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CHAPTER TEN

Reflections on cross-currents of Russian conservatism

Elena Chebankova

Every nation, just like every individual, has its own inner strength and can survive by it in a wider world; yet one needs to act in order to be alive. And to do that one needs to be in full command with his body parts. Say this to those who blindly admire the customs of other peoples [Europeans]. Tell them that we too can live like the rest [of Europe], if we free ourselves from the alien/foreign theories that constrain our life and adopt just one founding principle – free competition of agents – and ensure that law and order protects all activity and allows free development. They will object and cite Proudhon and Lois-Blanc ... They will refer to the rudeness and ignorance of our people, as though other countries that boast progressive development have fully educated masses ... No, the problem is not the one of education. English squires of the past century were not more educated than contemporary Russian landowners; the trick is in the organisation of socio-political life and in self-reliance of people. Only self-governed life creates real characters; only such life develops civic spirit, true education, and wealth.¹

In our day enlightened intelligentsia is ruled by generalisations, and seeks a logical constitution to life and society on universal [European] principles. These are the new fetishes that have taken the place of the old idols ... Our modern idols are phrases and generalities, such as Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, with their variations and extensions ... Faith in abstract [European] principles is the prevailing error of our time. This error consists in the dogmatic and absolute faith by which we disregard the facts of life with all its conditions and needs, ignoring distinctions of time and place, the characteristics of individuals, and the peculiarities of history.²

Political and intellectual life in nineteenth-century Russia was preoccupied with Russia's backwardness vis-a-vis Europe in multifarious political, institutional, social, economic, technological and industrial matters. Russia's decisive input into the victory over Napoleon, the 1814 entry of the Russian Tsar Alexander I and his army to Paris and the country's prominent role in the 1815 Vienna Congress solidified Russia's position as the leading European power at the international level. At the same time, it highlighted domestic socio-economic backwardness and turned this problem into a painful political dilemma for the intellectuals. Hence, existential questions such as *Who are we? What is the foundation stone of our past that defines the main parameters of our present and future?* and *How does that past, present, and future relate to the fate of Europe?* became central. The attempts to answer those questions created significant ruptures in Russia's intellectual and political scene.

In this light, the study of Russian conservatism presents the challenge of accounting for its various cross-currents. Examining the problem in very broad terms, we can conditionally split Russian conservatism in two main branches: liberal and statist. Among intellectuals in nineteenth-century Russia, Mikhail Katkov (1818–87), editor of the *Russian Messenger* (*Russkii Vestnik*) journal, could speak for the liberal conservative, or the 'reactionary liberal', branch. Konstantin Pobedonostsev (1827–1907), the over prosecutor of the Holy Synod, is the most eloquent representative of the bureaucratic statist conservative branch. Both philosophical streams have been occupying a legitimate place in the family of conservative thought in Russia since the nineteenth century and together comprise the intellectual tradition of Russian conservatism.

The liberal branch of conservatism often exhibits intellectual intersections with conservative nationalism, pressing for the gradual development of the Russian state and society in the uniquely Russian tradition, as Mikhail

Katkov points out in his opening extract. Nevertheless, it is also clear that this type of conservatism admires the political evolution of the West and views Russia as part of Europe (albeit with some serious restrictions which are outlined in the following). Being on a similar wavelength with nationalism and liberalism, Katkov, like other liberal conservatives, praised individualism and self-reliance, believing that Russia could begin her revival and flourish by improving the status of each individual.

The statist dimension of Russian conservatism also seeks to integrate the various periods of Russia's evolution and establish a path for the future that could most accurately reflect and encapsulate the country's past. Yet it selects values in a different order of priorities. First, it considers a strong and viable state as the epitome of Russian political evolution. Second, it refuses to accept a European legacy for Russia, viewing Russian civilization as a self-sufficient and separate universe. In that light, thinkers of this kind posit that the values of European liberalism are detrimental to Russia's development and progress – a point of view illustrated by the second quotation above. This chapter discusses all of these dimensions of Russian conservatism.

