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*The reactionary sympathizes with today's revolutionary,
for the latter embodies the vengeance on the one of yesterday.*
Nicolás Gómez Dávila (1913–1994)

Abstract

The driving forces behind the insurgency in Donetsk and Lugansk go well beyond the clichés of Moscow-backed separatism, cynical geostrategic calculations and the quest for natural resources. There are also psychological factors, including the perception that a society and way of life are under threat. This article examines the different components of the ideological framework and the “resistance identity” of the insurgents in southeastern Ukraine: the Donbass identity, the legacies of the USSR, the Great Patriotic War and anti-fascism, Orthodox Christianity, the freemen identity of the steppe of Novorossia, and anti-colonial resistance.

Survival and Colliding Social Orders

In some ways, the Donbass insurgency, which is now in its third year, recalls the War of the Vendée, which took place in post-revolutionary France between spring 1793 and early 1796. Of course, wholesale comparison between these two episodes makes no sense at all, given the differences in historical circumstances, causes and local conditions. Nonetheless, the often-misunderstood nature of the Vendée, along with the massive displacement and humanitarian impact the rebellion and repression had, are most instructive. For a start, the counter-revolutionary movement went well-beyond ignorant Catholic peasants, manipulated or coerced by the clergy and nobility who resented the loss of property, status and privileges, rising up against representatives and supporters of the republican regime in Paris.

The Jacobin post-revolutionary order was indeed felt, among wide sectors of the grassroots and some provincial elites, to be an existential threat to traditional identities, ways of life and habits of regional independence that co-existed with a certain loyalty to the deposed monarchy.¹ The post-revolutionary reforms and redistribution of resources mainly benefited a minority of town bourgeoisie rather than the majority peasant population. The last straw was the military draft. Although nobles and guild masters headed guerrilla units, it was essentially a popular movement. More than a progressive republican government facing a reactionary backlash, the Vendée War grew out of a collision of opposing societal and civilizational aspirations and different inter-

pretations of freedom. Its main lesson is that emancipatory ideals—no matter whether these are being pushed through subtly or with a heavy hand—are often experienced as destructive by the very populations one seeks to “emancipate” and “enlighten.”

This specific aspect bears relevance in assessing the events in Donetsk and Lugansk. If the insurgency indeed was really a matter of Moscow-backed mercenaries who terrorize the population for the sake of the cynical interests of organized crime, regional oligarchs, or Ukraine's former president, or a mere matter of obtaining more resources, without any locally-rooted support, ideological narrative and sincere faith in a societal project, then it would most likely have wound down long ago. It is not even relevant that the parts of Donetsk and Lugansk which are not under the control of the Ukrainian government and its affiliates are allegedly a closed information environment—an information environment cannot be hermetically sealed these days. The war, its humanitarian consequences and its psychological impact are at a point where the identity questions and sociological differences that were already present in Ukraine have been driven beyond the point where it would be feasible to psychologically reintegrate the affected regions.

The Donbass Identity

So, if there is indeed an identity and a societal concept that are being defended by the insurgents against external aggression and existential threats, then what are their components and characteristics? Of course, the personal motivations and the degree of ideological consciousness among the fighters and the formal and informal leadership of the Donetsk and Lugansk republics vary widely. But if one analyzes the discourse, symbols and iconography, and the propagandistic materials of the insurgents, one sees, in my opinion, an ideological

1 For an in-depth examination of the causes and motivations of the Vendée War, see Jean-Clément Martin, ‘La Vendée et sa guerre, les logiques de l'évènement’, *Annales, Economies, Sociétés et Civilisations*, 40(5), 1985, S. 1067–1085 and Tobias Birzer, ‘L'inexplicable Vendée’. *Gegenrevolutionärer Aufstand und Bürgerkrieg in Westfrankreich 1793–1796*, München: GRIN-Verlag, 2003.

narrative crystallized around six components. To start with, what began as local protests against rumored plans to cancel the language law and revoke the recognition of Russian and other minority languages, has become a fight mobilized around what one could call *the spirit of Donbass*, the area roughly situated between Lugansk and the Sea of Azov.

