

## Ideologues and Cassandras: the Thinkers behind Putinism

Michel ELTCHANINOFF

**What lies beneath Putinism? Taking a look at Russia's history and culture, Michel Eltchaninoff shows that the success of Vladimir Putin's anti-Western rhetoric, though drawn partly from pre-Revolutionary thought, is as much the result of the post-war Soviet Union's strong nationalist streak that continues to shape Russian society.**

In September 2013, one year after his second reelection to the Russian presidency, Vladimir Putin's rhetoric took a conservative turn. "The Euro-Atlantic countries," he thundered, "are rejecting traditional principles of ethics and identity—national, cultural, religious, even sexual. They are adopting policies that place families with children on a level with same-sex couples, and equate faith in God with belief in Satan. The excesses of political correctness have led them to seriously consider legitimizing a party whose agenda is to promote pedophilia. Many Europeans have become ashamed and afraid to speak of their religious affiliations." This can only lead, he claimed, "to a demographic and moral crisis."<sup>1</sup> Pointing to himself as the embodiment of the fight against this dangerous trend, he called for the "defense of traditional values" and assured he would take "a conservative stance."

Some months later, in response to the Ukrainian revolution, the Kremlin annexed the Crimean peninsula. During his celebratory speech, Putin said, "The policy of keeping Russia contained, begun in the eighteenth century, continues today. The world always tries to push us back into our corner because of our independent position, because we enforce it, because we call things what they really are and do not cater to hypocrisy. But there are limits."<sup>2</sup>

Finally, on January 1, 2015, the Eurasian Economic Union came into force. A revival of the Eurasianist philosophy that arose in the 1920s and was again in vogue in the 1990s, the EEU aims to gather 180 million people into a single market that will rival the European Union and the United States. It aligns Russia with Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan, and will potentially add other central Asian states.

---

<sup>1</sup> Valdai Discussion Club, September 19, 2013, Novgorod.

<sup>2</sup> "Address to the Russian Federation," March 18, 2014.

Conservatism as an antidote to Western moral degeneracy; the defense of a unique “Russian way”; an official Eurasian world power. These are the vectors of the new Kremlin ideology, endorsed by its highest authorities. In his speeches, the President regularly quotes the ultrareactionary emigrant philosopher Ivan Ilyin (1883-1954), whose remains were repatriated to Russia in 2005. He frequently evokes the anti-Western intellectual Konstantin Leontiev (1831-1891). He praises Lev Gumilyov (1912-1992) and his concept of “passionarity”—the essential energy native to the Russian people.

Of course, borrowing philosopher’s words does not a philosopher make. Putin uses them as signals to illustrate the depth of the Kremlin’s political identity. But, taken together, this kitschy collection constitutes the intellectual foundation of Putinism.

The rhetoric is not new. It first appeared in the 1830s over the dispute between Slavophiles—defenders of Russia’s early culture, society, and politics—and pro-Westernizers hoping to see Russia modernized on the European model. The controversy intensified in the latter half of the 19th century with the emergence of a second generation of Slavophiles who were more aggressive toward Europe. Their quarrel survived the Russian Revolution and continued, subtly, to inform the country’s intellectual field. It divided the members of the Central Committee’s Politburo. Dissidents turned against one another—Solzhenitsyn on side of the Slavophiles, Sakharov with the pro-Westernizers. The dispute dominated the national conversation of the 1990s. Putin, too, doesn’t stray far from the old motifs of conservatism, Slavophilia, and Eurasianism in his speeches. He is reviving the anti-Westernist current that was ever-present during the Soviet era.<sup>3</sup> He is the personification of victory over perestroika and the liberal democracy of the 1990s.

