
“Conservatism” in Russia: Political Tool or Historical Choice?



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Abstract

President Vladimir Putin's third term of office proceeds under the "conservative shift." Does this mean that the Russian government has finally opted for conservatism as its official—though not state—ideology, with long-term consequences for both its domestic policy and foreign policies? Or is the reversion to conservatism merely the latest in a line of political devices used by the Kremlin to solve its own problems—which include the struggle against liberal opposition and the need to increase the regime's legitimacy?

Both points of view are represented in the writings of Russian and foreign experts. This article attempts to take into account the arguments of both sides while at the same time suggesting that the "shift back to conservatism" is something more than the latest in a line of political devices by the Kremlin. And whether or not the Russian government solves a few of its immediate problems with its help, the turn to conservatism itself provides new potential opportunities for the alignment of a long-term strategy.

As far as domestic policy is concerned, conservatism as a meta-narrative may appear to be a continuation of the earlier "sovereign democracy" discourse while at the same time offering an ideology to cement Russian federalism. In foreign policy, a conservative Russia may appear a more desirable partner not only for the European right but also for the countries of the Asia-Pacific region. This is significant given the recent "pivot to Asia" clearly signaled in Russian foreign policy.

Introduction

Russia's relations with the West have entered a new post-Soviet "Cold War" period following the crisis in Ukraine and the "reintegration" ("annexation" in Western view) of Crimea and Sevastopol into Russia. Both sides are relatively intransigent in the assertion of their own interpretation of the standards and principles of international law. This stand-off has already lasted over eighteen months and there is very little chance of an imminent end to it. The West applied a range of sanctions against Russian industries and individuals that specifically concern the population of Crimea and Sevastopol, along with political, diplomatic and media pressure clearly in the hope of a change of political course by Russia—and maybe even regime change.

In relation to Crimea and Sevastopol, and in its strategy for South-Eastern Ukraine, Russia has made a perfectly conscious and irrevocable choice. To a large extent this stance became possible only with and due to the moral and political consolidation that occurred at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, based on widely shared conservative values. This ideological stance allowed the Russian political elite to react with a virtually united front to the events on Kiev's Maidan and to support President Putin's domestic and foreign policies during the most difficult phase of the Ukraine crisis.

This does not mean that all Russian politicians and an absolute majority of Russians have turned conservative overnight, but rather that conservatism has transpired to be the "comfort zone" of nationwide ideological and political compromise that is in such high demand, without whose existence post-Crimea world history could have taken a different turn. This article seeks to understand the nature of Russia's "conservative shift", its causes and effects, both for Russia itself and for the international community.

Translated from Russian by Siriol Hughes-Jones.

Putin's Identification

Vladimir Putin's third presidential term has been marked by a noticeable ideological shift. Conservatism, which used to be the official ideology of the ruling party "United Russia" (or what Andrei Isaev, one of the party's leading ideologues, calls "social conservatism"),¹ and which has virtually disappeared from official party documents, has been given a stamp of approval from the very top of the Russian government. In a 2013 interview Vladimir Putin, who had previously avoided identifying himself with any particular ideology,² described himself in the following terms:

"I think it is perfectly possible to say that I am a *pragmatist with a conservative bent*. [...] Conservatism certainly does not mean stagnation. Conservatism means reliance on traditional values but with a necessary additional element aimed at development. It seems to me that this is an absolutely essential thing. And as a rule the situation in the world, in almost every country, is such that conservatives gather the resources, the funds, and the potential for economic growth. Then the revolutionaries come along and they divide all this up one way or another. "Revolutionaries" is relative of course. They may simply be representatives of left-wing movements, left-wing parties or they may be genuine radicals. They then divide this up and everyone is pleased. The period of disillusionment begins when it seems everything has been used up or spoiled and you need to start earning again. People realize this and again they call in the conservatives. Again they put their shoulder to the wheel, they get to work, they start to build things up again and then they are

¹ "'Rossiyskiy konservatizm' stal ofitsial'noy ideologiyey 'Yedinoy Rossii'" ["Russian Conservatism" has Become United Russia's Official Ideology], RIA Novosti, 21 November 2009, <<http://ria.ru/politics/20091121/194856090.html>>. One should point out that in addition to the social conservative platform headed by Andrei Isaev there is a liberal conservative platform within United Russia which is headed by Vladimir Pligin. See <<http://er.ru/news/80493/>>.