This Donbass spirit, the first of the six components, refers to a certain type of person who has long been present in this old industrial basin. One spiritual aspect often referred to is the tradition of restiveness rooted in the history of the region, which was originally a steppe inhabited by Turkic nomads like the Kuman and Kipçak, and served as a refuge for Slavic dissenters. The Lugansk area, for instance, attracted proto-Ukrainian population groups fleeing Polish rule during Bogdan Chmelnytsky's Cossack rebellion between 1648 and 1654. After 1685, large groups of schismatic Orthodox Old Believers, facing persecution and driven by an eschatological belief in nearby end times, settled into what was then the wider periphery of the greater Russian space. A portion of what is now southeastern Ukraine was also long part of the free territories of the Don Cossacks. The region's present sociological identity, however, was formed by its gradual industrialization which started after coal fields were first discovered in 1720. It gained momentum during the major industrialization drive in coal mining, metallurgy and transport industries and the arrival of international capital between 1860 and 1890.

As one of the industrial heartlands of imperial Russia and later the USSR, it became an epicenter for a wide variety of labor and social movements, which later resulted, amongst others, in the creation of the ephemeral Donetsk-Krivoi Rog Soviet Republic—of which the present-day Donetsk republic uses the flag—in 1918 and the Donbass mine strikes in the USSR in 1989 and 1990. More importantly, for the advocates of a Donbass identity, it is the homeland of rough, but sincere and reliable, workers with a penchant for real labor rather than talk and hot air, and, as such, starkly opposed in lifestyle, attitudes and values, to the arrogant cosmopolitans and fickle “new economy” professional from Kyiv, and to the Central European from Galicia whose identity was formed by long association with the Habsburg and Polish spaces. The antipathy and social prejudice, by the way, is reciprocal, with Donbass people being depicted as hillbillies and proles unable to cope with globalization in the Europhile salons and cosmopolitan hipster cafés.

Strongly connected to this is the feeling that the Donbass, where before the war much of Ukraine's industrial and mining capacity was situated and which considerably contributed to the country's economic regenera-

tion between 1997 and 2007, basically feeds the country. The people of Donbass have nothing to gain from integration into a European Union where old industrial areas and societies have been dismantled if not marginalized by (Western) Europe's mine closures and de-industrialization since the 1980s. Although Donbass was demographically Russianized between 1926 and 1959, or at least diversified with the transfer of non-Ukrainian groups from other parts of the USSR to work in its industries, the current war is not considered to be an ethnic war between Ukrainians and Russians. As a matter of fact, many insurgent fighters and supporters themselves are (partly) of Ukrainian origin. It is rather a struggle between a project of inclusive Donbass patriotism defined by multi-ethnicity, regional brotherhood, certain forms of social organization and the binding capacity of the Russian language—which, according to official census data, is the mother tongue or at least every-day lingua franca of about two-thirds of the population in these two provinces—versus the exclusive ethnic nationalism of Western Ukraine.

Soviet Restorationism

The second major component of the Donbass resistance identity are *memories about the social achievements and perceived social justice in the Soviet Union*. This is not a matter of commitment to Marxist ideology or the political leadership of the local communist parties among the insurgents. What is important here, is the idea of a great and strong fatherland, in which Donbass, as an industrial heartland and historical proletarian center, occupied a special position out of which it drew confidence and a number of privileges. Belonging to an organic, Russian-dominated greater space, is considered to be a condition for the survival of Donbass, both as an economic area and as a social identity.² Although private property and market economics are recognized, the Donbass resistance identity and its mobilizing discourse also emphasize the imperative to re-habilitate the social-economic role of the state as an emancipator of the people, and of state control over the key sectors of the Donbass economy, in stark opposition to Anglo-Saxon neo-liberalism and market fundamentalism.

Besides that, the USSR is associated with social stability, income equality, low crime rates, well-developed social services, guaranteed employment, and strong human capital. Even if after the dismantling of the

2 For an examination of the role of industrialization in Donbass' strong identification with the USSR, see Andrej Baranow (Андрей Баранов), “Политическая идентичность Новороссии: состояние и ресурсы конструирования”. Каспийский регион: политика, экономика, культура. №2 (43), 2015, p 98–106.

