

Russian Political Ideology

Andrei Melville

“FORTRESS RUSSIA”: ASCENT OF THE NEW CONSERVATISM

Nearly a decade ago, I participated in a research project on possible Russian futures in the year 2020. One of the scenarios on the table was that of a dystopic future—a so-called Fortress Russia. That scenario involved Russia finding itself in a hostile environment, surrounded by regional conflicts. Oil revenues had dropped, and the country and population were beset by economic crises. In order to respond to the external threats posed by this scenario, Russia had to mobilise—even if such national mobilisation limited political rights and freedoms. My colleagues and I conducted focus groups on this “nightmare scenario” in cities across the country, from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok. Nearly all respondents judged this scenario to be extremely undesirable and also highly improbable.¹

Today, of course, there are clear signs that the “Fortress Russia” scenario actually approximates Russia’s emerging reality. A near consensus has been built around it among elite groups and the masses. And it receives strong propagandistic justification through the prism of an ideology that Russians call the “new conservatism”.

What happened? Answer: after two and a half decades of unsuccessful searches for a post-Soviet “national idea”, “new conservatism” was successfully summoned to fill the gap in the public consciousness, becoming

A. Melville (✉)

Faculty of Social Sciences, Higher School of Economics, Moscow

Russia's ideological credo—as if a “symphony” between the state and the population.

What is the content of this new ideological consensus in Russia? What are the real functions fulfilled by new conservatism, and what is the social basis for the ideology? What policy and practical recommendations does it make? And, perhaps most importantly, what are its prospects, and are there alternative future ideological vectors for Russia?

THE NEW IDEOLOGICAL CONSENSUS

A bona fide ideological spectrum has not yet been firmly established in post-Soviet Russia. There are, to be sure, many types of ideological “-isms” in the Russian ether, but these “-isms” are, as a rule, eclectic and do not correspond to the classifications generally accepted in political science. As such, analysis of the modern ideological situation in Russia is not premised on any classical opposition between “liberalism” and “conservatism” (or their radical extremes)—not least because of the manifest devaluation of the democratic and liberal movement and their ideas in contemporary Russia.

And yet in Russia, at present, there is a full-blown intensification of ideological work—almost like an “ideological renaissance”, in the spirit of the once famous “Manifesto of Enlightened Conservatism” (written by the filmmaker Nikita Mikhalkov).² This ideological work presumes that there looms, over the horizon, not only a “Cold War 2.0” but also a “new ideological battle”—in the world at large and inside the country proper.³ The West, on this logic, is not only the permanent geopolitical opponent of Russia, but indeed the centre of a “new international ideocracy”.⁴

The claim of the new conservatives is that the confrontation between the nucleus of the current global system (the West) and the rising powers (including, loosely, the BRICS countries, but also other contenders for status) has not only a permanent geopolitical but also a deeply ideological character—with (Russian) conservative-radicals even positing the more extreme thesis of an eventual “war to the death”.⁵ In a simplified logic, the new conservatives hold that the values of these competing camps are irreconcilable: “freedom” (“the West as a whole”) versus “justice” or “fairness” (where Russia is the “anti-West”). Russia must constantly counteract Western values, including by not promoting human rights norms. As in the Soviet period, the impossibility of any universal values is affirmed.

The ideological opponents of new conservatism in Russia are today, for all practical intents and purposes, marginalised. (Similar to the pre-perestroika era, they look more like “dissidents”.) There are clear signs of a new ideological consensus, which virtually erases the last 25 years of post-Soviet ideological development, and indeed even the prior period of Soviet perestroika and “new thinking” under Gorbachev. Of course, one might attribute this new ideological “wave” to the historical logic of Russian “cycles” (catching up development via inconsistent reforms, stagnation, counter-reforms, etc.). This leaves open the theoretical possibility of other political and ideological innovations down the road. However, such ideological innovations do not loom large in the Russian political space—a function not so much of the intellectual solidity or persuasiveness of new conservatism as of its strong social basis and the very real practical interests of its proponents.

What are some of the other claims of new conservatism? On the one hand, new conservatives hold that Russia was not the “losing” side in the Cold War and that it should not and will not, as a consequence, agree to the subordinate post-Cold War vocation assigned to it by the West. On the other hand, based on this belief, Russian new conservatives hold that it is imperative to revise accepted international legal norms and to reject the “collective West” in geopolitical and moral terms. A pivot to the East (East and even South Asia) is posited as the essential geopolitical and even philosophical alternative.