² "Russkiy natsionalist Dmitry Medvedev" [Russian Nationalist Dmitry Medvedev], <Inosmi.ru>, 10 March 2008, <<http://inosmi.ru/world/20080310/240115.html>>.

The only exception to this is the conversation between Vladimir Putin and Angela Merkel on 8 March 2008 during which he literally stated the following, "Dmitry Medvedev will have no need to prove his liberal views. But that does not make him any less of a *Russian nationalist* (in the positive meaning of the word) than I am," said Putin at the time. "And it will be no easier for our partners to work with him. He will fiercely defend the interests of the Russian Federation". Indeed, here, too, it seems he made a deliberate play on words, in which this description as a "Russian nationalist" was used simply as an emotional synonym for "patriotism".

told “Okay, that’s enough, you’ve saved plenty. Now it’s time to share it”. This is the constant circle within politics”.³

One may understand the Russian president’s description of himself as being one of two things depending on whether we define his position as “conservative *pragmatism*” or as “pragmatic *conservatism*”. The question comes down to what, in the given wording, is the noun and what the adjective.

His personal “grammar” encourages us to accept the term “pragmatist” as being the primary element that takes effective priority. Indeed, at the very outset, Putin refers to himself as a “pragmatist with a conservative bent”. Later, however, when explaining his understanding of conservatism, he actually defines it as a developed political *philosophy* and says this philosophy allows the drawing of two key *pragmatic* conclusions.

First of all, conservatism is understood as a guideline for a political course, the basic principle of which is the development with an emphasis on traditional—i.e. conservative—values.⁴ Secondly, conservatism (as this fully reflects Samuel Huntington’s definition of this political ideology)⁵ is understood as being opposed in principle to any radicalism—but to left-wing radicalism in particular. That is, as a position legitimized by the *simple, practical maxim* that before you spend anything you need to have created and to have saved something. And “Before breaking up what has allowed us to achieve the current level of growth, we have to understand how the new mechanisms work. This is essential”.⁶

As appears from Vladimir Putin’s descriptions of himself and his explanations, for him personally conservatism is a perfectly consistent philosophical and moral platform, consistent also as an outlook on the world. It is specifically on this that he based his election campaign of 2011-2012 and specifically this that he put forward as the foundation for his national development strategy

³ Interview with Russia’s Channel One and the Associated Press agency, <Kremlin.ru>, 4 September 2013, <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19143>>.

⁴ As Vladimir Putin noted in one of the Valdai Club discussions in 2014, “for society to exist there needs to be support for some fundamental things developed by mankind over centuries: these are a caring attitude towards motherhood and childhood, a caring attitude towards one’s own history, towards its achievements and a caring attitude towards our traditions and traditional religions”: meeting of the International Valdai Discussion Club, <Kremlin.ru>, 24 October 2014, <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>>. The president further expanded on the concept of conservative values on another occasion: “Honest hard work, private property, freedom of enterprise—these are basic, I would emphasize—*conservative values*.” Address by the president to the Federal Assembly, <Kremlin.ru>, 4 December 2014, <www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/47173>.

⁵ S. Huntington, “Conservatism as an Ideology”, *The American Political Science Review*, No. 51, 1957.

⁶ Meeting of the International Valdai Discussion Club, <Kremlin.ru>, 24 October 2014, <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>>.

to 2025, presented to the Russian public as one of the “May Decrees” of 2012.

The question arises of how far the president’s personal identification with conservatism is able to turn conservatism into some sort of, if not state ideology (which is prohibited by article 13 of the Russian Federation’s Constitution), then into one that is officially-sanctioned and perhaps more, into a national ideology at the current stage in the country’s development and specifically within the foreign policy context? In other words: is the current Russian “conservative shift” a matter of spin dreamed up *ad hoc* that produces a short-term result but is of little use (or is even harmful) in the medium to long term? Or is this shift not accidental after all but one for which Russia’s earlier cultural, historical, philosophical and political traditions have paved the way? And does it therefore dictate the course of Russia’s domestic and foreign policies, as Vladimir Lenin once said about the Bolshevik government, “in earnest and in the long term”?