USSR and Ukrainian independence, a fair amount of the Donbass industry continued to function in the national and global economy under new ownership structures and under the new financial oligarchies, much of the Soviet Union's social achievements did not. The period immediately following the demise of the Soviet Union was also a time of stark demographic decline for Donbass. In particular, between 1989 and 1998, the region lost over 1.5 million inhabitants due to economic emigration, plummeting birth rates and the overall impact of social disintegration, all seen as an existential threat to Donbass' social fiber and identity. The social and psychological impact of the USSR's disintegration clearly form a defining experience that has shaped the Donbass's present identity.

The importance of the USSR, or at least a number of aspects and episodes of its history, for the ideological framework of the Donbass resistance brings us to the third component, *the Great Patriotic War (1941–45) and its anti-fascist struggle*. The insurgents see themselves as a new generation of men who take up the duty to defend the Donbass, in a line that includes the revolutionaries of the Donetsk-Krivoi Rog Soviet Republic who fought Ukrainian nationalists, the anti-Bolshevik Don Cossacks and their German and Polish backers in 1918, and, of course, the partisans who resisted the Nazi occupation of Donbass between October 1941 and February 1943. As such, they connect with a remembrance culture of the Great Patriotic War still prevalent in the old USSR. In the insurgent's view, Ukrainian nationalism and ultra-nationalism always flourished with the backing of foreign invaders and occupiers.³

References are thereby made to the imperial-German support to the Ukrainian Council Republic and then hetman Skoropadski's Ukrainian State in 1917–18. However, an episode that especially underlines this point is the Galician-Ukrainian nationalist movements and auxiliary units who collaborated with the Nazi occupation of Ukraine and Stepan Bandera's declaration of Ukrainian independence in summer 1941. The "Bandarites," Ukraine's present-day ultra-nationalists who are present in the government and in the paramilitaries fighting the Donbass insurgents are perceived to be the direct heirs of the Ukrainian Nazi collaborators. The only difference now is, that they are no longer instrumental in German expansionism, but in an American and NATO takeover and occupation of the country and eventually of the Russian world. This explains the

strong anti-Americanist and anti-NATO line of the Donbass insurgents.

Orthodoxy as Cultural Defense

The fourth component is *Russian Orthodoxy*. Russian Orthodox symbols appeared early in the insurgency and some Cossack units and factions like the Orthodox Army specifically refer to the religious character of the struggle. No matter the level of actual and everyday religious practice of the individual insurgents and their supporters, Russian Orthodoxy and the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate are considered to be key components of the Russian identity and a binding agent of the Russian greater space of which Donbass is an inalienable part. Moreover, Orthodoxy is considered to be the custodian of traditional values and norms of family and social organization which have to be the base of society. As such, it is part of a cultural defense against liberalism and against an emasculated, vassalized and de-Christianized European Union.

Since the globalist liberals have vested interests in the destruction of Orthodox Christian civilization, the latter is under a multi-pronged assault by Protestant and Pentecostal missionaries and various sects who have been active in many parts of the old USSR since the 1990s, foreign-funded liberal "civil society," orchestrated international gay and transgender campaigns, and military aggression against Serbia and the Serbs in the former Yugoslavia and now also against Donbass and against the Russian Orthodox in the rest of Ukraine. The fact that a number of leading personalities in the current Ukrainian government and in the foreign-backed protest movement that brought it to power are (rumored to be) Protestants and Scientologists, confirms the destructive role of non-traditional faiths. Therefore Donbass is a frontline where the survival of a civilization and of true Christianity is at stake.

Civil War or Colonial War?

A fifth component, which surpasses the geographical limits of Donbass proper, is *the frontier identity typical of "New Russia" and the "Wild Fields."* Historically, this refers to the sparsely-populated Kipçak steppe and the northern coast of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, which were attached as a military frontier to the Russian greater space during the Russian-Ottoman war of 1768–74. The lands were subsequently incorporated into the military Governorate of Novorossiisk, the territory of which eventually stretched all the way to the Dniestr and Bessarabia. Its ideological relevance is twofold. First, "New Russia" ("Новороссия" in Russian) refers to an area in southern and southeastern Ukraine going from Donbass all the way to Odessa and Transnistria, where the Russian element is well-present. These territories are eventually to form a confederation when the present Ukrainian state collapses.