The theme of Russia as a completely distinct civilisation, with its own eternal historical patterns and unique moral laws, is ever-present: Russia has its own conspicuous “path”, separate from that of other countries and peoples. As stressed in the aforementioned “Manifesto of Enlightened Conservatism”, Russia is a “continental empire, and not a nation-state”, where order and stability are more important than individual rights and freedoms. Traditional collective values and a spirit of solidarity are the foundation of the national social contract, while individualism and its excesses, masked by political correctness, are deemed destructive. Indeed, as today’s Europe (specifically, the European Union) will not, institutionally and strategically, survive in its current form (according to the new conservatives), Russia must protect traditional Orthodox Christian values from “European decay”. *Bref*, this is the special mission of Russia in today’s world of chaos, moral decay and mortal geopolitical threats.

These are, for all intents and purposes, the approximate contours of the “Fortress Russia” scenario, whose supporters feel threatened by enemies

from without and “fifth columns” from within. According to the new conservatives, in order to resist external and internal foes, the country and the population must “rally around the flag”—spiritually, politically and militarily. Of course, I do not wish to oversimplify, as this ideological consensus is not absolute. Important nuances are at play, and the intellectual homework and scaffolding supporting this consensus are not to be underestimated. Nevertheless, in today’s Russia, there is little doubt that such a mental map of the world generally predominates in the consciousness of the political class, the elites and the general population.

ARGUMENTS AND PRESCRIPTIONS

Even in the context of ideological near consensus, new conservatism is internally non-uniform—that is, it has, in broad strokes, both *radical* and *moderate* flanks. The radical flank finds expression in the quite marginal “Izborsk Club” (Alexander Prokhanov, Alexander Dugin, Natalya Narochnitskaya, Maksim Shevchenko, Sergey Glaziev).⁶ The moderate flank, for its part, is armed with some fairly refined arguments, developed through such large-scale initiatives as the international research project “Conservatism and Development”,⁷ sponsored by the Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Research (closely tied to the Presidential Administration) and the “Folders on Conservatism” almanac⁸ (under the same sponsor).

As mentioned, one of the starting points of new conservatism is the thesis on the rebirth of global, unresolvable ideological confrontation—for all intents and purposes, an ideological anti-Westernism that is supported by anti-Western geopolitics. Arguments that are geopolitical in spirit are often borrowed and reproduced about the “end of globalisation” or the start of “de-globalisation”, which in essence entails the rejection of any and all illusions about cooperation and a hard-headed reversion to the presumed “norm” of world politics—to wit, the “war of all against all”, a “game without rules” or the “Hobbesian moment”.⁹

The theme of the “renaissance of geopolitics”—one of the key planks of new conservatism, and one meriting separate analytical treatment—is today very popular in Russia (see Chap. 12 on Russian Foreign and Defence Policy). Of course, it cannot be said that the modern critique of globalisation—even among avowed globalisation optimists, inside and outside of Russia alike—has no basis in fact. And yet even the deepening of splits and the escalation of contemporary conflicts, the unmanageability

of global processes, the revenge of fundamentalism and extremism and the seduction of Realpolitik, together do little to change the governing global trends of world development—namely, powerful integration processes in the world economy (despite many bumps in the road), financial and political interdependence, information openness, the universalisation of cultural spaces and growing people-to-people interactions.

In the simplified geopolitical imagery of new conservatism, Russia is a “besieged fortress”, surrounded by enemies. This singularity, paradoxically, allows Russia to be independent in its renewed “sovereignty” vis-à-vis outside influences, in its self-reliance, and in its belief in the inviolability of its national interests. (The theme of the *supremacy of national interests*, while clearly articulated, remains conceptually underdeveloped—especially in terms of a concrete and long-term programme or agenda.) This posture, to be sure, also has its own internal tensions—that is, between the extremes of its isolationist and messianic camps.

The practical prescription for strategic self-isolation and autarky in the modern world works only for pariah states—which is why the followers of new conservatism themselves easily recognise the necessity of foreign investment for national development. It is an altogether different matter that many of these same followers, as convinced ideological and geopolitical “anti-Westerners” and “Eurasians”, would like to pivot towards the East. And yet this is, by and large, an entirely utopian “East”—one that is imagined to be simply waiting for Russia to act as a “bridge” between it and Europe, such that Russia and it can together develop various species of mega-projects—naturally taking into account the legitimate Russian interests that were previously ignored by the West.