Clash of Interpretations

For many domestic and foreign experts, the Russian president is a “liberal conservative”.⁷ One of the leading British experts on contemporary Russian politics, Richard Sakwa, has noted that “Putin’s centrism” as the incarnation of Russia’s unique “third way” “is drawn from an older tradition, liberal conservatism” which is sustained by such eminent philosophers of the first wave of Russian emigration as Peter Struve and Semyon Frank.⁸

Canadian academic Paul Robinson also supports the thesis based on which “Putin fits into a long-standing Russian tradition of ‘liberal-conservatism’”. And on this basis he comes to this general conclusion:

“But the point here is not whether liberal-conservatism is the right choice for Russia. Rather, the issue is that we in the West fail to recognize this ideology for what it is. Putin has a clear vision of a strong, centralized, law-based government with defined and limited competences, consistent with native Russian schools of thought. Our relations with Russia would be greatly improved if we were to acknowledge and engage with this reality instead of tilting at irrelevant caricatures of a police state”.⁹

This point of view was later shared and given further support by American researcher and essayist Paul Grenier. He refers especially to the fact that Ivan Ilyin, one of the most significant philosophers among the Russian émigré community in the 20th century, and who is the very embodiment of the “liberal conservative”, can be regarded as Vladimir Putin’s ideological prototype.¹⁰

However, a number of experts do not share this approach and insist that the contemporary Russian “conservative shift” is in fact just a temporary instrument in what is otherwise a purely

⁷ They also include the author of this article. See Leonid Polyakov, “Liberal’nyy konservator. Imenno takim predstavlyaetsya Vladimir Putin, sudya po ego zayavleniyam” [A Liberal Conservative, this is what Vladimir Putin Appears to be Judging by his Statements], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 2 February 2000.

⁸ R. Sakwa, *Putin: Russia’s Choice*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2004.

⁹ P. Robinson, “Putin’s Philosophy”, *The American Conservative*, 28 March 2012, <www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/putins-philosophy/>.

¹⁰ P. Grenier, “A Conservative Russia? This Means War! (The Tragedy of American Ideology)”, Johnson’s Russia List, 24 March 2015, <<http://russialist.org/paul-grenier-a-conservative-russia-this-means-war-the-tragedy-of-american-ideology/>>.

opportunistic Kremlin policy. One of the first to put forward such views was Marlène Laruelle:

“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”.¹¹

Three arguments support this choice. Firstly, the basic toolkit of the most senior political elite, who make up what we know as “the Kremlin”, remains unchanged. These are pragmatism in domestic politics, *Realpolitik* in international relations and a “nihilistic belief that reinforces cynicism, patronage and consumerism.” In addition to this basic triad, conservatism was used as some sort of ideological “added value” intended to reinforce the regime’s declining legitimacy.

Secondly, unlike the unchanging regime, Russian society has changed a great deal. An active liberal minority has appeared and has ambitions towards full inclusion in politics. Something of equal ideological weight needed to be put up to oppose it. Conservatism aimed at the masses played this role. The problem is that it is no longer shared by the Russian elites. Furthermore, there used to be a general consensus in favor of the Kremlin using an appeal to implicit patriotism. However, the danger arose here that this could become overt nationalism. Inherent in this was a direct threat of the break-up of a multinational and multi-confessional country, hence the appeal to an overt “*moral conservatism*” which is of course intended to shore up the status quo.

Thirdly, Marlène Laruelle insists that Putin and his close circle are using conservatism to score points in foreign policy by criticizing the US and European elites as failing to reflect the opinion of their own conservative majority. In this regard, the Russian foreign policy discourse is identical to what the right wing in Europe, and conservative Republicans and Tea Party supporters in the United States are saying. Laruelle admits that the response to the Russia’s action is increasing “Russophilia” in European right-wing circles. Her forecast for the future is:

“The Kremlin’s attempts to put in place a more elaborate ideology are probably doomed to failure. (...) 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 destabi-

¹¹ M. Laruelle, “Conservatism as the Kremlin’s New Toolkit: an Ideology at the Lowest Cost”, *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 138, 8 November 2013, <www.css.ethz.ch/publications/DetailansichtPubDB_EN?rec_id=2759>.

lizing 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”.¹²

By submitting that the current “conservative turn” in Russia is purely instrumental and that moral conservatism cannot and will not aspire to the status of an ideologically-inspired social reform project, Marlène Laruelle apparently reveals the Kremlin’s “secret intention”. But in fact she is simply repeating, in the Russian context, ideas put forward by Samuel Huntington as long ago as 1957¹³. Unlike those of its “ideational” competitors such as liberalism and communism, conservatism as a political ideology does not in principle offer society any kind of ideological project. Conservatism is a positional ideology that *defends* the existing institutional structure against attempts to radically change or destroy it.