3 The emphasis on the fight against Ukrainian ultra-nationalism brought the Donbass cause some sympathy among ethnic minorities in Western Ukraine, like the Ruthenians and Hungarians of Trans-Carpathia.

Second, the old Wild Fields are considered to be a part of the Russian world with a strong tradition of freemen and pioneers. Some parts of this region were already populated by Slavic groups like Cossacks, (proto-)Ukrainians and Old Believers before it was officially annexed by imperial Russia. The 18th century, however saw a more systematic Slavic population colonization in order to demographically anchor this frontier in the Russian greater space. Contrary to many peasants in the Russian heartland, the settlers were mostly not serfs but free peasants. Cossack democratic self-governance, the peasant councils and the communal land ownership structures that existed are considered to be historical precedents and, once rehabilitated, building blocks for the non-liberal democracy some want to build in the region.

Last but not least is the conviction that the insurgents, their ideologues and the opinion makers favorable to them *are not fighting a separatist, but a colonial war*. This manifests, first, in a strong stance against oligarchs—in the first place, but not exclusively, pro-governmental oligarchs and the oligarchs who were nominated official governors of the rebel provinces by the Ukrainian government—who merely sell out Ukraine and Donbass to foreign interests and demolished the social achievements of the Soviet times. Ukraine's current government is seen as operating under the custodianship of the IMF, which aims to squander the country's potential by turning it into a mere reservoir of cheap labor and into a colony of agro-industrial transnationals and of the shale gas industry which vies for reserves that exist in the eastern part of the country. This, of course, includes the privatization and eventual dismantling of Donbass' mining and industry sectors.⁴ Moreover, the war and so-called anti-terrorist operation against Donbass are seen as pretexts for physically and socially destroying the southeast, and subsequently granting its reconstruction to foreign and regime-connected companies and to foreign-funded civil society and international organizations with their ideological indoctrination agendas.

Ideological Patchwork or New Texture?

Apart from ideology, a major psychological factor that explains the doggedness of the Donbass resistance is the expectation that, if Donetsk and Lugansk fall, the reaction of the central government, its army and the ultra-nationalist paramilitaries will indeed resemble the republican repression in the Vendée before and after the rebellion was defeated: At least 170,000 civilians and combatants killed in a total area population

of some 800,000, ethnic cleansing, the mass drownings of “refractory elements” in Nantes and some 7,000 post-insurgency death sentences. In that respect, an element that arose in the discourse and iconography of the Donbass insurgency, are the “42 Martyrs of 2 May.” This refers to the pro-Russian demonstrators who died in the arson of Odessa's trade union building in 2014, and is often used to point at what will be allegedly in store once the “Banderites” reconquer Donbass.

On the whole, Donbass' resistance identity resembles that which developed over the years in Transnistria, the region which seceded from Moldova in 1990.⁵ However, the Transnistrian war which followed in 1992 in an attempt to retake the territory, lasted for only four months and the amount of destruction and the humanitarian crisis were far more limited than is the case now in southeastern Ukraine. As such, conditions to consolidate a proper form of statehood were more favorable there. In Donbass, as in Transnistria, separatism and international recognition of de facto statehood might not even be goals as such. Secession is rather considered to be a necessity at least as long as Ukraine is governed by what is seen as American vassals, liberals and Banderites. The de facto state is also to serve as a “trial field” to put the aspired societal and ideological model into practice.

Incorporating Soviet, tsarist and traditionalist Christian components, the Donbass resistance identity is as eclectic as it is paradoxical. It transcends the classical left-right dichotomy. The “Donbass ideology” also has a certain international appeal. This can be observed among a number of Western European and Latin American leftists who are disillusioned in a militant Left, which, as one anecdotally put it, is nowadays more concerned with transgender rights and festive multiculturalism than with the predicament of the working classes. It can also be seen among militant rightists hostile to the economic neo-liberalism of many of Western Europe's supposedly nationalist parties. A number of volunteers from the ranks of these two groups joined the Donbass insurgency. Even if its project collapses or is eventually defeated in the Donbass itself, the combination of leftist and rightist elements will manifest themselves, in the lands of the former USSR as well as beyond, in more insurgent and opposition movements in the future.

