

Interview

Russia: Putinism, conservative rhetoric, Russian capitalism, dissent

Crimea: “The Putinist majority could fast become anti-Putinist”

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An interview with left activist and historian Ilya Budraitskis, on dissent, politics left and right, and the “patriotic majority” in Russia today.



How would you describe the ideology of the ruling regime in contemporary Russia? On what values rests that which some call “Putinism”? What is behind the facade of all this speech about ‘spiritual bonds’ and ‘our glorious past’?

Ilya Budraitskis – The conventional idea has become that from the beginning of Putin’s third term we have been experiencing a conservative turn. If in the ’00’s the regime presented itself as technocratic, standing above politics and simply ensuring the integrity of the country, stability, etc., then in the 10s’ we have observed an ideological evolution.

The conservative orientation to traditional values and aggressive anti-Western rhetoric have made many, including the oppositionally-minded, believe that the Russian regime has accomplished a revolution of values, and now opposes the world order, which is exemplified by the policies of Western countries. It is often asserted that we are undergoing a phantasmagoric reincarnation of the Stalinist, Soviet, imperial project, for which it is characteristic to deny the values of the contemporary global world.

It seems to me that this understanding of an ideological evolution represents a trap. I do not believe that Russia has, from the beginning of this conservative turn, transformed into a space isolated from the rest of the world, where other laws obtain, other values reign, where even the people themselves have mutated into one or another anthropological type— sovki [derogatory term for people still “stuck” in the Soviet past, for surviving members of “*Homo Sovieticus*”— tr.] , zombies, vatniki [literally, “quilted jackets,” a derogatory term for lower class nationalistic Russian—tr.].

Despite Putin's Russia's attempt to transform itself on the level of rhetoric into an alternative to the contemporary world, it remains fully a part of that world. Despite the conservative turn, Russia has not even for a minute ceased to be a part of the world capitalist order ruled by the laws of the market. In this sense, conservative rhetoric is an important constitutive part of the spirit of Russian capitalism. This spirit not only does not contradict basic market values, but gives them a new form, and a new disguise.

So it turns out that we do not have any special values that differentiate us from the West?

You can often hear it said — indeed Putin himself has said it more than once — that Russians have different values than Western people, and these values are collectivististic, the opposite of Western individualism. But if you actually think about this claim, which is often reproduced, then the question arises: what sort of collectivism is actually meant? From our own life experience we know that Russia is a country of aggressive social inequality, with a fairly atomized and unintegrated society, in which people habitually think of their own interests and take their neighbors and other inhabitants of their cities for suspicious competitors, from whom one can expect only scams and dirty tricks, and who implicitly or explicitly covet our place in the sun. In this sense, Russian society is even more individualistic than Western society, in which various forms of self-organization are incomparably more developed.

But still, there is a certain sense behind this semi-official dichotomy: it suggests that Western individualism is the desire to take into account the interests of the minority (for example, the “self-satisfied gays” or “lazy migrants”) claiming some kind of explicit representation, who ought to be provided for by the state at the expense of others. According to the rhetoric of the Russian media, Western states support manifestations of individuality at the expense of taxpayers. But the Russian state defends the interest of the majority, expressed as the desire of people to receive for their money that product in culture and education that corresponds to their traditional ideas. The principle of collectivism in this interpretation is simultaneously a market principle. The collective here is understood not as a community, all members of which provide support to each other, but as the majority of buyers who vote with their rubles for certain values, the dominance of which the state thus assures. The conservative state is no more nor less than a successful and attentive seller in the market of moral and cultural values. Its law—the client's desire.

In this version of the conservative turn, there is no special ‘Russian way.’ Of course, we encounter this combination of the market with a veneer of conservative values in other countries. Just such a symbiosis of nationalism, conservatism, religious obscurantism, and a severely pro-market policy (albeit with local specificities and in different proportions), for example, is widespread in Eastern Europe. The same trend reflects the evolution of American Republicans over the past decade. In this sense, Russia is not only not unique, but even the opposite—it is in the vanguard of some global or pan-European tendencies.

The architecture of the modern Russian media field is built in such a way that actors who do not agree with the ideology of the ruling regime are all but automatically labeled liberals. But how, generally, do contemporary Russian liberalism and its adepts present themselves? And how can you describe its relationship with the current ruling regime?

Yes, in recent years, thanks to state propaganda, the very word “liberal” has become a synonym for the internal enemy. Of course, this phantasmagoric figure is necessary for the ruling power. In order to insist on the organic unity of the people and government, it is necessary to point to those who are trying to destroy that unity. Used in this sense of a subversive minority, the term “liberal” has completely lost touch with its real meaning, with the political definition of liberalism. From the point of view of power, anyone who opposes new repressive laws, attacks on human rights, or restrictions

on freedom of speech, is automatically numbered among liberals.

The other side of this false opposition is that if all of the enemies of the existing system are liberals, then the system itself can not be in any sense liberal itself. However, with the very notion of a liberal collective enemy, as with the rejection of liberalism by the system itself, we face two serious problems.

