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Editorial

by Alexander Meienberger

Conservatism is not a new trend in Russian politics and society. It traces its long history back to the 19th century when Slavophile, an intellectual movement, developed; this movement advocated for Russia's future development to be rooted in the values and institutions that had their foundations in the country's early history. In 1833, Count Sergej Uvarov formulated his state doctrine, "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality," that sought imperial unity under Orthodox Christianity and the absolute authority of the emperor. His doctrine can be called the first version of Russia's state-prescribed conservatism. Following this, Russia's Pan-Slavism movement arose, foreseeing the union of all Slavic nations under Russian leadership. After the First World War, the movement of Eurasianism developed, albeit in exile. Its members saw Russia as a unique civilization with a particular mission. During Soviet times, communism dominated all aspects within society.

In modern Russia, political elites started to shift towards conservativism between 2007 and 2012, as evident in both domestic and foreign policies. However, in Russian political society, conservatism has always been present to a certain degree.[1] The return of Vladimir Putin, who had already served two terms as president, from 2000-2008, and then as prime minister from 2008-2012, marked the final turn of the Kremlin from liberalism to conservatism.[2] In 2011, the pro-Kremlin-orientated political party United Russia won the parliamentarian election, and in 2012, Putin won the presidential election. These two elections were reportedly manipulated, and opposition groups accused Putin and the United Russia party of fraud. It led to mass protests in Moscow and other cities. The protests started in February 2011 and continued until June 2013. The protest movement was seen by the Kremlin as a riot of the so-called middle class. Therefore, the Russian policymakers, and especially Putin, turned to conservatism and the so-called "common people."

The conservative turn in Russian politics can be marked by its oppressive law, its zero tolerance to any opposition groups except for systematic opposition with only decorative function, and its view of Russia as a significant player in international affairs. As a result of these mass protests, the Kremlin signed in 2012 the foreign agent law requiring anyone who receives financial support from outside Russia or is under the influence from outside Russia to register themselves as "foreign agents". Many Russian human rights organizations, like the Memorial, the Sakharov Center, and the Golos, fell victim to this law and were shortly shut down. Later, in 2012, Putin signed the Dima Yakovlev law, also known as the anti-Magnitsky law, which defines sanctions against U.S. citizens involved in violations of the human rights and freedoms of Russian citizens. In 2013, the Duma passed the gay propaganda

law prohibiting the distribution of non-traditional sexual relationships among minors.

Later in 2020, the Russians adopted a new constitution; technically, the changes were called amendments. However, their significance is too important to call them simply "amendments." For instance, according to the updated Russian constitution, Russian law takes precedence over international law.[3] Moreover, it defines marriage as a relationship between one man and one woman.[4] Furthermore, the president gets the right to remove judges.[5] Finally, Putin can stay in power until 2030[6] if he wins the presidential election in 2024, which should not be a problem for him with all oppressive laws in force and state apparatus on his side. Furthermore, after a full-scale war against Ukraine, the Russian law makers passed in 2022 war censorship laws that establish administrative and criminal punishments for discrediting or dissemination of unreliable information about the Russian Armed Forces, other Russian state bodies and their operations, and the activity of volunteers aiding the Russian Armed Forces, and for calls to impose sanctions against Russia, Russian organizations, and citizens. These few examples show a clear picture of political development in Russia, which has been developing since 2000 into a dictatorship.

As for foreign policy, conservatism plays a significant role. The Russian political elites view Russia as a global player in international affairs. However, they see Russia not as the leading country in the economy or as promoting democracy but as a protector of traditional Christian values. This external conservatism should be viewed as a reaction policy of Russia towards Western countries. In Russia's perception, the West did not want to give Russia the desired recognition as a significant power. "The inconsistency between Russia's status ambitions and Western policies has finally triggered a change in Russia's narrative about her exceptionalism."[7] This Russian exceptionalism allowed the Kremlin to speak about its sphere of influence, the post-Soviet space, and to use its military to attack its neighboring countries: Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014.

The Russian war against Ukraine has been going on since 2014, when Russian soldiers occupied the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea and supported rebels in the Eastern parts of Ukraine. On 22 February 2022, the conflict escalated into a full-scale war. The Russian state declared war on Ukraine, and the regular military troops started to bombard Ukrainian cities. As justification for probably the most significant conflict in Europe since the end of World War II, Putin has used moral categories such as denazification and demilitarization of Ukraine. This evokes a direct association with the Soviet Union and its achievements in the denazification of Germany. That shows that the Russian political elites are firmly confident in the role of Russia and its exceptionalism.

