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Between Populists and Conservatives

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**The Right-Wing Deviation in the West and Russia’s Soft Power**

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Resume: Russia’s soft power should develop a broad and long-term narrative, capable of giving constructive answers to challenges facing Russian and Western societies. Berdyaev’s model of liberal conservatism can serve as the basis for an alternative discourse.

Wide-ranging discussions have only recently begun concerning the turn towards conservative values in Europe. In fact, one of the first signs of this change was the general election in the Netherlands in 2010, when the ultra-right People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy won 24 seats in the Dutch parliament to become the third largest political force in the country. The right-wing trend gained momentum from 2014-2016: any vote in European countries added influence to forces whose rhetoric focused on strengthening the nation state, criticizing integration processes, and complaining about the globalization of all aspects of life.

Nationalist parties, such as Alternative for Germany, National Front (France), True Finns, the Five Star Movement (Italy), and the Freedom Party of Austria, which previously were fringe political forces, now receive millions of votes. In some countries, traditionalists, who do not hesitate to challenge the basic values of the European Union, are coming to power. A vivid example of this is Poland’s right-wing conservative Law and Justice Party, which won the October 2015 election to the Sejm, the Polish parliament. Law and Justice openly advocates purging federal agencies and the media of liberals and cosmopolitans. Law and Justice received 235 seats out of 460 in the election. For the first time in its post-communist history Poland now has a one-party majority government.

Undoubtedly, Brexit and the victory of Donald Trump, who built his campaign on isolationist slogans, are also symptoms of the right-wing turn not only in Europe, but in the West in general. It is widely-believed that the shift in public sentiment is due to the crisis of the globalization project: an increasing number of people in Western societies consider the globalized world as not meeting their interests and posing risks for the future. The reasons behind the right-wing turn should be the subject of a special study. In this article, I will look at this problem from another perspective: Does the rightward turn of the West open up any opportunities for Russian soft power? And can the new direction help create a favorable international atmosphere for Russia?

**FASHION FOR SOFT POWER**

As Janice Mattern correctly noted, at the beginning of the twenty-first century the notion of soft power captured the imagination of scholars and politicians all over the world. Much has been written and said about soft power, yet it is often interpreted differently.

The author of the concept, Harvard professor and U.S. diplomat Joseph Nye, defined soft power as the ability to influence others through co-optive means of agenda setting, persuasion, and attraction. He wrote that there are three main sources of soft power: the culture of a country (its attractiveness to others); political values (provided that this country brings them into politics); and foreign policy (the degree to which it is considered legitimate and moral by others). According to Nye, soft power does not include financial levers—forms of coercion through economic pressure or threats cannot be an example of influence through attraction. On the other hand, a military potential is a possible source of the soft power of a state, because “a well-run military can be a source of admiration” for foreign partners.

In Russia, heated debate about soft power began in 2008-2009. In 2013, this notion was codified in a new version of the Foreign Policy Concept. The Concept defined soft power as an “indispensable component of modern international relations” and a “comprehensive toolkit for achieving foreign policy objectives based on the potential of civil society, information, cultural, and other methods and technologies as an alternative to traditional diplomacy.” The latest version of the Concept, made public in early December 2016, postulates the importance of soft power for achieving foreign policy objectives.

Recently, Russia’s soft power has strengthened. Thanks to state institutions and public organizations, such as the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation, commonly known as Rossotrudnichestvo, the Russkiy Mir Foundation, and the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund, other countries have begun to talk about Russia’s soft power in earnest, viewing it as a special phenomenon. This is evidenced by the 2016 ratings provided by the Portland Communications Agency and Jonathan McClory, where Russia placed 27th among the top thirty leaders. Reports by European and U.S. think tanks also note Russia’s impressive successes (for example, The Kremlin’s Sleight of Hand: Russia’s Soft Power Offensive in the UK, released by the Henry Jackson Society, and Legacies, Coercion and Soft Power: Russian Influence in the Baltic States, prepared by Chatham House). It should be noted, though, that the majority of Western commentators view these successes as threatening and requiring an adequate response. So, the image of an influential country in this field is not necessarily positive.
Russia’s success is not only due to the effective use of institutions and tools. The Russian model is gradually acquiring an ideological content that is particularly important for projecting soft power in world politics. Joseph Nye believes that in a new era the real struggle will unfold not between armies, but between ideas, plots, and narratives.