### **Nationalism in Détente**

Stalin’s death in 1953, around the time Putin was born, reignited old divisions. Popular magazines, benefiting from greater freedom during détente, put opposing ideological perspectives on display. *Novy Mir (New World)* took a humanist and vigorously anti-Stalinist view; they published Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch* in 1962, as well as the writings of future dissident Andrei Sinyavsky. Even as they conscientiously quoted Marx and Lenin, the liberals were more concerned with socialist internationalism, condemning chauvinism, and analyzing Russian history strictly in terms of class struggle. Working against *Novy Mir* was the “Russian Party” in the form of another magazine, *Molodaya Gvardiya (Young Guard)*. These “patriots” extolled the merits of the peasantry while criticizing—often in anti-Semitic tones—the rootless élites, and lamenting the Americanization of society.

In a 1968 *Molodaya Gvardiya* article, the Slavophile critic Mikhail Lobanov condemned the “mini-bourgeois spirit” of conformity and pragmatism sweeping through Soviet cities and paralyzing the “creative genius of the people.”<sup>4</sup> *Novy Mir*’s response, “On Popular

---

<sup>3</sup> For a recent overview of these intellectual divisions, see Mitrohin N. A. *Russkaâ partiâ. Dviženie Russkikh nacionalistov v SSSR, 1953-1985*. M. : Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie (izdatel’stvo) / Izdatel’stvo NLO, 2003, 624 s.

<sup>4</sup> Lobanov, M. P. “Prosveštennoe Mešanstvo,” *Molodaâ Gvardiâ*. 1968. N°4. S. 22.

Traditions and Principles” by Alexander Dementiev, denounced propagandists who preferred to employ “the language of Slavophilic messianism rather than that of our contemporaries.”<sup>5</sup> In 1970, another *Molodaya Gvardiya* nationalist critic, Sergei Semanov, railed against Western decadence: “In the capitalist world, spiritual values erode and collapse under the obvious influences. There they celebrate the relativism that permeates their moral sphere; take the ‘sexual revolution,’ for example, the ‘hippie movement,’ etc.”<sup>6</sup> This accusation brought the regime’s censure down onto the magazine and resulted in the dismissal of its editor-in-chief. But the worst-suffering publication was *Novy Mir*. Its editor-in-chief, Alexander Tvardovsky, had been under fire since the suppression of the Prague Spring, and he too was removed. By 1970 the situation was under control, but the fault lines remained visible.

Two years later, the Party’s head of ideology decided to launch a new term to combat neo-Slavophilia. Alexander Yakovlev published a long article in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (*Literary Newspaper*) entitled “Against Antihistoricism”<sup>7</sup> (1972). Yakovlev criticized “apologists for the rural patriarchy’s hostility toward urban culture.” It was deleterious, he asserted, for progressive thinkers to mingle with supporters of czarism within the same national conscience. There was no way to reconcile “democratic revolutionaries with Slavophile reactionaries.” Fidelity to the principles of Marxist historical analysis—that is, to the framework of class struggle—should replace essentialist notions of an abstract, artificially virtuous “Russian people.” Yakovlev accused *Molodaya Gvardiya* of—crime of crimes!—“idealizing and glorifying reactionary agents like Vasily Rozanov [the anti-Semitic Christian philosopher] and Konstantin Leontiev,” the “Russian Nietzsche” who derided the Western bourgeoisie and is quoted today by Vladimir Putin. His conclusion lacked appeal: “We find moral examples not in the ‘lives of the saints,’ nor in the embellished biographies of czars and khans, but in the revolutionary feats of those who fought for the people’s happiness.”

With this article, written by a high-ranking apparatchik, Leninism appeared to have won back the Party. The events that followed, however, showed that the fight was still on, and that the “Russian Party,” with help from sympathizers in very high places, had no intention of going down easily. Several months later, Alexander Yakovlev was relieved of his duties as an official ideologue. He went into a long political exile as the Soviet ambassador to Canada and was only reprieved in 1983, by Mikhail Gorbachev. The father of perestroika was looking to surround himself with a team of reformers and bring liberalism back to Moscow. The same man who had been punished for criticizing Slavophiles became the chief ideologue of perestroika—and, once again, anathema to the “Russian Party.” The battle was back on.