For information about the author and recommended reading see overleaf.

⁴ On this, see Gilles Lapesant, *Entre européanisation et fragmentation, quel modèle de développement pour le territoire ukrainien?* Centre d'Études et de Recherches Internationales, N°212, Paris: CERISciences po, 2015, p. 20–21.

⁵ For insights on the formation of Transnistria's “resistance identity,” see Joris Wagemakers, “National identity in Transnistria: a global-historical perspective on the formation and evolution of a ‘resistance identity,’” *Journal of Eurasian Affairs*, 1(2), 2014, p. 50–55.

About the Author

Bruno De Cordier is a professor at the Department of Conflict and Development Studies under the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of Ghent University.

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- For a partisan view on how the current policies of the Ukrainian government amount to the colonization of the country, see Simon Uralow, “Ziele der USA und Hauptaufgaben von Saakaschwili in Odessa”. Réseau Voltaire, 15. Juni 2015, <www.voltairenet.org/article187883.html>
- For insurgent or pro-insurgent views:
 - <novorossia.today/de/>,
 - <slavyangrad.de>

ANALYSIS

Organic Tradition or Imperial Glory? Contradictions and Continuity of Russian Identity Politics

Viatcheslav Morozov, Tartu

Abstract

Russian identity politics and, more broadly, the country’s development in modern times has been conditioned by two constitutive splits: between the imperial elites and the peasant masses, on the one hand, and between Russia and Europe, on the other. The current conservative turn aims to overcome the internal split by attuning state policy to mass consciousness, with its alleged preference for ‘traditional values’. This strategy ignores the fact that today’s Russia is a modern, urbanised society. In the long run, it undermines the Kremlin’s effort to achieve and consolidate great power status.

Contemporary Russian identity politics is a rather peculiar combination of familiar elements. Since 2012, the official discourse emphasises ‘traditional values’ and ‘spiritual bonds’, thus referring to the presumed existence of a genuine Russian culture and spirit, uncontaminated by the centuries of Westernising modernisation. At the same time, the Russian state continues to claim continuity with its imperial predecessors, which involves a civilising mission in relation to its own population as well as a claim to the status of great power and to a prominent role in world affairs. The importance of the latter dimension was raised by the interventions in Ukraine and Syria, while the resulting standoff with the West intensified the search for a ‘truly Russian’ Self. The attempts to artificially fuse the imperial and the traditionalist-nationalist narratives are not entirely unprecedented, but have never been particularly successful in the past.

A European Empire vs. the Organic Tradition

In order to appreciate the difficulty of bridging different identity narratives, historical background is absolutely essential. Russia’s development in modern times has been fundamentally conditioned by two constitutive splits: between the imperial elites and the peasant masses, on the one hand, and between Russia and Europe, on the other. According to Geoffrey Hosking, the first split originates in the division between the nobility, who had an obligation to serve the crown in the army or the bureaucracy, and the taxed population. It was introduced by the state in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but solidified under Peter I, who forced the elites to adopt European culture and customs. As Alexander Etkind points out, this created a deep divide between the Europeanised, ‘shaven’ Rus-

sians and their 'bearded' compatriots, to the extent that their relations are best described as those between colonisers and colonised.

These developments were driven largely by foreign and security policy considerations. Russia's territory has always been vulnerable to external invaders. The ascent of Western Europe, driven by technological and societal innovation, made Russia feel increasingly exposed on that flank, creating incentives for Europeanisation as a way of catching up with the most advanced countries. However, as Leon Trotsky was first to clearly demonstrate, the geopolitical 'whip of external necessity' did not result in a smooth transplantation of 'progressive' European institutions. Rather, Russia followed a pattern of what Trotsky termed 'combined development': institutional borrowings were adjusted to the needs of a vast empire whose primary task was to control its diverse populations and to mobilise resources for the continuous military effort.

One could argue that combined development was responsible for fact that Russia has never been able to fully integrate into the European civilisational space. Iver Neumann has argued that in their hegemonic position, West Europeans have always been very sensitive to the ways in which other countries were governed: Russia's authoritarian governance was looked upon with suspicion and contempt, and often presented as a threat to the entire European liberal order. The reasons for this suspicion are easy to reconstruct by following the present-day discussion about Moscow's subversive policies in relation to Western democracies. This was the origin of the second major divide mentioned above, between Russia and (the rest of) Europe.

