

Russia's Nationalist Consolidation: Love it or Leave it?

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October 1999

PONARS Policy Memo 121

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Stalin and Putin as Nationalist Counter-Revolutionaries

More than sixty years ago, Russia experienced a radical ideological transition that in some respects strikingly resembles the processes taking place today. In the late twenties, Communist ideology in Russia was in a profound crisis. The austere and naive economic policies of so-called Military Communism were abandoned in 1920. The New Economic Policy, which allowed some private entrepreneurship, eased the social tensions that had to be ruthlessly suppressed in the early twenties, but only at the price of undermining the ideological legitimacy of the Communist government. The world revolution failed to materialize. Instead, a large part of Europe was increasingly an arena for various nationalist parties and regimes. The Communist idea of a cosmopolitan proletariat who had no fatherland and whose only enemy was the international bourgeoisie obviously did not work. The price paid for the sake of Communism was immense. In general, Russian Communism seemed a major failure.

Twenty years later, Russia emerged as a Communist superpower. It was a greatly modified Communism, however. For one thing, it was no longer cosmopolitan. In fact, it persecuted Jews for being too cosmopolitan. It restored many symbols of the old empire, such as military uniforms and ranks. The new empire rehabilitated the most famous tsarist generals, including those who only a few years earlier had been considered oppressors of smaller nations, and even some tsars like Peter the Great or Ivan the Terrible, previously considered sick tyrants. Such was the nature of the transition that started in the thirties. It was basically a nationalist transition that successfully rallied a large part of Russian society along nationalist lines. It was so contrary to some basic ideas of the Communist revolution that Stalin had to wipe out a whole generation of revolutionaries, along with their ideas.

Today's Russia is experiencing a crisis that in some respects is similar to the crisis of the late twenties. For various reasons, the recent Russian liberal revolution failed miserably. With the flashy new rich of dubious reputation in the foreground, the Russian economy has shrunk to the size of Portugal. Its federal budget is less than that of New York City. Its population is poorly fed and clad and is shrinking at the rate of almost one million people per year. Its outgoing president has been embarrassing Russians throughout his tenure. Russia's international stance is no longer important. The major powers are at best

ambivalent as far as Russia's security is concerned. It is no surprise that Russians in general feel victimized by the liberal idea, or that liberal politicians cannot score much higher than 5% in national elections.

These days, we are witnessing the beginning of a new transition. The attitudes of Russians towards the second Chechen war that made Vladimir. Putin so popular are in stark contrast to the unpopular first Chechen war, which ended only four years ago. We see revealing signs of historical revisionism in the ruling elite, such as toasts to Stalin or flowers for Andropov, that were inconceivable ten or even five years ago. Basically, what makes the situation of the thirties similar to the present one is that the failed revolution precipitates a crisis of legitimacy. In both cases, some segments of the ruling elite cope with the crisis, attempt to legitimize their power, and solidify society by appealing to the offended national sentiment of the Russian people.

National Liberalism or Worse?

Whereas Stalin's counterrevolution produced a peculiar version of National Communism that abjured several basic elements of the original Communist idea, one wonders as to what kind of Russian regime is lurking ahead of us today. Some people in Russia would like to believe that it is going to be a kind of national liberalism. Sure, they say, several basic elements of liberalism will be abandoned. We have learned the painful lesson that money goes to places like China rather than to places like Russia, where freedom of speech is not backed up by economic security. So, there is no reason to bother much about freedom of speech, but every reason to create a better environment for foreign and domestic investment. We have also learned that weak countries' arguments fall on deaf ears. So, there is every reason to pump some of the remaining resources into the army and flex our muscles in the Caucasus some, so that our arguments will be better heard. Our people love to see this, so it will also serve to further consolidate the society. But in general we will remain committed to the development of a market economy, as the modern liberal society will remain our purpose and ideal.

Of course, this is probably an oversimplification. But it serves the purpose of showing that national liberalism is going to be a caricature of liberalism as it was conceived back in 1991. And yet, unfortunately, it is the best scenario under the current circumstances. As if the fact that this Pinochet scenario is what many Russian liberals hope for were not enough, there are a few more hazardous scenarios. For one thing, where is the guarantee that Putin will always be able to outplay the Communists in what is largely their own field? Or, for that matter, that he will continue to compete with them rather than to cooperate with them and forsake the handful of hopeful liberals?

Setting such speculations aside, I would like to highlight another aspect of the current transition, namely the anti-Western attitude that seems to be one of the central components of Russia's nationalist consolidation. As much as the West was admired ten years ago, there is now a sense of victimization among Russians, who feel that the West has been playing against them. The calls of Western leaders for more democracy and

openness are perceived as inconsequential or hypocritical. This disenchantment makes Russia a very difficult partner. As a disenchanted lover is often deeply hostile to and suspicious of his or her former partner, so is Russia deeply suspicious of the West. Almost anything the West will do or say with respect to Russia will likely be perceived in the worst possible light. The easiest strategy for the West under such circumstances may be to leave, that is to minimize interactions with Russia.

However, there are two obvious reasons why this is not a good idea. The first reason is that the West has important economic and security interests in Russia that cannot be easily discarded. The second reason is that such isolation will likely lead Russians to seek partners elsewhere. There have already been calls in Russia to seek strategic partnership with China and/or India and to oppose the West. While this would likely be a self-defeating strategy for Russia, it is surely pregnant with negative implications for the West as well.

What then is an alternative strategy for dealing with Russia, given its current aversion to the West? To go back to the disenchanted lover analogy, loving could be an alternative strategy to leaving. Sometimes it is possible to persuade an offended person that you really care, especially if you are genuinely interested. There are important interests that Russia and the West share. But in order to realize this potential, it is absolutely necessary to convince Russians that the West cares. If such an effort is to succeed, it must involve a structure of incentives for Russia that seriously commits the Western powers to consideration of Russia's interests.

The Russian national emblem is the two-headed eagle, with one head turned westward and the other eastward. It lucidly epitomizes the dual nature of Russian society, with historical and cultural roots in both the Orient and the Occident. Whereas it is possible that the eastern head will overwhelm its western counterpart, the West still has a fair chance to prevent the western head from withering-- cutting it off is hardly in the West's interest.

PONARS 1999