Views towards Western Europe

It becomes clear from the opening extracts that Russian conservatism in general, much like any other form of conservatism, claims that each society's intellectual, cultural and aesthetic life grows organically from a people's tradition and history. Such traditions give societies their unique identity and spirit (*Volkgeist* or *Volkstum*, to deploy the German romantic terminology), and have their own absolute value. Despite this, however, a complex attitude towards Western Europe has been a source of division in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian political thought, and for conservatives in particular.

The Western European 'question' concerns not only the realm of international relations and politics but also more significant metaphysical issues of individual psychological character and wider problems of cultural and social anthropology. While liberal conservatism seeks to integrate Russia's tradition with some elements of Western European political development, its contemporary statist and pre-existing reactionary counterpart actively backs away from Europe, emphasizing the particularity of Russian civilization and her unique historic path. This approach also divorces Russian conservatism from the liberals who regard Russia as an essential but 'confused' or 'broken' part of Europe that must mend her developmental trajectory by rejoining the 'right' side of history pursued by the West.

Both Katkov and Pobedonostsev have left an ample intellectual legacy in Russia. A large number of contemporary Russian conservatives who follow Katkov's line argue that Russia represents part of European civilization

that could and should develop a dialogue with its European sister stream. However, just as with Katkov, their idea of a dialogue does not involve intellectual, cultural and political submission. They view it as an exchange between equal partners who mutually enrich each other's visions through their ideas and experiences. These thinkers view Russia as part of the broad European civilization which parted ways when Constantinople succeeded Rome in 330 AD and the Christian Church experienced a Great schism in 1054. Nonetheless, the Greek–Roman–Celtic West and the Hellenistic–Byzantine–Slavic Russia remain two parallel, and intricately intertwined, branches of European heritage. Geographically, they share the continent. Intellectually, they sustain 2,000 years of common culture and history that evolved via dialogue, conflict, cooperation and competition.³

Common to this line of thought is the idea of Russia saving Western Europe from decline and degradation. Most conservative philosophers of the nineteenth century and beyond ponder the question of moral and ethical foundations that could allow Europe to remain 'European'. They also harbour hopes that Russia is endowed with the ultimate mission of protecting Europe's political and cultural heritage. The latter includes the Christian foundations of morality and a pluralistic approach to the organization of human life, as well as the negative foundations of liberty that stand in stark opposition to positive pressures towards self-actualization pursued by the contemporary politics of identity. Just as during the nineteenth century Russian nationalist conservatives offered salvation to Europe, Russia's contemporary liberal conservatives hope to guard Europe's freedom and individuality from the pressures of globalization and act as an anchor of traditional European morality.

The statist branch of Russia's conservatism, on the other hand, holds a different position. To this day, this thought represents the intellectual legacy of Nikolay Karamzin (1766–1826), who viewed Russia as an 'organic, separate, national entity which was radically different from ... other countries with regard to customs, outlook, laws, and way of life'⁴. Pobedonostsev's vocal scepticism on the universal applicability of Western political patterns, which is clearly articulated in the opening extract, therefore was not original but highly instrumental to the policy and politics of his age. While admiring political forms found, for example, in France and England, Pobedonostsev did not regard these as models to be transferred to Russia. He argued that 'laws and legal institutions should always conform strictly to the national traditions of a given society'.⁵ Alexandr Dugin, a contemporary Russian philosopher whose ideas largely inherit the conservatism of Konstantin Pobedonostsev, sustains this line by arguing that Russia must develop her own intellectual path. She must become isolated from the stream of European philosophy, which sustains 'someone else's ontology' and narrates 'someone else's glories and dramas'. Dugin concludes that Russia joined Western philosophical discussions almost at the very close of 'modernity'. Hence, to break the vicious cycle of borrowing, Russia must develop her

own epistemology that could provide a conceptual matrix for her distinct ontology.⁶