**RUSSIAN CONSERVATISM AS A NARRATIVE**

Russia’s signal to the outside world is inextricably linked with domestic politics, in which the authorities have set a conservative course for quite some time. The keynote speeches delivered by Vladimir Putin in 2013—the presidential address to the Federal Assembly and the speech at the Valdai Club—became manifestoes of Russia’s new conservatism.

In his 2013 address to the Federal Assembly, Putin stated that nations in the West “are revising their moral values and ethical norms, eroding ethnic traditions and differences between peoples and cultures.” Russian society does not accept such a revision. People remain committed to the values of the traditional family, real human life, including religious life, not just material existence, but also spirituality, the values of humanism, and global diversity. Russian conservatism should be viewed from the standpoint of philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, who wrote that the point of conservatism is not that it prevents movement forward and upward, but that it prevents movement backward and downward, into chaotic darkness and a return to a primitive state.

Berdyaev occupies a special place in Russian political thought because he does not fit into the mainstream of Russian conservatism. Some experts believe that Berdyaev’s choice in formulating manifestos of modern conservatism was partly accidental. But I think that this choice could be unconsciously correct.

The peculiarity of Berdyaev’s position as a “singer of freedom” is best seen in comparison with the main trends in Russian conservative thought. Conservative philosophy in Russia emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century, giving rise to two trends that still exist today.

The first trend was the state conservative ideology, developed by Nikolai Karamzin and Sergei Uvarov, with its “Orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality” triad. According to this ideology, autocracy and the special significance attached to power played a key role for the Russian mentality. Today we can say that such ideas underlie social conservatism (left-wing conservatism), which is the ideological basis for the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, the Izborsk Club, and neo-Eurasianism.

The second trend is commonly identified with the Slavophile tradition, which, unlike the state conservative ideology, brought the Russian people and its distinctive culture to the fore, while viewing the state solely as an instrument for preserving and developing Russian nationality. Later, the Slavophile tradition formed the basis of “white” (right-wing) conservatism or moderate national conservatism, as Nikolai Rabotyazhev describes its current version. Features that remained of Slavophilism in “white” conservatism were unconditional love for the Russian people and belief in the special mission of Russian culture.

Berdyaev does not belong to either the first or second type. He is usually identified with the so-called “liberal conservatism,” which developed in the 1930s in the Russian émigré community, namely among members of the Novy Grad philosophical movement, which published a journal under the same name. This movement was distinguished by its devotion to individual freedom, a democratic rule-of-law state, and the rejection of the anti-Western and isolationist ideas of traditional Russian conservatives. Liberal conservatives had an ambivalent position on Russia’s place on the West-East axis. This position was best expressed by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who said that the Russian people had two fatherlands—Russia and Europe.

In many respects, liberal conservatism was akin to the ideologies of the Christian democratic parties that arose in the postwar period in West Germany and Italy. However, in post-Soviet political thought the liberal movement was marginalized and, as we can say now, has not become part of the emerging Russian ideology. Yet its development has just begun. According to experts, real domestic political practices are dominated by the so-called administrative, or nomenklatura, conservatism intended to maintain the status quo in the existing relations between society and the authorities.

Can we say that Russia translates Berdyaev’s ideas of liberal conservatism into its foreign policy? The answer is rather negative. As in domestic politics, Berdyaev’s ideas, as a basis for the Russian foreign-policy narrative, need to be developed and specified.

Berdyaev did not develop a full-fledged concept of liberal conservatism. But as its basis, he proposed the priority of individual freedom, a democratic rule-of-law state, and a rejection of the anti-Western and isolationist ideas of traditional Russian conservatives. This framework may be filled with Berdyaev’s ideas on values and goals of the development of man, society, and the world, which he set out in his works (The Philosophy of Inequality, The Fate of Russia, The New Middle Ages, The Meaning of History, and others). It would be appropriate to examine Berdyaev’s ideas from two perspectives: practical and metaphysical.

What is liberal conservatism in practical terms? Berdyaev was convinced that a conservative, yet happy, society can be built only if there is absolute respect for the human being and his significance for society and the state. Therefore, all democratic achievements of the twentieth century should continue to be part of the state system in the twentieth-first century, too. At the same time, according to Berdyaev, each nation should cherish its national traditions, which are the source of its creative energy and guarantee the successful development of society. It is in this sense that conservatism “does not prevent movement forward and upward, but prevents movement backward and downward.” The traditions of a strong state and a strong national leader, which Russia has adhered to under various forms of government for centuries, perfectly meet the challenges of the age of globalization. Uncontrolled migration and the spread of terrorism are scourges of this age. The practical model of liberal conservatism undoubtedly requires a metaphysical substantiation, just as the Western liberal model relied on the philosophy of postmodernity.