Both splits had constitutive significance for Russian identity. Essentially, the key identity problem Russia has faced since the eighteenth century is whether to Europeanise further, in the hope of eliminating the difference with Europe, or to turn its back to the West and rebuild the society around traditional values, with the elites abandoning their unnecessarily sophisticated culture and embracing a simpler lifestyle of the masses. The first option has always been extremely attractive not just because of the chance to become fully recognised as a European great power, but also as a way to create robust institutions rooted in civil society and thus capable of reigning in the omnipotent, corrupt bureaucracy. Yet this was also risky, since grassroots mobilisation threatened the integrity of the empire, where ethnic Russians constituted less than half of the total population. Even those ethnic Russians were predominantly peasants, culturally alienated from the elites and believed to be unpredictable and prone to rebellion. Finally, the elites were also increasingly fragmented: the emergence

of the democratic *intelligentsia* by the mid-nineteenth century signified a radical challenge to the legitimacy of the state and a growing fragmentation of the public space into mutually hostile circles and groupings.

The second option—going with the people away from Europe—looked safer at first glance but implied forsaking or at least postponing social modernisation. This inevitably put Russia under Trotsky's 'whip of external necessity'. Another, subtler but eventually more fatal, difficulty consisted in the fact that the people were not properly represented in the discursive and political space. The peasants were largely illiterate and did not possess the means to express their 'traditional values' in a way that would enable their political operationalisation. Instead, these values were mostly imagined by the intellectuals, and in particular by the great nineteenth-century Russian literature. This gap began to close down in the early twentieth century, but it certainly would be an exaggeration to say that we know much about the peasants' view of an ideal society, or, indeed, even to claim that peasants shared any comprehensive social utopia going any further than contradictory common-sense views.

Viewed against this background, the current turn in Russian identity politics might seem to be a repetition of the old pattern of conservative reaction following the most recent round of painful and destabilising reforms. However, the current situation is distinct in at least one crucial respect.

Traditionalist Identity for a Modern Society?

As pointed out above, imperial Russia was a deeply fractured society, where the distance between the elites and the masses was so huge that the state effectively had to embark on a civilising—or colonising—mission in relation to its own population, including ethnic Russians. However, the Soviet Union managed to largely complete this mission in relation to the imperial core, roughly consisting of the European part of the Russian Federation (except for North Caucasus), Belarus, Eastern Ukraine and urbanised spaces in Siberia, Kazakhstan and the Far East. Social mobility and displacement caused by the Soviet modernisation and totalitarian repression levelled legal and cultural barriers between social groups. The new hierarchies that came to replace the tsarist ones were much less steep; in addition they were again transformed by the Soviet collapse. Most importantly, however, the Soviets introduced universal standardised secondary education and developed a mass culture that appealed, and was available, to all social strata.

As a result, the post-Soviet Russian society is much more homogenous than any of its predecessors. This is not to say that there is no inequality or that class dif-

ferences have no cultural markers. However, when it comes to questions of national identity, any two Russians would always be able to engage in a conversation and they would be using largely the same discursive codes.

It is impossible to imagine such a conversation in the nineteenth century between an intellectual and a peasant: when the Russian populists decided to 'go to the people' in the 1870s, it took a lot of time and effort even to begin to establish a common language and the trust needed to discuss politics. However, the topics of today's conversation would be largely the same that were discussed by the nineteenth-century Slavophiles and Westernisers, as well as their successors: is Russia a European country? Should it try to catch up with the West or go its own way? Should it be proud or ashamed of its difference from Europe?

Hardly anyone in Russia or beyond would deny the fact that there continue to exist significant differences between Russia and most of the EU-Europe when it comes to how the society is governed, the design and quality of institutions, certain behavioural patterns and so on. This is hardly surprising, given that the country has never been able to break away from the vicious circle of dependent, semi-peripheral development. Stalinist modernisation was in this respect a huge leap forward, but it was mostly based on imported technology (which was exchanged for grain expropriated from the peasants). Late Soviet Union developed an oil addiction, which became even more acute in the post-Soviet period. The state's reliance on rents rather than taxes distorts popular representation, undermines democratic accountability and produces widespread corruption.