That explains why we cannot demand absolute ideological leadership like the emerging conservatism in Russia, let alone demands for an ideological monopoly. The description of modern-day Russian conservatism as a “meta-narrative” fundamentally distinguishes Marlène Laruelle’s approach from attempts to present the current situation as yet another kind of (well-known) “Potemkin village”. Polish writers Witold Rodkiewicz and Yadwiga Rogoza, who repeat much of Marlène Laruelle’s thesis, add their own even harsher conclusions regarding the nature and objectives of the current Russian “conservative shift”. They claim that:

“In reality the Kremlin has been treating its own conservative ideology in a purely instrumental manner. Its resort to conservatism has been aimed solely at enhancing the legitimacy of the regime by claiming that it reflects Russian tradition. While it is the Kremlin’s genuine intention to maintain a strong, centralized state authority, the conservative social and moral rhetoric is in fact being used as just another ‘political technology’, i.e. a tool for manipulating public opinion, both at home and abroad. The invocation of this ideology means neither that the current rulers of Russia really adhere to conservative values, nor that they have a long-term programme to implement them. We are in fact dealing with *another kind of ‘Potemkin village’*, the aim of which is to divert public attention from Russia’s real socio-political and economic problems, and to provide the authorities with arguments to implement repressive internal policies and an anti-Western foreign policy”.¹⁴

In this interpretation conservatism appears merely as a political tool used to distract the public from real problems, and to justify repressive domestic policies as well as an anti-Western

¹² Ibid, p. 4.

¹³ S. Huntington, *op. cit.* [5].

¹⁴ W. Rodkiewicz, Y. Rogoza, “The Politics of the Putin Regime”, *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 171, 14 July 2015.

foreign policy. In response to the question of how effective this tool is and whether it is not what one might call a “self-delusional mirage” they say:

“The Kremlin’s adoption of a new “conservative” ideology, and its implementation of this conservative political project, seems in the short term to have brought the Kremlin its desired results. In contrast, however, the long-term consequences may be unfavourable for the authorities”.¹⁵

The admission by such critics that thanks to the “conservative shift” the Kremlin has managed in the short-term to achieve the goals it has set deserves special attention. If only because this assumes not just deliberate manipulation on the part of the government but the existence of a certain readiness on the part of a huge majority to accept the new rules of, if you like, the “ideological game”.

In other words, by the middle of the second decade of the 21st century, the Kremlin had succeeded in doing what it had tried so hard to do twenty years ago: specifically, to establish a nationwide consensus which, if not an ideological meeting of minds, was at least a pragmatic compromise on a relatively broad platform of “conservative values”. And while this is of course a new level in national consolidation, it is more specifically a key step in managing the consolidation of “society” and “government” which is the one true foundation of Russian statehood in the post-Soviet era.

In this context it is worth noting that even some of the liberal Russian analysts (who are overall pretty critical in their attitude to the current regime) accept that history paved the way for the “conservative turn”. In particular, the Russian journalist and head of the “Russian domestic policy and political institutions” Program at the Moscow Carnegie Center, Andrei Kolesnikov writes:

“The Russian political establishment has been eager to supply the ideology called for by the masses. In March 2015, 49 percent of Russians gave Putin credit for restoring the country to its great-power status. The regime has generally benefited from a stable yet relatively high level of demand for conservative ideology over the past fifteen years. After almost a decade of sociopolitical transition, a transformational crisis, and a rupture of

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 4. The authors see the reasons for these unfavorable consequences in the materialist attitudes of the majority of the elite, reluctant to sacrifice their prosperity for the sake of “conservative values”, in the passivity of the masses willing to make the next ideological “shift” under the influence of the government and, finally in the cynicism of the government itself, which is using conservatism to build yet another “Potemkin village”.