First, liberals in Russia are by no means the only opposition movement. It is not at all necessary to be a liberal to criticize government's actions, including its suppression of civil liberties.

Second, the current government's policy is grounded in part on economic liberal principles. If we understand the logic of the government's reforms in education, health and culture, we will find that it largely corresponds to what is commonly called neoliberalism: the dominance of the principle of profitability, of economic "efficiency" over the interests of society.

Finally, we have confusion among those who actually express adherence to liberalism. Factually, by "liberal," in the Russian political tradition, is normally understood both those who advocate a free market and see political democracy as its simple consequence, and those for whom liberalism is first and foremost civil liberties and human rights.

It is important to separate the supporters of civil liberties from the supporters of economic freedom. These are different conceptions of freedom, which actually come into conflict with each other. The propagandistic designation of all opponents of the regime as liberals prevents, among other things, the clarification of positions both within the opposition as a whole, and among the self-described liberals themselves.

I would like to discuss one remark of Alexei Navalny, which he made in an interview with Ksenia Sobchak on TV Rain. He said that for contemporary Russian politics, the right-left dichotomy basically does not function. How would you respond to this?

On the one hand, I agree with Navalny's position. The concepts "right" and "left" really do not matter if we are talking about the official imitation of politics. If we take the spectrum of parliamentary parties, the notions "right" and "left" do not have much meaning. These parties are not really right and left, because they lack political independence. Their actions are determined not by political convictions and values, but by curators from the presidential administration who are neutral to any values. It does not make much sense to say that Mironov is left and Zhirinovskiy is right: this is true.

However, this does not mean that in general the notions "right" and "left" have no significance in the Russian context. Here I can not agree with Navalny. If we want politics to be not just a cynical means of manipulation, but a space in which we uphold certain principles and views on the development of the country, self-identification in the ideological spectrum is extremely important. Even if today it is represented by small groups that are not in parliament.

Of course, in Russia there is real left, and a real right. Just outside systemic politics. Why Navalny denies this is also understandable. His goal is to include all people who are oppositional to the current regime in his own election campaign as volunteers. And technically for him it is not important who they are—left or right.

Is Crimea really rallying Russian society around Putin? Is his 84% support, as measured by the polls, an accurate expression of reality?

One of the main system-forming myths of the modern Russian political regime is the myth of the

identity of the country, the state, and the people. A myth expressed through the famous formula "Russia is Putin. Putin is Russia."

The main and defining feature of this mythical majority is its passivity. It is assumed that this majority is not able to assemble and express itself independently, and therefore its only representative, its only voice, is Putin. And this is the strong point of this myth: it insists that everyone by him- or herself is powerless. Therefore, we need to recognize ourselves, via television, in Putin, to contemplatively accept his active will, his activity, as the positive side of our own inactivity and impotence. This pessimistic philosophy has, of course, an impact on the consciousness of many people in Russia.

But its weakness stems from the same source as its strength— from passivity. Support for power is not measured by anything other than sociological surveys. How, for example, do we know that the people trust Putin? We can no longer learn this from elections, since turnout is constantly decreasing, and their results do not represent the actual opinion of the majority. Also, naturally, we do not know anything about the majority's support of Putin through mass demonstrations, rallies, etc. We see that people do not participate voluntarily in these rallies of celebration and unity with the regime. Administrative power has to be put to work to gather a more or less sizeable demonstration of support for any state actions.

The only way to confirm the support of the people remains the sociological survey. But these questionable surveys do not focus on what specific elements of public policy people support. The main paradox of Putin's "Crimea Is Ours" majority is that people who support Putin can simultaneously be extremely critical of all the concrete manifestations of the state that are present in their own lives. At the level of personal life experience they are not satisfied with current social policy, they do not like Russian police, they do not believe in the independence of the courts, they are extremely unsatisfied with the situation in health care and education, etc. But at the same time they support Putin. And these people are included in the 86% that, according to the pro-Kremlin mass media and sociologists, support Putin.

And it is very likely that at some point this qualitative, concrete discontent connected with people's real life experience will pass to the abstract figure of the leader with which this state associates itself. Therefore, it is possible to imagine that one day this phantom-like 86% pro-Putin majority could suddenly and swiftly turn into an 86% anti-Putin majority.

P.S.

* EastLeft, July 24, 2017:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/ilya-budraitskis/putinist-majority-could-fast-become-anti-putinist>

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* Ilya Budraitskis(1981) is a historian, cultural and political activist. Since 2009 he has been a Ph.D. student at the Institute for World History, Russian Academy of Science, Moscow. In 2001-2004 he organized Russian activists in mobilizations against the G8, in European and World Social Forums. Since 2011 he has been an activist and spokesperson for Russian Socialist Movement. Editor of

OpenLeft.ru and member of the editorial board of "Moscow Art Magazine". Regular contributor to the number of political and cultural websites.