Civilization and the Russian world

The task of preserving Russian civilization's distinctiveness thus represents the main theme of contemporary and earlier Russian conservatism. All streams of Russian conservatism subscribe to the idea of the *Russian World* that ought to represent a separate self-sufficient civilization. Deliberations on the nature of civilization and its divergence from the idea of the nation follow as a result of this intellectual endeavour. This continues the quest of Russia's early conservatives concerning the nature of Russia's difference from Western Europe. Boris Mezhuiev claims that the difference in eschatology separates nations from civilizations. Following Kant and J. S. Mill, he reminds us that nations require some form of civic maturity that signifies the 'passing of traditional society', the end of barbarity and the negation of 'nature' by a 'republican order'. Simultaneously, a nation sees its collective goals in the dialogical transfer of culture, knowledge and ethics as well as in the preservation of its political integrity, thus rebelling against the idea of universal political systems.⁷

The category 'civilization', on the other hand, is starkly distinct from that of 'a nation'. Mezhuiev further claims that, while a nation requires some form of civic maturity with its visible apex in the formation of the nation-state, civilization demands the opposite dynamic.⁸ Civilization necessitates a *faith* in the unclear but predestined 'End of History' that binds nation-participants in a universal push towards creating a perfect order, peace and happiness. That historic endeavour requires participants to develop a universal logic in the application of political forms and to exercise a common *Kultur*, to use the Fichtean idea, which expresses true common goals of unity. This approach injects a transcendental flavour into the very notion of civilization. In contrast to the rigid rationality of a nation, civilization requires mere *faith* in the natural ability of its participants to accept their chosen universal order based on the goodness of their chosen epistemology. The movement of civilization through time represents the will of history itself, whose true intentions and logic are unknown to the participants.

At this point, Russian conservatism of all varieties denies that Russia could join the Western trajectory at the level of civilizational faith. The main lines of ethical rupture lie in Western postmodernity. Russian conservatism struggles with the contemporary redefinition of traditional human anthropology, the excessive politicization of gender and sexuality and the prevalence of anti-Christian cultural and political tendencies. Russian conservatism is sceptical and critical about the acceleration of Western politics of identity that, while attending to the problems of subaltern minorities, generates a substantial group of the 'silent majority'. The latter is reluctant to redefine the norms

of tradition but remains silent due to the stifling atmosphere of ‘political correctness’ that almost excludes a traditionalist viewpoint from the newly formed political consensus.

Anthropocentrism

It could be argued that, much like its Western counterpart, Russian philosophy is highly anthropocentric. Our opening extracts suggest that deliberations on the relationship between the individual and society and between the individual and national character compose another key aspect of Russian conservatism. Starting with the Slavophile thinkers, Russia’s most prominent philosophers, such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Nicolay Berdyaev, Leo Shestov, G. Florovsky, Peter Florensky, placed man at the centre of their reflections.

However, the two strands of conservatism were distinct in their anthropocentrism. Katkov’s opening statement suggests that he was a ‘convinced individualist for whom social progress depended entirely on the energy and creative ability of men’.⁹ Following this trend, the subsequent liberal conservatism of the twentieth century also accentuated individualism and individual rights.¹⁰ Representatives of the liberal conservative intellectual branch – Nicolas Berdyaev, Semyon Frank, Sergei Bulgakov, Alexander Izgoev – believed that Russia’s future lies in the spiritual revival of its people and the resurrection of core traditions of compassionate humanism. Theirs was a middle way between radical liberals of the age and the reactive isolationism of statist conservatives. Curiously, the contemporary Russian Orthodox Church also sustains this view. Russian patriarch Cyril insists in most of his speeches that individual revival, constant work on improving one’s soul and conscientious attempts at perfecting the individual’s environment are the building blocks of Russia’s revival and survival as a state and civilization. It is through individual effort that the community could thrive and develop.