While a majority of political and intellectual leaders of contemporary Russia would perhaps agree with the diagnosis, most of them stop short of embracing any radical reform. They do it for the same reason their predecessors did in the nineteenth century: they do not trust their own people. There is a fear that grassroots activism, unless closely supervised by the state, is prone to result in chaos and destruction. This view is sustained by the interpretation of the 1990s as a 'dark age' in Russia's recent history, a modern time of troubles, as well as by the conspirological idea that the West will use any weakness of the state to stage a 'colour revolution' in Moscow.

Thus, instead of talking to the Russian people as enlightened peers, the conservative elites prefer to see them as nineteenth-century peasants who could and should be kept in check through the promotion of Orthodox religion, traditional family and a 'patriotic' view or history where the tsars and their people stand together in some form of spiritual, superhuman unity. Paradoxically, the conservatives are being helped by a large majority of the liberals, who never tire of deploring the barbarianism

they see around themselves. Instead of conceptualising Russia's difference in institutional and historicist terms, as an outcome of a specific pattern of deferred modernisation, Russian Westernisers essentialise this difference as a cultural phenomenon, by attributing it to the persistence of 'peasant consciousness', 'Soviet mentality' or 'the authoritarian Russian mind'. From such essentialism, there is only one step to supporting the regime as something that the Russians actually deserve.

It must be emphasised that while it is the elites who determine the course of the country, the identity discourse behind those decisions is shared by the entire society. In other words, it is not just the leaders who do not trust the masses: in a way, the entire Russian people do not trust themselves. Everyone is eager to repeat the clichés about Russia being a radically, irrationally deviant case. Whether this allegation is taken with gloomy pessimism or self-indulging elation is of secondary importance. Inter alia, this explains the effectiveness of the official propaganda: it is not that everyone believes everything the TV tells them to be true, but most people would say that some brainwashing is necessary for the sake of disciplining fellow citizens, who otherwise might get out of control.

Conclusion

There are limits to the extent to which a modern power with a claim to global leadership can engage in attempts at persuading its population that they are better off as uncivilised natives rather than as modern citizenry. For one, embracing spiritual values might be fine as long as most people still have access to the benefits of modern civilisation, but radical traditionalists are constantly trying to question that. Among the potentially explosive issues are the right to abortion or access to modern communication technologies, both of which in different ways could seriously affect large segments of the population.

Even more important is the fact that the Russian state seems to be at a peak of its international engagement, being involved in the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria as well as in the global standoff with the West. There is an obvious risk of imperial overstretch not unlike those which brought down the Russian empire and the Soviet Union. In combination with the structural economic crisis and a decline in the oil price, this means the need to mobilise all available resources. Eventually—and this is acknowledged by the authorities—making Russia great again necessitates an economic and technological modernisation.

If modernisation is indeed a necessity, the conservative turn might be useful for societal mobilisation, but its short-term benefits are clearly offset by the backward movement in the development of education, health care

and other key elements of social infrastructure. In other words, if the state persists in its promotion of 'traditional values', it will perpetuate the technological and institutional gap between Russia and the developed

world, which will inevitably have consequences in the field of foreign policy. The 'whip of external necessity' is bound to strike again, although it might take time before that happens.

About the Author

Viatcheslav Morozov is Professor of EU-Russia Studies at the University of Tartu. His current research explores how Russia's political and social development has been conditioned by the country's position in the international system. This approach has been laid out in his most recent monograph *Russia's Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World* (Palgrave, 2015).

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ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Ortting, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen (<www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de>), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich), the Resource Security Institute, the Institute of History at the University of Zurich (<<http://www.hist.uzh.ch/>>), the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at The George Washington University, and the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language *Russland-Analysen* (<www.laender-analysen.de/russland>), the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia (<www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html>), and the Russian Regional Report. The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

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Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Ortting, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

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Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen • Country Analytical Digests • Klagenfurter Str. 8 • 28359 Bremen • Germany

Phone: +49 421-218-69600 • Telefax: +49 421-218-69607 • e-mail: laender-analysen@uni-bremen.de • Internet: <www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html>