the socioeconomic order, popular demand for something abstractly conservative was poised to come to the surface.”¹⁶

Andrei Kolesnikov also poses the question of how serious this shift is in the long term but, unlike his Polish colleagues, he examines the chances of the “conservative project” being replaced with a liberal one. In other words, the vexed question (asked by all Russian liberals) arises yet again of when there will finally be any “Russian modernization”. And his response, essentially, boils down to the fact that this will only occur when ideology is replaced with realism. This is because:

“Modernization begins with getting rid of mythologizing and sacral thinking; it requires a sober reassessment and a return to truth and a realistic worldview. After that, a vision of the future and a strategic program with an ultimate goal and a road map could emerge.”¹⁷

This fairly critical yet relatively objective analysis has one problem. This lies in the fact that the appearance of conservatism as a kind of “national ideology” is regarded simultaneously as both a natural process, the outcome of the whole of Russia’s post-Soviet evolution, and as an “unnatural” process, the result of the authorities’ manipulation of the public consciousness. At the same time, the authorities (*vlast*—the supreme political power/authority and generally applied to the Kremlin) is understood as something imposed on the masses (evidently by those same authorities), including through the use of an ideology such as conservatism. In other words, many analysts work with the paradigm of the “authoritarian regime” and therefore regard everything that happens within the search for a new, post-Soviet national identity as a variety of *compulsion* exerted by the authorities on society.¹⁸

However, as Andrei Kolesnikov himself accepts, the “conservative shift” in Russia is happening within the framework of a “two-way street”: the authorities and society (or an overwhelming majority of its members) have converged on conservatism as the ultimate expression of the “social contract”. And this contract is certainly not “freedom in exchange for Crimea and spiritual bonds”, as Andrei Kolesnikov claims.¹⁹ It actually looks like this: authorities credit society for the *right* to moral conservatism while society considers it to be the duty of the authorities to steer a conservative

¹⁶ A. Kolesnikov, “Russian Ideology after Crimea”, *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 22 September 2015, <<http://carnegie.ru/2015/09/22/russian-ideology-after-crimea/ihzq>>.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 20.

¹⁸ See for example the reference to the apparently self-evident “time of authoritarian conservatism in Russian domestic politics”: B. Lo, “Frontiers New and Old: Russia’s Policy in Central Asia”, *Russie.Nei. Visions*, No 86, January 2015, <www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ifri_rnv_82_central_asia_bobolo_eng_january_2015_0.pdf>.

¹⁹ A. Kolesnikov, *op. cit.* [16].

course in domestic and foreign policies. This is the true expression of the social freedom that each nation with genuine sovereignty creates for itself.

Where Will the “Conservative Shift” Lead?

Vladimir Putin’s own description of himself in ideological terms referred to at the beginning of this article is the personalization of this new social contract. Putin’s pragmatism relies on a firm conservative moral foundation. This means he puts basic moral objectives at the fore when setting the main directions in domestic and foreign policies.²⁰ For this reason the polls showing the level of trust and approval of V. Putin’s actions have, over the last year and a half, been two or three times higher than those of leading Western politicians.

However, this incontrovertible fact certainly does not mean that Russian society as a whole has become conservative. That is the case neither where the elite nor where the general public are concerned. For example, here is a wonderful admission by one of Vladimir Putin’s closest advisers, First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov:

“I understand that in the political process it is sometimes important to call someone a liberal, someone a conservative or something else. I can assure you that there are neither liberals nor conservatives within the government. Whatever I may have been called I have always been and remain a pragmatist. I don’t care whose ideas they are—liberal, communist, “A Just Russia” or “United Russia”. If they are interesting, useful and will help improve our lives or strengthen the economy I will work with them. The main thing here is not to end up with an unworkable mish-mash.”²¹

It is impossible to overlook the fact that this is a rather paradoxical claim given that the government is headed by the chairman of the United Russia party, Dmitry Medvedev. But this

²⁰ One of the most conspicuous political explanations of moral conservatism is the following passage from the Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation dated 4 December 2014, in which Putin openly declared that “Crimea, the ancient Korsun or Chersonesus, and Sevastopol have invaluable civilizational and even sacral importance for Russia, like the Temple Mount in Jerusalem for the followers of Islam and Judaism. And this is how we will always consider it.” Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, <Kremlin.ru>, 4 December 2014, <www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/47173>.