At the same time, while speaking about the values of individualism, we must make an important qualification in recognition of the particular Russian understanding of this term. The focus on the individual was of a particular type. Liberal conservatives, such as Berdyaev, redefine the rationalistic anthropology of the Western individual by emphasizing the ideas of compassion, suffering and love as definitive features of a human soul. Hence, the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* that defined Western individual rationality during the period of modernity is replaced in Berdyaev with *senito ergo sum* (I feel therefore I am) as a definitive and desirable feature of Russian individualism.¹¹ Liberal conservatives ponder a human who painfully grapples with the process of his own thought, and reflects on the problems of the outside world with sensitivity and compassion. Russia’s conservative aversion to revolution and pain runs through the idea of

compassion and suffering. In a bold statement, prominent conservative Ivan Ilyin notes that ‘all Russia’s culture is anti-revolutionary and pre-revolutionary’.¹² Hence, the social anthropology of conservative liberals depicts an anti-revolutionary, aloof figure, who is constantly torn, morally and intellectually, between the search for higher justice and happiness for his people and personal abstention, even aesthetic aversion, to the course of history that inevitably throws the masses into suffering, violence and pain in search of such higher goals.

The statist conservative approach, on the other hand, emphasizes the supremacy of the collective over the individual. Pobedonostsev’s conviction on this point was clear throughout most of his writings and is indicated in the opening quotation. Those who followed this intellectual path have also been convinced that involvement in the fate of one’s people arises from an existential need in all individuals. Without sharing and partaking in the thorny part of one’s country, experiencing the pain of its people, a person is reduced to an atomized unit, an uprooted plant dying out and morally degrading without experiencing a higher existential purpose. The main sin of humanity, in their eyes, is the persistent juxtaposition of the individual and the commune (and later community) and the struggle against the supra-individual sources of human history.

State

The contemporary Russian state finds itself in the condition of epistemological uncertainty. It balances between these two approaches and acts as an arbiter. Following a conservative position in general, it appropriates ideas from both branches and attempts to build a reconciliatory ideological position. The state’s main goal is to encourage the consolidation of Russia’s historic and contemporary narratives. Linking the three separate stages of Russia’s history – pre-revolutionary, Soviet and post-Soviet – remains the chief endeavour of Putin’s government on the ideological front. In other words, two of Russia’s greatest upheavals of the twentieth century (the October 1917 Revolution and the fall of Communism) must be reassessed through the prism of the Russian tradition.

Given that the state in Russia has always been highly personified, the ideological outlook of President Vladimir Putin is a key consideration for this chapter. While some of his economic policies could be appropriated by the liberals, Putin’s metaphysical, geopolitical and civilizational stand is clearly conservative. Yet, being both product and leader of his time, Putin balances between the two extant conservative directions. In his annual Addresses to the Federal Assembly, an occasion during which he outlines his vision for the country’s immediate economic and political future, Putin alternates between citing the classics of liberal and statist conservative thought – Berdyaev, Ilyin, Losev, and the like. Putin’s active support of all

Russia's main religions – Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism – falls in line with Russia's modernist conservative preference and her rejection of the postmodernist value package discussed earlier. Yet, even in his religious policies, Putin's balancing between the two branches of Russia's conservatism remains. Putin's presiding over the reunification of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad and the Russian Orthodox Church was a clear attempt to marry the liberal conservative sentiment of the former with the statist leanings of the latter. Putin's dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Old Believers Church represents a nod in a direction of the most devout statist conservatism.

The enormity of the task of ideological reassessment is also seen in the fact that the Russian public seeks an answer to the question as to what type of conservatism is the most appropriate for the country's development. The public also searches for the ideological values that such conservatism could entail. Bearing in mind that conservatism is often considered as a positionist, rather than ideational, ideology, the pitfalls of this approach lie in accepting this thought as mere anti-liberalism or anti-revolutionism. From this point of view, contemporary Russian conservatism, much like its nineteenth-century predecessor, experiences existential challenges. It aspires to become an integral platform of the Russian state and society, while struggling to obtain a coherent shape and form.