

# Alexander Solzhenitsyn as a Mirror of the Russian Counter-Revolution

Eduard Ponarin

October 2000

PONARS Policy Memo 150

European University at St. Petersburg

Seemingly worried about recent trends in Russian government policies that call into question freedom of speech and private property, Anatoly Chubais--a pioneer of Russian economic reforms--suddenly declared this September that the government was unduly influenced by the ideas of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. A few weeks later, Chubais' pronouncement received unexpected confirmation by a televised meeting between President Vladimir Putin and the dissident writer. Apparently, President Putin is in search of a political identity and ideological legitimation. In the absence of realistic alternatives, Solzhenitsyn's ideology may indeed become a principal element of the emerging Russian identity--not only at the governmental level, but also for society.

## **Solzhenitsyn and Contemporary Russia**

During Stalin's era, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn spent several years in Soviet concentration camps. He became famous during and in the wake of Nikita Khrushchev's relatively short-lived thaw as an author of fiction and documentary prose that revealed the horrors of the Stalinist repression. When the thaw was over, he was stripped of Soviet citizenship and exiled to the West. Once there (secluded in Vermont), Solzhenitsyn surprised many Westerners with his outspoken criticisms of Western society. He returned to Russia in 1994.

Solzhenitsyn came back to the fore of political activism while the Soviet Union was collapsing, when he published an essay arguing for a unification of Russia with Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. In his last book, published in 1998 soon after his triumphant return to Russia, he delivered a scathing criticism of Russian reforms, accused Western countries (in particular the US) of capitalizing on Russian misery, and warned that the survival of the Russian people itself was jeopardized. According to Solzhenitsyn, it is the Orthodox religion--a bottom-up vertical line of local government similar to that introduced by Aleksandr II in the 1860s--and the spirit of the nation that collectively can deliver us from the current predicament; a triad not too different from the classic "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationalism." Furthermore, extreme forms of nationalism, such as fascism, seem to him a highly unlikely scenario in Russia. To the contrary, he seems to believe that a major problem of Russia is its weak national consciousness, which he writes is exacerbated by attacks from the liberal media, including Radio Liberty, on any manifestations of Russian nationalism.

Both the domestic and international environment seem favorable for the realization of Solzhenitsyn's ideas:

- Russian liberals by and large have discredited themselves and cannot put forward a leader equal in standing to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Liberal media that criticized some of the recent changes in Russian politics and society, including Radio Liberty, are being disciplined;
- The leadership of Belarus seems to be a step ahead of the Russian government as far as unification plans are concerned;
- Kazakhstan--along with some landlocked Central Asian countries dependent on Russian routes and resources, and scared by Islamic fundamentalists in and beyond Afghanistan--has recently entered into a closer alliance with Russia;
- More independent-minded but poorly governed and lacking energy resources, Ukraine is cornered by the world oil crisis and the apparent willingness of the East European governments to circumvent Ukraine's transit pipelines from Russia. With a cold winter a few months ahead and both internal and external pressures growing, Ukraine seems to be only a step away from a major reevaluation of its foreign policy;
- In Russia's ideological void, the role of the Russian Orthodox Church has been growing steadily;
- The Russian president seeks Solzhenitsyn's advice on reform of the "power vertical;" and
- Russian society is getting increasingly nationalist.

Or, was President Putin's visit to Solzhenitsyn's home merely a clever public relations event aimed at distancing the government from unpopular liberals? Indeed, it could bring the government a few political points just before a rather austere draft budget went before the State Duma. Yet there seems to be more than just a coincidence between the ideas expressed in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's political essays and the general direction of developments taking place in Russia since the anti-Communist revolution of 1991. Due to the liberal revolution's failure to deliver better lives to people, increasing segments of the frustrated Russian establishment (and of society at large) are looking for an alternative solution to Russia's problems. A counter-revolution is now unfolding in Russia which finds legitimacy in the sort of ideology Solzhenitsyn preaches.

### **Dangers of the Counter-Revolution**

So, is Solzhenitsyn an ingenious prophet who foresaw post-Soviet developments even before the ultimate collapse of the Communist system? Perhaps he is. Yet here are some considerations elucidating the potential dangers associated with the ongoing counter-revolution that Solzhenitsyn's work never addressed:

### *The Danger of Power-Enforced Cohesion in the Post-Soviet Space*

The collapse of the USSR was relatively peaceful because the federal center was weaker than its constituent republics. Indeed, the leadership of the Russian republic under Boris Yeltsin was instrumental in the demise of the Soviet Union, as it took the side of other republics against the center (personified by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev). The Russian people, being the dominant element in the union, had little or no animosity toward other peoples. These days, the situation has reversed. The Russian Federation--which would now play the role of the power center--is stronger than any of the potential union members. On the other hand, it is highly unlikely that these independent states entering various unions will fully forsake their independence. Rather, they will try and negotiate a status out of proportion with their resources. That would no longer be a Soviet setup, but rather one like Yugoslavia. Serbia, internally powerful and surrounded by weaker neighbors, was increasingly frustrated by its modest position within the Yugoslav federation, and tempted to use power to enforce its aspirations. The situation finally exploded in bloodshed. The Russian Federation must be careful to avoid such an outcome. A nationalist Russia may find it much harder to keep the peace in its borderlands than did the older imperialist Russia.

### *The Danger of Extreme Forms of Nationalism*

Likewise, it is no longer true that the Russian people have little or no animosity toward other peoples. Russians who found themselves beyond the borders of the Russian Federation (and sometimes even within, as in the Chechen Republic) have experienced a sharp status reversal. Many of those who found the situation especially unbearable migrated to Russia proper where they shared their less than pleasant experiences with other Russians. In addition to bitterness against their former socialist compatriots, there is a feeling (expressed by Solzhenitsyn among others), of being betrayed or exploited by the major world powers. The combination resembles post-World War I Germany, which has found expression in the term "Weimar Russia." It potentially provides a fertile ground for various extremist ideologues. While embracing the ideology of Russian nationalism, which may be unavoidable and even useful, the Russian leadership has to be careful not to allow extreme shades of nationalism in socially accepted discourse.

### *The Danger of Silencing the Press*

Whereas many people are no doubt happy to see the humiliation of formerly powerful media magnates, silencing the media is destroying a useful mechanism of societal self-regulation. The profoundly undemocratic nature of the Russian establishment--the character of which has changed little since the late Soviet era--is incompatible with the bottom-up government system proposed by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. In the absence of independent media, democratic institutions will degenerate into self-sufficient and self-interested bureaucracies, and Solzhenitsyn's vision will remain a utopia.

Solzhenitsyn is a nationalist counter-revolutionary. He passionately fought against both the Bolshevik takeover of 1917 (even if *ex post facto*) and the liberal revolution of the

early nineties. His views, however, would not be very popular if Russian liberals succeed by enacting reforms that better the lot of the masses. It is the failure of liberal reforms and the resulting incapacity of Russia to benefit from the global prosperity of the post-Cold-War period that have made Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn a mirror of the Russian counter-revolution.

© PONARS 2000