The messianic pathos of new conservatism manifests itself primarily in ideological declarations: “[T]he Russian ideal is ‘sacredness’. Sacred Rus is a universal ideal – not limited geographically, ideologically or metaphysically” (taken from one of the reports of the Izborsk Club).¹⁰ In practice, however, Russia’s ambitions in this respect are today far more modest and include ongoing support for integration processes within the Eurasian Economic Union (see Chap. 15 on International Economic Policy) and calls to assemble the “Russian world” as a union of “the most dispersed people in history”. The “re-establishment of empire” is, as a serious imperative, not considered by the new conservative mainstream—not least because there simply are no resources for empire-building.

Above all, new conservatism emphasises “traditional” values and religious fundamentalism as foundations for “spiritual authenticity”.¹¹

“Orthodox ethics and the spirit of solidarity”—almost as an antithesis to Max Weber—are put forward as the bases for a distinct or special civilisation rooted in cohesion and communitarian values. These are supposed to represent the core of the basic “Russian mentality”—a notion much discussed by new conservatives but still lacking adequate conceptualisation. It is also notable, on this construct, that the principle of the primacy of law is not articulated—something that the new conservatives themselves do not hide: “For the conservative, tradition and morality are above the law.”¹²

Finally, the new conservatives also argue in favour of so-called “sovereign modernisation”—that is, a modernisation without dependence on the West, emphasising Russia’s indigenous capabilities. This evokes certain analogies with the Bukharin-Stalin concept of “building socialism in one country”. Of course, in the context of Russia’s extant global interdependence and its relatively modest internal resources, such a recipe for modernisation has little hope of being realised in practice in any foreseeable future.

FUNCTIONS AND SOCIAL BASIS

If most of the substantive arguments and practical recipes of new conservatism are precarious, then how did there come to be such high ideological demand for it? First and foremost, the ideology reflects the posture of the central government itself and of key elite groups for which the preservation, at all costs, of the status quo (and the reduction of threats from competing elite groups or the risks of popular dissatisfaction) is the dominant priority. The glorification of this status quo has been inculcated into the elite and mass consciousness via the muscular propagandistic influence of mass media—especially television (see Chap. 9 on Russian Media). It is noteworthy that, according to public opinion surveys, the success of the propaganda effort follows, to some extent, the paradoxical rise of conservative moods in large segments of Russia’s younger population as well.

Second, an important component of the social base of new conservatism is the constantly growing bureaucratic estate in today’s Russia. Bureaucracy and “bureaucratism” in Russia have very real material interests in the preservation of the existing state of affairs in the country—including through the privileges of status and office (see Chap. 30 on the Bureaucracy). Russia’s bureaucrats are, as in many other countries, the natural carriers of the conservative and protective ideology. And the

bureaucrats are supported by other social groups—including pensioners and the military—that are in one way or another financially dependent on the Russian state.

Third, Russia’s “middle class”, which, before the current economic crisis, on various measurements, comprised anywhere between 10 per cent and over 40 per cent of the population,¹³ is a very peculiar middle class. It is, in many ways, a product of the redistribution of revenues from the oil boom in the first decade of the 2000s—that is, redistribution aimed in part at procuring the loyalty of the “better off” population. The values of this middle class may well serve as a refutation of the “Lipset hypothesis”—much discussed today in Russia—to the effect that economic development and growth in well-being generally lead to an economically independent middle class, which in turn sooner or later begins to demand broader political representation and a transition to democratic processes and practices.

In Russia, the increase in the economic well-being during the oil boom did not lead to a corresponding demand for democratisation and political liberalisation from the new “middle class”. On the contrary, this middle class has remained conservative, non-independent, and completely loyal to the political authorities and the existing order on which it depends for its economic well-being (see Chap. 7 on the Social Structure of Russia). This, then, is a quite servile middle class, dependent in its economic existence on the administrative decisions of the bureaucrats of upper, middle and lower levels, who in turn comport themselves according to their particular material interests (as well the directives of their masters). There are no fundamental distinctions here based on the social status and economic wealth of members of this middle class—that is, a large private owner and a small individual entrepreneur can equally be stripped of property or deprived of their rights by dint of administrative discretion or caprice.

