian society – still rooted in quasi-mystical concepts of tradition and community (*sobornost*). The role of the state is to express society's essential unity: an impossible task. As a result society oscillates between angry rejection and hopeful worship of the state. Russian thinkers do not take social diversity as a starting assumption: the differentiation that comes with modernization is a challenge and a threat. The writings of the nationalist émigré Ivan Il'in (1883-1954) enjoyed a revival during the Putin years: he stressed the need for moral unity between the ruler and ruled.

The most eccentric wing of political writing is that represented by the Eurasianists, who have revived a philosophical school that grew up among Russian émigrés in the 1920s. Their most influential thinker was Lev Gumilev (1912-92). Post-soviet Eurasianists seem to have a mass readership, though whether their views have any impact on actual government policy is another story. The Eurasianists believe that Russia is a distinctive civilization that arose out of the nomadic tribes of the Eurasian steppe, with a life force superior to the sedentary civilizations of Europe and Asia. Russia's history is indissolubly connected to both continents, but Russia will never be accepted as a full member of either continental club – nor should it want to be. Rather ironically, contemporary Eurasianists such as Alexander Dugin draw heavily on the geopolitical theories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century British strategist Halford Mackinder, who focused on the Eurasian "Heartland" as the key to world domination. Also, the Eurasianists' defense of Russian statehood is driven by their hostility towards the military preeminence enjoyed by the United States in the post-cold war world. So Eurasianism is not a hermetically Russian invention, it is rooted in emulation and envy of the Western powers.

The few remaining liberals have moved to the fringes of the Russian political scene. Former prime minister Yegor Gaidar wrote an ambitious book, *The State and Evolution*, in which he tried to justify his actions as prime minister in 1992 as an attempt to create a property-owning class which could provide a check on the bureaucratic state. Others, such as philosopher Boris Kapustin, have given up on the modernist project altogether. With the crash of the Soviet model, Russia has leapt straight into a post-modern condition, which alas is not compatible with liberty, merely license. Kapustin defines the central elements of post-modern politics as "ironic detachment, fluid coalitions and temporary issue-oriented alliances, ideological pastiche, [and]

the affirmation of local customs and practices at the expense of vast projects.” Similarly, Mikhail Epstein argues that in post-atheist Russia the return of spirituality will not lead to a revival of organized religion, but to a personalized, “minimalist religion.”

## Conclusion

A political scientist would normally try to map a country’s political space by looking at the programs of the leading political parties. Russia has seen nine national elections in the past five years, but a coherent party system has failed to emerge. The State Duma is dominated by the United Russia party, whose platform was simply support for President Vladimir Putin’s program, whatever it was. The remaining seats are occupied by Communists and nationalists, offering a weak mélange of political ideas culled from decades past.

The attempt to chart the political space of contemporary Russia has its limits. Contending political thinkers speak past each other and rarely bother to engage in direct public debate. The study of Russian political discourse sometimes seems more archaeological than ideological, in that the political spectrum consists of remnants of ideas from ages past. Some are trying to understand why Russia fell prey to Stalinism, others are pondering the viability of the tsarist state. The Stolypin reforms (of 1907) and Eurasianism (an idea current in the 1920s) are topics of everyday political debate. It’s as if the British Conservative Party was still debating where to bury Cromwell.

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