The metaphysics of liberal conservatism has its origins in the early twentieth century, when Berdyaev, along with many contemporaries, warned that Europe had reached a deadlock and argued that the European identity was in crisis. According to Berdyaev, Europe abandoned its culture during the Enlightenment and since then had been creating a civilization that denied God and enslaved nature. European society sought to build a world that would provide a comfortable life for people and exempt them from responsibility to God and Nature. “The triumph of mammonism in Europe” had led to a civilizational impasse. It was obvious to Berdyaev that all catastrophes of the twentieth century—collapses of empires, world wars, Nazism, and fascism—were consequences of the crucial choice made by Europe during the Enlightenment.

Today, the crisis in Europe continues in other, modern forms. Historical parallels to the events of a hundred years ago only strengthen the sense that existential conflicts of European life, which seemed to have been resolved in the second half of the twentieth century, are emerging again. The unique and, at times, catastrophic historical experience of Russia gives it the right to offer its recipes to the world. Berdyaev argued that Russia had failed to create a civilization of its own, like Europe had done. Throughout its history, Russia had given priority to cultural and spiritual development, sometimes to the detriment of material development, which led to various consequences. But in Berdyaev’s understanding, having avoided the European path to civilization, Russia can return the Western world to real culture, thus tying Man to Man, and God and Nature.

**EUROPE AFTER POSTMODERNITY**

In Europe, postmodernity is giving way to the post-secular society first mentioned by German philosopher Jurgen Habermas in 2006. According to his definition, a post-secular society is characterized by democratic debate, in which religious arguments are used. Issues of faith and religion are still alive. Pro-Christian forces are developing in modern Europe; for example, in Poland, Hungary, and Italy. The adjective “Christian” has lost its original meaning in the names of many conservative parties, but now demand for that initial definition may reemerge.

Playing on political differences on both sides of the Atlantic, Russia skillfully uses conservative ideas. Russian conservatism in foreign policy and foreign-policy propaganda is situational, depending on the specific circumstances. It serves as a unifying platform for politicians whose ideas are tactically advantageous to Russia (for example, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who opposes Brussels). But in more complex cases, such as Russian-Polish relations, ideological similarity does not help remove political differences. In fact, it is in Poland where we see an obvious gravitation of society and an influential part of the political elite towards traditional values, which in a different situation would be very close to many Russian statements.

In the long term, such a situation could negatively affect the ability of the Russian narrative to influence foreign audiences. Already now, Western elites and even ordinary citizens are beginning to associate Russian conservatism not with an ideological search for ways to overcome the adverse consequences of globalization, but with the rise of far-right forces. It is characteristic that foreign academic and journalist communities do not associate the National Front, Hungary’s Jobbik, the Freedom Parties of Austria and the Netherlands, the UK Independence Party, and others with the notion of “conservatism.” Foreign experts and journalists define these parties primarily as populist. This does not always denote a desire to pin labels on others (although this is obviously one of the motivations in the information war that is raging in both foreign and domestic politics in many leading countries). It is rather a desire to separate constructive ideologies that can offer real solutions to problems from demagogy, a pathology of modern democracy that plays on the fears of ordinary citizens and which does not provide a positive agenda. Studies have shown that Europeans and Americans are tired of the corrupt establishment that is unable to solve escalating problems pertaining to social and economic development and security. For example, according to public opinion polls, 39 percent of French voters are ready to vote for any alternative candidate in the next election, and only 30 percent of young people in the United States believe in democracy, compared with 75 percent in 1930. Western society is going through a systemic crisis as it looks for answers to challenges that uncontrolled globalization poses to the world.

This unique situation offers Russia an opportunity to develop its own ideological concept, which to some extent would be an alternative to the postmodern philosophy of the West. Judging by shifts in voter sentiments, in the medium term the Western ruling elites will have to move away from their totally liberal ideology and adopt some conservative ideas—firstly, to meet society’s demand for greater security, even to the detriment of democratic ideals, and secondly, to win back trump cards from populist parties. It is still hard to imagine a renaissance of openly reactionary or chauvinistic approaches. Having swung in the opposite direction, the pendulum will hardly approach an extreme position, and Berdyaev’s liberal-conservative ideas, already used by Russian ideologists in 2013, may well be in demand.