This middle class refers not to the “second”, “third” or “fourth” Russia (in the terminology of Natalia Zubarevich¹⁴)—that is, not to the residents of Russia’s villages, small cities or middle cities or autonomous republics. Instead, we refer here to the “first” Russia as the representative window of the modernising future, and comprising, for all practical intents and purposes, the materially advanced residents of the large cities, from Moscow and St. Petersburg downward. And *pace* Lipset, the representatives of this “first” Russia are, en masse, carriers of the present conservative consensus, and not of any deep or sustained demand for reforms.

Fourth, the ideological demand of the authorities and elites turns on a surprisingly harmonious brew of mass moods reflecting mobilised

propagandistic influence—but not only this. These mass moods are a very distinctly Russian, largely emotional, manifestation of mass complexes, authoritarian syndrome, nostalgia and imagined or phantom ills. And the simplified, new conservative picture of the world offers fast and easy prescriptions for addressing the country’s very real problems and pressures.

The consistent thrust of these mass moods is the return of Russia to the status of a *great power*. Indeed, this fancy is arguably the key force in the present ideological unity between the state and the people. Some 65 per cent of the Russian population are certain that “Russia is today a great power” (November 30, 2015),¹⁵ compared to 31 per cent in 1999. Moreover, 59 per cent are certain that “Russia has never been the aggressor or initiator of conflicts with other countries” (November 2, 2015). *Krym Nash*—the 2014 absorption of Crimea into Russia—is supported by up to 85 per cent of Russians (February 3, 2016).

The patriotic élan is bolstered by the presence of the “image of the enemy”, driven into the mass consciousness by propaganda. Some 80 per cent of the population today believe that Russia has enemies (November 2, 2015), and 75 per cent believe that the countries of the West are adversaries of Russia, rather than partners (October 13, 2015). The adversarial politics of Western countries is, according to surveys, reflected in: sanctions (55 per cent); information warfare (44 per cent); attempts to control or take over Russia’s economy and its natural resource wealth (35 per cent); designs to overthrow the Putin government (27 per cent); and, finally, campaigns to foist upon the Russian population foreign values, culture and ways of life (26 per cent) (November 2, 2015).

Some 62 per cent of Russians agree that relations with the West will always be based on distrust (June 26, 2015), while just as many think that “it is not worth paying attention to the criticisms of the West” (November 2, 2015). And, as mentioned, propaganda is able to persuade a significant portion of the population that the “enemies” are not only without, but indeed within, with some 41 per cent of the population believing that the fight against “Western fifth columns” is important (December 8, 2015).

The major ideological “building blocks” of new conservatism are fully consonant with the popular belief—held until recently by 55 per cent of Russians—that Russia has “its path” (discussed above), separate from other countries and peoples. However, what this “special path” is, and how it manifests itself concretely, is far less apparent to survey respondents. In the extreme, 69 per cent of the population have no or only the foggiest notion of it. Only 17 per cent think that Russia’s path is that of European

civilisation (April 21, 2015). Finally, some 61 per cent of Russians favour strong public order, even if this requires the restriction of individual freedoms and human rights (October 28, 2015).

While the parallels between new conservatism and the current public moods are obvious, they are insufficient for purposes of understanding the origins and prospects of the new ideological consensus. For this, we must properly appreciate the social contract between the Russian state and the Russian population. During the period of high oil prices, the population passively accepted the status quo in exchange for a constantly increasing standard of living. However, the end of high oil prices has meant that the preservation of such a system requires entirely different instruments—above all, a mobilising propaganda (privileging, as it were, the “television” over the “refrigerator”) with the spectre of an enemy and, to be sure, a resurgent Russia returning to its erstwhile great power status.

How sound is this new social contract? Public opinion polls suggest that there may be at least preliminary doubts about it, driven naturally by the serious worsening of the economic situation in the country and the diminishing material well-being of the population. Recent surveys suggest that Russians are starting to worry very seriously about some of the following: the growth in prices and impoverishment of the population (54 per cent); economic crisis (49 per cent); Russia being drawn into conflicts outside its borders (33 per cent); unemployment (29 per cent); and increased tensions in relations with Western countries (22 per cent) (February 26, 2015). It therefore remains to be seen whether the extant ideological consensus can compensate for the continuing economic deterioration of the country, as well as the growing fatigue of the population vis-à-vis mass propaganda—propaganda that has, predictably, become less potent and effective over time.

