

Conservatism as the Kremlin's New Toolkit: an Ideology at the Lowest Cost

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Abstract

Among the major themes that cut across Russia's public debates, the heightened focus on values and identity is a bold demonstration of the entrance of conservative rhetoric into the Kremlin's toolkit. This conservative turn has no ambition to reshape Russian society. It is an ideology of the lowest cost, targeting the conservative majority and hoping to create a new space of depoliticized consensus, which has the added advantage of offering the country a new string to its bow in terms of international branding.

On several occasions over the past two years, highly political issues occupied the Russian public sphere: the anti-Putin protests in 2011, the Pussy Riot trial and law on foreign agents in 2012, and the Moscow electoral campaign, homophobic atmosphere and several anti-migrant riots in 2013. Among the major themes that cut across these public debates, one cannot help but notice the heightened focus on values and identity. Putin's speech at Valdai on September 20, 2013, is a bold demonstration of the entrance of conservatism into the Kremlin's toolkit, usually more for pragmatic reasons than ideological ones. "Today we need new strategies to preserve our identity in a rapidly changing world, a world that has become more open, transparent and interdependent. (...) For us, questions about who we are and who we want to be are increasingly prominent in our society. (...) It is evident that it is impossible to move forward without spiritual, cultural and national self-determination. (...) We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual."¹

If the identity focus is not new for Russia, the conservative lexicon is, and can be interpreted in at least two ways. The first way is that despite efforts by the Kremlin to de-politicize its citizens and appear to be a non-ideological regime, the country has experienced public debates on social issues such as the relationship between state and society, between society and its elites, and between majorities and minorities (ethnic, sexual, etc.); and in this debate the Kremlin promotes its own voice, which is one of moral conservatism. The second way is that some of these debates make sense abroad. On issues related to traditions, identity, and values, Russia is in tune with some part of the public opinion in Europe and the United States. For the first time since the Soviet

collapse, the country is participating in transnational debates that stir Western public opinion.

From Patriotism to Conservatism, from Implicit to Explicit Ideology?

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin has maintained a cautious or negative position toward any ideological credo. In the 1990s, the enthusiastic calls to Western liberalism were short-lived and the theme of the motherland was gradually rehabilitated. Despite all the changes that came along with Putin's regime, ideological engagement remains a controversial topic that lacks consensus within the ruling elite. The only ideological stance advanced during Putin's first term (2000–04) was that of the reconstruction of the state—the 'power vertical.' Putin also wielded a narrative with a clearly pragmatic orientation—towards modernization. During his second term (2004–08) different ideological wings were structured within United Russia, with explicit references to conservatism emerging, for example by Viktor Zubkov. However, the ruling party seeks to occupy public space via a kind of de-ideologized technocracy and through patriotic rhetoric. Under the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev (2008–12) voices from the Kremlin diversified. The conservative and patriotic disposition was confirmed, but liberal references were revived as well.

Putin's third term in office confirms two trends. Firstly, over the years the Kremlin has gradually developed an ideological meta-narrative while still refusing to elaborate details about it and to systematize its contents. Secondly, this meta-narrative crystallizes values identified as conservative. Does that mean that Putin and his inner circle have changed their worldviews and feel suddenly more confident about the need for an ideology? No, as they remain marked by their pragmatic approaches to domestic issues, their *realpolitik* in the international sphere, and a nihilistic creed that promotes cynicism, patronism, and consumerism. Yet they have because they have aged. Their legitimacy has eroded and their inability to bring forward a new generation of chosen successors—the Chinese model—is glaring. Thus they hope to compensate for their weakened legiti-

1 See the transcript of the speech at <<http://valdaiclub.com/politics/62880.html>>.

macy with a surplus of ideology. More importantly, the context in which the regime negotiates with society has evolved. The regime has not changed, while society profoundly transformed during the 2000s. The current conservative turn is an attempt to respond to the widening gap between them.

Maria Lipman, from the Carnegie Center in Moscow, explains that the implicit 'no-intrusion pact' that governed state-society relations during the 2000s (the state does not intervene in the private lives of citizens and in exchange they do not participate in managing the state) was broken by the demonstrations against Putin in winter 2011–12.² The system attempts to react with more ideological coercion in order to maintain the status quo. For this, it relies increasingly on the conservative—and silent—majority of the electorate to marginalize the active minority with more liberal values, but also nationalist ones, who want to participate in decision making.

In other words, the system has been forced to make explicit what was previously implicit. But the transition from implicit to explicit is both difficult and dangerous.

It is *difficult* because the ideological consensus in Russia is *ad minima*. There is consensus on the need to promote in the public sphere only what is shared and to limit divisive issues to the private sphere, but not on the substance. If the terms of the substance have to be explained, they are no longer unanimous. There is no agreement within the ruling elites on the question of national identity, the future of federalism, population or migration policies, the reading of the Soviet past, or relations with the Near Abroad and themes linked to it (compatriots, etc.) Nor is there unanimity among those who see the United States and NATO as the main enemy versus those who are most concerned about Islam, or China; or between those who think they can maintain economic development within the status quo versus those who believe that reforms are needed. To formulate ideological content is a complex undertaking indeed, and even more so in an open and diverse country like Russia is today. This can be observed in the debates around whether there should be a single textbook for 20th century history and around the role to be given to the Orthodox Church, among others.

It is *dangerous* because making the social contract explicit implies recognizing ideological differences, while the Russian regime is designed specifically on denying divisions in the public sphere. This also assumes

that dissent should be discredited (or suppressed) by the establishment of a coercive apparatus using legal means (the law on 'foreign agents'), technology (internet controls), and security (the services). However, this undertaking is expensive in financial terms, prohibitive in terms of personnel, and not in accordance with the 'nihilistic' creed of the elites. This can be seen with the 2012 law on foreign agents, which remains a virtual tool of repression since the authorities have decided not to advance the underlying logic of the law. Finally, and most importantly, an explicit ideology assumes recognizing a value to political values, while the regime's implicit idea is based on the negation of debating what is the nature of the common good.