### **Perestroika: The Rising Ghosts of the Past**

With his politics of transparency (*glasnost*), Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Communist Party beginning in 1985, opened the Pandora’s box of embattled liberals and patriots. From then on the controversy unfolded in broad daylight, but with new

---

<sup>5</sup> Dement’ev A. G. “O tradiciâh i narodnosti,” *Novy’ Mir*, N°4, 1969

<sup>6</sup> S. N. Semanov, “O cennostâh otnositel’nyh i večnyh,” *Molodaâ Gvardiâ*, 1970 g, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Âkovlev A. N. “Protiv antiistorisma,” *Literaturnaâ Gazeta*, November 15, 1972.

actors and points of reference. The magazine *Nash Sovremennik (Our Contemporary)*, which had for several decades published writers specializing in descriptions of country life, represented partisans of the “Russian Renaissance.”

The religious believers had returned in force. They commemorated the thousandth anniversary of Kievan Prince Vladimir’s Christianization of Russia with pomp and pageantry. In a country rediscovering its orthodox majority, many youths took part in the baptism—and brought along their formerly staunchly atheist parents. A movement to reclaim architectural patrimony was growing. Banned literature from the Soviet era was republished. The educated populace could now explore a side of their culture that had previously been difficult to access. Newly published writings of Russian religious philosophers, Slavophile thinkers, and those once written off as reactionary or imperialist now flourished. A generation of students discovered this previously hidden “Russian mind.” The official Soviet idols had been revolutionaries and progressives: Belinsky, Pisarev, Dobrolyubov, Chernyshevsky. As for those who had been considered renegades—Konstantin Leontiev, Nikolay Danilevsky, Vladimir Solovyov, Nicolay Berdyaev, Pavel Florensky, Father Sergei Bulgakov, Lev Shestov—now they were adored.

At the same time, the country formed a strong interest in all forms of Gnosticism. Theology and anthropology were both in fashion. Occultism was popular in the 1990s, and even the most outlandish sects could set up shop. Jung’s more esoteric works were sold on bookstore shelves next to texts on Russian cosmism and Nietzsche volumes with Gothic cover designs. In 1993, followers of the traditionalist René Guénon started a journal of antimodern writings steeped in myth and symbolism, and called it *The Magic Mountain*. This almanac existed to critique the West’s materialism, its forgetfulness of its religious roots, and the absolute rule of money and dreary legal-democratic transparency.

The euphoria of the mid-1980s was soon forgotten. The USSR’s collapse in 1991 had paved the way for a democratic era, but also for an era of social and political crisis. In 1993, President Boris Yeltsin opened fire on his nationalist and communist opponents in Parliament. The intellectuals of the traumatized country were freshly divided into two camps: the democrats and liberals versus the patriots, who felt betrayed by perestroika and Yeltsin’s attack, and would not rest until they had their revenge.

### **Revenge for 1993**

The 1990s first saw the rise of the prolific Eurasianist guru Aleksandr Dugin. A student of France’s New Right and the Eurasianism of the 1920s, as well as a National Bolshevik Party associate of Eduard Limonov, Dugin tended to mix his references: Occultism and the defense of the Guénon tradition, the fascist ideas of Julius Evola, the German Conservative Revolution. In 1992, during the dissolution of the Soviet empire, he popularized the works of Carl Schmitt in the pages of *Nash Sovremennik*, presenting them as “lessons for Russia.”<sup>8</sup> The primacy of politics over morality, Dugin wrote, must help Russia “avoid becoming, as it was 70 years ago, the hostage of a reductive

---

<sup>8</sup> From the “Arctogaia” website, <http://arcto.ru/article/23>

antinational ideology that ignores the will of its people, its past, its qualitative unity, and the spiritual meaning of its historical journey.”