²¹ Speech during “government hour” at the State Duma, 30 January 2015, <www.russia-today.ru/article.php?i=1294>.

paradox can be explained by the fact that, as has been noted above, there has recently been a move within the “United Russia” party itself away from defining itself as a party of conservatives. And the fact is that, despite the genuine moral conservatism of the average voter, the public perception of the term “conservative” itself remains extremely loose. This is precisely what WCIOM (Russia Public Opinion Research Center) identified in its report “The nebulous nature of Russian Conservatism”, presented in May 2014.²²

Thus, in answer to the question “What comes into your head first when you hear the word “conservative” or “conservative person?” 38% of those polled cited positive features, 32% negative and 31% were undecided. Asked whether to describe someone as conservative is positive or negative, 43% said it was positive and 37% said it was negative, with 21% undecided.

An interesting dynamic in the attitude to conservatism was evident in the period from November 2003 to February 2014. The number of those who believed that “conservatism is what allows the preservation of a country’s customs and traditions, existing social structure and smooth, undisrupted progress” grew from 44% to 56%. But at the same time the number of those who believe that conservatism “does not allow society to move ahead” also grew—from 27% to 31%. The trend in the changes, in responses to the question “Do you personally sympathize with the ideas of conservatism or not?”, is equally revealing. In 2003, 37% replied “yes definitely” or “yes probably” while 33% answered “probably not” or “definitely not”. 30% were undecided. In 2014, 48% answered “yes” definitely or probably, 35% replied definitely or probably not, while 17% remained undecided.

These figures show that despite an obvious increase in sympathy for conservative ideas, the attitude to the “conservative” ideological “brand” remains extremely ambivalent. And that means that for conservatism to become the national ideology that genuinely determines domestic policy priorities and the direction of foreign policy, the Kremlin will have to make explicit the latent content containing this meta-narrative. What is more, this is content that concerns not the immediate practical aspects of the discourse (how to resist the challenges of the liberal opposition and support the legitimacy of the regime) but specifically the deeper “meta” level, that of long-term strategic goals.

Whether and how this will happen remains unclear. But we can already assume this could be made explicit, at least where

²² “Tumannyy obraz rossiyskogo konservatizma” [The Nebulous Nature of Russian Conservatism], WCIOM, 2014, <http://wciom.ru/fileadmin/file/reports_conferences/2014/2014-05-16-konservatizm.pdf>.

three key aspects are concerned. Two of these relate to long-term domestic policy objectives and one to foreign policy in the long term.

First of all, a strategically significant continuation of the existing “conservative shift” could occur as an extension of the “sovereign democracy” discussion that took place a decade ago, but on radically new terms and with radically different implications. It is worth remembering that the term, coined in 2004 by Romano Prodi, was applied to Russia for one purpose only—to assert Russia’s sovereign right to independence from any foreign policy diktat. These days, any return to a discussion of “sovereign democracy” would fundamentally relate to domestic policy.

One of the implications of the “conservative shift” lies in the fact that the authorities address a significant majority of Russian citizens as if addressing the constitutional “sovereign” with a fundamentally new objective; namely to offer them a stable format for political engagement, not just as supporters voting for the *status quo* once every few years but as the genuine masters of their own political fate and of the associated political leaders. This way, the people would, for the first time in the last hundred years of Russian history, have an opportunity to stop being the passive “masses” who are constantly being led towards a “bright future”, be it by “enlightened” communists in 1917 or by “enlightened” liberals in 1991.

In other words, conservatism as national identity expressed through an ideology becomes a means of presenting the nation itself as “sovereign” as defined by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his treatise *The Social Contract*. And no matter how “strange” or unacceptable the Russian people appear in their choice of way of life, moral standards or political system if judged by the canons of Western liberal democracies or the tastes of the Russian liberal minority, this is its sovereign right. Here again conservatism can be regarded as an instrument, though this time not as an “instrument of the Kremlin” but as an instrument of the people that allows them to secure their sovereign right once and for all to choose the trajectory of their own development.