PROSPECTS AND ALTERNATIVES

Is the new ideological consensus stable over the long run? Is it capable of dealing with the challenges of today and tomorrow, as promised by the new conservatives themselves? If we understand these challenges to include defensive stabilisation and system preservation in the context of economic crisis, social stagnation and increased political authoritarianism, then, yes, new conservatism is, for the time being, adequate for the tasks at hand. But if we mean the challenges of developing and modernising the country in earnest, then the present ideological consensus is highly problematic. New

conservatism claims that only it can offer a model of development that takes into account national specificities, anticipating mistakes and mitigating the costs of Russia's transition. But is this in fact the case?

There have been cases in political history and in the history of political ideologies—in the USA, the United Kingdom and other European countries—in which conservatism turned out to be a constructive “antidote” to the radical extremes of other development projects, and above all against radical versions of liberal projects. Critically, in such scenarios, conservatism was an important element of the political and ideological “centre” (“The Vital Center”, as it were, of Arthur Schlesinger Jr.) in the context of general cooperation with its liberal opponents—that is, on a generally agreed philosophical or programmatic premise for national development. Conservatism, in other words, has been constructive principally when it has opposed and softened the extremes of other competing, more radical programmes of development.

Having said this, Russia's new conservatism claims to be self-sufficient—that is, not needing ideological and political opponents who propose different (even complementary) development agendas. It does not wish to oppose anything, as it considers its position to be naturally true, infallible and comprehensive. Of course, on the strength of only conservation and isolation from other political and ideological projects, it is nearly impossible to propose a credible programme of development and modernisation.

In short, the current Russian doctrine of “conservatism for development” may be rhetorically attractive for many social groups, but it has not produced and is unlikely to generate a genuine programme of development for the country. It does not have a concrete programme of economic, social and political development for Russia in the context of the present geopolitical conflicts and international disorder, or indeed in the larger context of global interdependence, economic integration and open information flows across borders. Moreover, new conservatism is fundamentally closed to dialogue with other alternative ideological and political programmes—that is, for the new conservatives, the followers of these alternative ideologies and programmes are not legitimate partners, but may even represent a “fifth column”. And without such a dialogue, of course, the country remains “Fortress Russia”, bereft of prospects for entry into the modern world.

To be sure, modern political history has, over the last decades, been resistant to simple and uniform predictions. Will the Russian population continue to support the current (revised) social contract in the event of

a further worsening of the national economic situation? Will the loyalty of influential elites be shaken in the event of new exogenous shocks? Will institutional inertia continue to lead to continued economic and social stagnation? Will viable alternative democratic projects eventually emerge? *Contra* the new conservatives, there is every reason to believe that in history in general, and in Russian development in particular, there exist critical junctures leading to alternative futures.

NOTES

1. Melville A. and Timofeev I. (2008) “Russia 2020: Alternative Scenarios and Public Preferences.” *Polis*, No. 4, 66–85.
2. Mikhalkov N. (2010) *Law and Truth: Manifesto of Enlightened Conservatism* (<http://polit.ru/article/2010/10/26/manifest/>).
3. Lukyanov F. and Krastev I. eds. (2015) “New Rules or No Rules?” XI Annual Valdai Discussion Club Meeting Participants’ Report (http://valdaiclub.com/publications/reports/new_rules_or_no_rules_xi_annual_valdai_discussion_club_meeting_participants_report/).
4. See Lukin A. (2016) New International Ideocracy and Russia. *Comparative Politics*, 1(22).
5. Nagorny A. (2015) ed. Russia and Westerners. Report of the Izborsk Club (<http://izborsk-club.ru/content/articles/7867/>).
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7. Makarenko B. (ed.) (2015) *Conservatism and Development: Bases for Public Agreement*. Moscow: Alpina.
8. <http://www.isepr.ru/almanah/>
9. Barabanov O. et al. (2016) “War and Peace in the 21st Century: International Stability and the Balance of a New Type.” Moscow: Valdai Discussion Club.
10. <http://zavtra.ru/content/view/vsplyvivayuschaya-imperiya/>
11. See Malinova O. (2014) “‘Spiritual Bonds’ as State Ideology.” *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 4.
12. *Ibid.*, 275.
13. The Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences suggests that the middle class may represent over 40 per cent of the population (<https://lenta.ru/news/2016/02/29/middle/>), while a number of other sources, using other measurements, argue that it may be as small as 10–15 per cent (<http://iqreview.ru/money/middle-class-in-russia-and-usa/>).
14. http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2011/12/30/chetyre_rossii
15. All survey data in this section come from the Levada Centre (<http://www.levada.ru/>).