Elaborating an ideology would indirectly pave the way for pluralism, and therefore not be favorable to the Kremlin. It would give a certain voice to more liberal positions that the elites could accommodate with relative ease, but also to nationalist theories (coming both from 'ethnic Russians' and 'ethnic minorities') that could jeopardize the stability of the regime. Maintaining the implicit is thus seen by the Kremlin as a way to avoid the real or imagined risk of the dismemberment of the country. This is likely the crux of the conservative turn that has been seen over the last two years. So far the implicit has been formulated through patriotism, which allows for the promotion of shared social values and practices and of collective memory centered on Soviet culture and the Second World War. But seeking to elaborate patriotism opens a Pandora's box of nationalism and could produce a chain reaction between 'Russian nationalism' and 'non-Russian nationalisms.' *The implicit patriotism cannot become an explicit nationalism without endangering the regime, whereas an explicit moral conservatism is, on the contrary, strengthening the statu quo.*

Conservatism as Russia's Brand in the International Sphere

This conservative turn does not develop only in a domestic context; it also became a brand for Russia's reassertion on the international sphere. Russia presentation of itself as a driver of a 'multi-polar world' took shape in the second half of the 1990s with its stance on the Yugoslav wars. After that, Russian diplomatic authorities have positioned themselves in a niche of strict compliance with international laws (denial of the right of interference, military action only with validation of the UN Security Council—except for the recognition of independence for South Ossetia and Abkhazia); and Russia's major role in the Syrian crisis is understood as a crowning achievement. This strategy of branding was strengthened further with Russia's consistent support of all initiatives related to 'dialogues of civilizations', such

2 Maria Lipman, 'The Kremlin turns Ideological. Where this New Direction Could Lead', in Maria Lipman, Nikolai Petrov, eds, *Russia 2025. Scenarios for the Russian Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 220–239.

as those held annually in Rhodes, and with senior officials, from Putin himself to Igor Ivanov and Sergey Lavrov highlighting 'traditions and values' openly inspired by the Moscow Patriarchate.

Today Russia's new conservative turn is seen as the country's contribution to denouncing the hypocrisy of U.S. and most European elites, who favor more liberal values than the majority of their citizens. The Kremlin positions itself as a messenger of the silent majorities in the liberal world. It seeks to express what large parts American and European populations actually think and give voice to these silent majorities, which although they are in democratic systems, do not see their vision of the world represented at the highest levels of the state. Hence, the conservative themes raised by Putin and his inner circle are nothing original: they are taken almost verbatim from opinions wielded by the most conservative Republican fringe, some Tea Party members, and a growing number of European right wingers, pushed to a more conservative bent due to the rise of the extreme right. The difference is not in the themes promoted, but in the fact that in Russia, they come from the authorities and can therefore directly shape public policies. In Europe, and to a lesser extent in the United States, they are seen as minority opinions with only episodic access to decision making.

Conservatism as an international brand for Russia already has had an effect, for example in discussions in the OSCE, where Moscow often forms a common front with the Vatican, and increasingly clearly in various European institutions where Moscow can lobby for recognition of legal texts on the Christian heritage of Europe, ethnic majority-minority relations, and about gay marriage. With this new active niche, Russia has become the new darling of not only the European far right (it already was in the early 2000s), but also a large part of the so-called classic right, who has found a new ally in Moscow. Increasing Russophilia among the European, British, French, German, and Italian right is strengthening Putin's idea of a specific 'Voice of Russia.'

Where to Go?

The Kremlin's attempts to put in place a more elaborate ideology are probably doomed to failure. Russian society is sufficiently differentiated, diversified, and inte-

grated to the outside world such that any attempt to impose this kind of top-down dynamic will fail. In addition, the elites cannot agree on the content of the ideology to promote and are not willing to pay the price to a new rigidity that could be imposed on themselves. They also know the transition from implicit to explicit threatens the political cohesion of the country and their own legitimacy.

The Kremlin does not have many options at its disposal to maintain control of the public sphere. The very inspiring theme of nationalism poses inherent problems in terms of its contents (impossible to get unanimous definitions) and endangering both the survival of the regime (the mobilizing potential of nationalism is largely anti-Kremlin) and the country (risk of increased ethnic tensions, and the issue of the integration of migrants). Only moral conservatism can become more explicit, with benign effect. It enjoys a silent majority, respects social hierarchies, does not call the legitimacy of the Kremlin into question, stigmatizes sexual minorities that are less threatening than ethnic minorities, and lacks destabilizing potential. And unlike nationalism, which can be both thought (ideology) and practice (public policies and violence), moral conservatism is primarily a meta-narrative. It can be stated without deeply impacting social practices. It is therefore compatible with the very liberal mores of Russian society, but also accommodates the re-traditionalization taking place in Russia's Muslim regions. In addition, moral conservatism creates channels of interaction with European and American politics that promotes Russia's integration in the international sphere and makes known a 'Russian voice' in the world.

The Kremlin's conservative turn has no ambition to reshape Russian society. The Russian elite do not believe in the power of words to affect the social fabric, and see it more as a toolkit to preserve the status quo of the regime. So it is an ideology of the lowest cost, which has the added advantage of offering the country a new string in its bow in terms of international branding. Even with its lack of domestic success, Russia's conservative turn puts wind in the sails of a worldwide movement reaffirming values and identities.

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