**THE VALUE ROADMAP**

It is very important for the Russian narrative and soft power to thoroughly analyze the development and transformation of European society. What values are in the highest demand in Europe today? What ideological changes are taking place in Western society?

The cultural map of the world, created by Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, illustrates the current moods in various countries. The map divides countries into nine clusters and maps them in two dimensions: traditional versus secular-rational values, and survival versus self-expression values. The clusters are ranked in ascending order, from traditional survival societies to secular-rational societies, where the development level allows people to concentrate on self-development and self-expression.

Traditional societies include countries of the African-Islamic group, Latin America, some Orthodox countries, part of South Asia, and some English-speaking countries. However, it is only in English-speaking and partly Latin American countries that traditionalism is combined with successful development, which allows people to focus on self-expression values. Of European countries, Poland and Ireland are the most conservative. Inglehart and Welzel even placed Poland among Latin American countries.

Europe is divided on the map into three groups: Catholic, Protestant, and the Baltics. Protestant Europe and the Baltic states are the farthest from the traditionalist maximum. Catholic Europe is in the center of the map, while Greece, Portugal, Cyprus, and Croatia are the closest to conservative ideas. It is noteworthy that countries where far-right parties are popular—Austria, Hungary, and France —are not among the most conservative.

At the same time, there is a tendency towards traditionalization in such countries, for example, Hungary. This tendency is vividly illustrated in the speech Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban delivered in 2013 in Chatham House. In a speech called “The Role of Traditional Values in Europe’s Future,” Orban said that in order to overcome the civilizational impasse, Europe should stop its attack on traditional values—the church, the family, and the nation. In his understanding, “democracy in Europe is democracy based on Christianity” and it is only a return to the Christian roots that can prevent the extinction of Europe. His position is fully shared by the elites and society in Poland, which is now also a bastion of traditional conservative values in the European Union.

These ideas are in tune with the emerging conservative ideology of Russia and are almost word for word what Vladimir Putin said at the Valdai Forum in 2013. He said that many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including Christian values, which will lead them into a civilizational impasse.

The conservative pivot in Europe can really provide new opportunities for Russia’s soft power. However, it should not be oriented towards populism, which is in high demand on the eve of elections. Moreover, mainstream parties have lost the people’s confidence. The political space of the West is now a field of bitter rivalry for the future ideological leadership. This rivalry is most graphically manifested in the United States, where Trump’s victory, far from putting an end to inter-party (and in Trump’s case, also intra-party) confrontation, has, on the contrary, intensified polemics. As Andrei Bezrukov has noted, the West is witnessing changes in its political and ideological field. The first stage will see the rise of radical and often completely irresponsible forces, reflecting spontaneous discontent. However, this will only be a transitional period, to be followed by the formation of new or renewed moderate and responsible political forces.

Transformations in the world political space have already begun. During the presidential race in the U.S., Bernie Sanders fueled debate about democratic socialism as a separate area of U.S. politics. Europe is discussing the “modernization” of the conservative political wing, in particular, new progressive conservatism. The sovereignization of domestic politics is a general trend, which has a significant impact on conservative circles in Europe and the U.S. Responding to the demand of voters, conservatives are reconfiguring their political programs towards protectionism in the economy, security, culture, and national identity. In the short term, these major trends will move the conservative wing to the right, so that it could successfully compete with populist parties.
Russia should be careful when working with groups and movements that are the most conspicuous today and that are considered populist. As a rule, they do not have well thought-out programs of action, and their slogans are instinctive responses to voter discontent. There is no doubt that these parties will influence the formation of the political landscape, but they will hardly be the main players in the future. A too close association with them may narrow the field of opportunities for Russia in the longer term.

Russia’s soft power should develop a broad and long-term narrative, capable of giving constructive answers to challenges facing Russian and Western societies. In this sense, Berdyaev’s model of liberal conservatism, which combines the ideas of traditional society and liberal ideas about the value of the human being and the priority of a rule-of-law state, can serve as the basis for an alternative discourse, which Russia can offer instead of the exhausted dictatorship of postmodernity.