The Schmittian doctrine of “us” and “them,” friends and enemies, advocated for the rejection of global humanitarian wars. He endorsed concepts such as the “state of exception” and decisionism, which would help Russia escape the moralizing legal “universalism” of the new world order. The “imperatives of the Great Space” were to define Eurasia, a civilizational site that Dugin envisioned as the matrix of a World Empire capable of standing up to the Atlantic Thalassocracy. Schmitt’s partisan theory, Dugin believed, was immediately comprehensible to Russians, accustomed as they were to the partisan wars of Napoleon and Hitler. Dugin published Schmitt’s works in *Den (The Day)* and then *Zavtra (Tomorrow)*, a mouthpiece of the far right run by the writer Alexander Prokhanov. To both Dugin and Prokhanov, the democratic mode of thought that perestroika had offered as a solution was actually the problem. They believed traitors (democrats and cosmopolitan businessmen) had sold out Russia to the foreigners, and they looked forward to the arrival of a leader who could put the nation back on track. They would find him in Vladimir Putin.

The President, in effect, has developed a new ideology. Of course, he took care to differentiate himself from the extremists. But his borrowed themes and ideas originate with the “Russian Party” of the Soviet era as much as from the neo-Eurasianists of the 1990s. Dugin’s writings reveal a striking similarity between the Kremlin’s politics today and neo-Eurasian geopolitical fantasies. In 2008, Dugin predicted an arm wrestling match with the West over post-Soviet states potentially aligning themselves with Europe and the US. “If Ukraine and Georgia were absorbed into the American empire,” he said, “the imperial scheme would leave Russia blocked off.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, said Dugin, “the countdown to stop the annexation of Ukraine by the Atlantic empire has already begun.” He concluded, “We can’t rule out the possibility of going to war for Crimea and Ukraine.”<sup>10</sup> At the time, only a handful of ultranationalist ideologues and Cassandras really imagined Crimea being annexed and Donbass set ablaze. But Putin has indeed subscribed to the most radical platform of the “Russian Party.”

Members of the United Russia Party and senior officials are instructed in Putin’s conservative ideology at conferences and seminars. In April 2015, one of these was held in the symbolic city of Königsberg, now Kaliningrad, a European outpost of the Russian Federation. It was the third Berdyaev Conference dedicated to recent developments in European conservatism. The theme: “Russia and Europe: a dialogue on values within civilizations.” The Kremlin is using this new doctrine of conservatism to try to spread its influence into a Europe that is growing more porous to discourses of identity. In the service of another Putinist idea, the “Russian voice,” every theorist on the deep hostilities between Russia and Europe is being mobilized as part of the official conversation. The philosopher Nikolay Danilevsky (1822-1885), who happens to be buried in Crimea, has become a point of reference for Russia’s politics today. In fact, in his book *Russia and Europe* (1871), he prophesied that the fight with the West would increasingly take place

---

<sup>9</sup> Aleksandr Dugin, *The Fourth Political Theory*, Ars Magna, 2012 French translation, p. 225.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

out in the open. The Eurasian Union has accordingly joined the movement to build an alternative to Western “universalism.”

Russia’s history can be read through the prism of the argument between Slavophiles and Westernizers. In the 19th century, the fight was an intellectual, complex one. In the 20th, it was more subliminal: “friends of the Russian people” against internationalists. The conflict has been reincarnated through the politics and history of modern-day Russia. The “Russian Party” viewed the end of the USSR as a victory over liberals, while the liberalization of the country signified submission to foreign powers. Yeltsin’s bloody victory over the nationalist Parliament in 1993 was perceived as an attempt to finish off the “patriots” once and for all. Then Putin arrived on the scene, and his ideological rise to power was both the product of and the resolution to the fight.

It’s increasingly clear the president is the manifestation of the Russian Party’s revenge. The consequence is that he has profoundly destabilized the fault lines of his country’s culture. If Russia is to escape being sunk under a wave of hysterical nationalism, it is to be hoped that the liberals haven’t all left the country. Time will soon tell.

Books&Ideas.net, November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015

©[booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net)