The *Euxeinos* issue no. 35 on state-prescribed conservatism in Russia analyzes this phenomenon politically, socially, and economically, both before and after February 2022. Alexander Kynev opens this issue with developments in Russian

internal politics. In his article titled "The Scandalous Electoral Victory of the Governing Party United Russia," the author shows how, and by which means, the party United Russia won the latest election and what political methods the government used to gain the majority of votes for this party. Kynev provides evidence of unprecedented restrictions on voting rights, such as the banning of every single small public activity of the opposition, and he goes on to show how the electoral process was manipulated. He argues even when the party United Russia gains a comfortable majority, the secret winner of the election is the Communist Party, which, unlike the other opposition parties, increased its share of votes.

Alexander Meienberger reveals how conservative thinking informs Russian foreign policy. In his article titled "The Concept of the 'Russkiy Mir': History of the Concept and Ukraine," he explores the concept of the *Russkiy Mir* (the Russian world), its history, and how the Russian elites see Ukraine within this controversial concept. He argues that the idea of *Russkiy Mir* was unknown until the occupation of the Ukrainian peninsula Crimea in 2014 and the war in the Eastern parts of Ukraine. The concept, first developed in 1991 as an idea to unify all people who speak Russian, has evolved and become a geopolitical tool that the Kremlin has adopted for its purposes in the early 2000s. The Kremlin, for instance, wants to polish the Russian image abroad with the help of the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation and to consolidate the Russians abroad with the help of the state agency *Rossotrdničestvo*. Later, the Kremlin used the concept to justify the war in Georgia and the occupation of Crimea. The Russian geopolitical concept *Russkiy Mir* now symbolizes the cruelty of the Russian state in Ukraine and all the civil victims in Butcha and other Ukrainian cities.

Regula M. Zwahlen and Natalija Zenger, in their article titled "Silenced Dissent in the Russian Orthodox Church," outline how the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) now deals with dissent in general, and the authors provide an overview of dissent among priests and lay people within the ROC in the aftermath of the mass protests against the arrest of the Russian opposition politician Alexey Navalny in February 2021. They argue that raising a protest voice within the ROC was possible before launching the full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022, and many individual clergy members showed an understanding with the protesters. However, after February 2022, such allowances and understandings have become next to impossible due to the official support of Russia's war against Ukraine by the leadership of the ROC. Yet even though there is little room for anti-war action by Orthodox clergy and laity, some are seizing the opportunities left to them.

Sergei Erofeev continues the exploration of Russian society. In the article "What will the Russian Diaspora Do When 'Dvizhukha' Starts at Home?," he delves into the evolution of Russian émigré culture, a growth that has gained momentum since Vladimir Putin's return as Russia's president in 2012. The author contends that a qualitative shift unfolded between 2012 and 2018 in the attitudes and inclinations

of new émigrés, potentially fostering a robust anti-authoritarian political ethos within a significant portion of the diaspora. He concludes that it is premature to unilaterally criticize the Russian diaspora for not immediately and en masse responding to Putin's military actions in Ukraine.

Finally, Roland Götz explores in his article titled "War Economy: Russia's Economic Development in 2022" the economic development in Russia after the launch of the full-scale war against Ukraine. He argues that the Russian economy should have fallen into a classic recession after the beginning of the war. Some tendencies confirm this expectation. However, this was not the case. He sheds light on Russian financial institutions' work and the impact of sanctions on the Russian economy after February 2022.

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Endnotes

1 Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner, "Dilemmas and Paradoxes of Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Introduction," in *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives*, ed. Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner (Brill, 2019), 3.

2 Marlene Laruelle, "A grassroots conservatism? Taking a fine-grained view of conservative attitudes among Russians," *East European Politics* 39, no. 2 (2023/04/03 2023), https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2045962, https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2045962.

3 Art. 79 "Konstitucija Rossijskoj Federacii," Oficial'noe opublikovanie pravovych aktov, 2020, accessed 23.8.2023, http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/0001202210060013.

4 Art. 72 "Konstitucija Rossijskoj Federacii."

5 Art. 83 "Konstitucija Rossijskoj Federacii."

6 Art. 81 "Konstitucija Rossijskoj Federacii."

7 Alicja Curanović, "Russia's Contemporary Exceptionalism and Geopolitical Conservatism," in *Contemporary Russian Conservatism*, ed. Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner, Eurasian Studies Library (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020), 215.