The new model of integrating cultural pluralism within the framework of Russia’s unique federalism could become a second aspect of domestic policy that renders the strategic potential of the “conservative shift” more explicit. While it may have been confirmed in law under the 1993 Russian Federation Constitution, the principle of Russian state federalism is in fact far from being implemented in practice. Russia’s unique ethnic and religious mix (probably only comparable with that of India) is simultaneously a powerful development resource and the source of serious issues. The creation in March 2015 of the Federal Agency for Nationality Affairs is an implicit acknowledgement of this.

The head of the Agency, Igor Barinov, has described its primary objective as the creation of a multi-level system to monitor, analyze and predict ethnic and religious conflicts which would “allow us not simply to later confirm some event that has already taken place but [...] to understand in advance where the threat is and where there is a critical mass forming which could lead to ethnic or religious conflict”²³.

Unsurprisingly, what needs to be achieved in the short term is reducing the potential for conflict within Russia’s regions. But the basis of any long-term strategy in this area has to be an attempt to use conservatism as an instrument to legitimize the unique ethnic, cultural and religious diversity not only of the “nation republics” within the Russian federation but of all of its constituent parts. It is specifically here that Vladimir Putin’s idea about Russia as a unique civilization, put forward by him in January 2012 during the presidential election campaign, might be usefully applied. In his article on the “Russian Question”, he then wrote: “The Russian nation defines itself as a multi-ethnic civilization held together by a Russian cultural nucleus”. Essentially, this is a form of “third way” between the Western multi-cultural project which, in Putin’s opinion, has failed and the challenge of an alternative “nation state” project built “solely on ethnic identity”²⁴.

Federalism, as inherited by the new Russia from the Bolsheviks, may, in a conservative interpretation, be given fresh impetus for its development. The principle applied in the Soviet Union, according to which all republics (federal republics and autonomous republics within the RSFSR) were “national in form and socialist in content”. The party ideologues believed that everything national would in future have to be smoothed out to allow the emergence of a “new historical commonality”, a *Soviet people* with no nationality. It is no secret that it was precisely the rise of national movements prompted by perestroika that proved to be one of the factors that destroyed the USSR from within. If we learn from this we could turn the old USSR formula on its head and define Russian civilization as a federation of entities that are national in content and conservative in form.

Finally, the likely third aspect of Russia’s “conservative shift” appears in the clear shift in foreign policy priorities to the East and to the Asia-Pacific region in particular. It has been noted in many of the works cited above that the Kremlin’s conservative discourse is addressed to mainly right-wing Western politicians.

²³ Meeting of Dmitry Medvedev with the head of the Federal Agency for Nationality Affairs, Igor Barinov, <government.ru>, 29 July 2015, <<http://government.ru/news/19081/>>.

²⁴ V. Putin, “Rossiya sosredotachivaetsya. Orientiry” [Russia Focuses. Landmarks], OLMA Media Group, 2012, p. 19, Incidentally, German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, also noted the “failure of multi-culturalism” when she used her famous phrase “Multi-Culti ist tot” (“Multi-culturalism is dead”).

Here it is indeed receiving a favorable response—in contrast to the Western political mainstream.

However, the pivot towards Asia promises very different prospects for the Russian conservative discourse. Putin's conservative formula (development on the back of national traditions) is an almost perfect match both for Asian modernizations that have already taken place (in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore) and the hopes and intentions of the next modernization projects in the East and South-East. Most importantly, this formula perfectly reflects the experience of the People's Republic of China, the main strategic partner of today's Russia.

Indeed, China's Communist Party is building socialism with a Chinese flavor but it is precisely this unique flavor that allows modernization to be achieved by evolution rather than revolution. It was no coincidence that at the last meeting of the Valdai Club, one of China's leading intellectuals, Professor Feng Shaolei, asked President Putin about what sets the Russian concept of conservatism apart and also about "whether this will be a dominant concept for Russia's modernization or temporary, for a specific period?"²⁵ Putin's reply to this specific question is set out at the beginning of this article. But the answer to the question posed by this article itself remains open.

²⁵ Meeting of the International Valdai Discussion Club, <Kremlin.ru>, 24 October 2014, <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>>.

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