



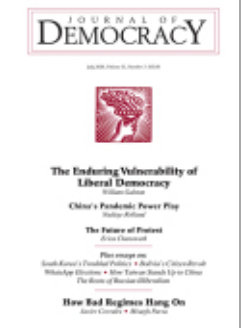
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Making Sense of Russia's Illiberalism

Marlene Laruelle

Journal of Democracy, Volume 31, Number 3, July 2020, pp. 115-129 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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MAKING SENSE OF RUSSIA'S ILLIBERALISM

Marlene Laruelle

Marlene Laruelle is research professor of international affairs and director of the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (IERES) at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs.

Political movements declaring the rejection of liberalism are on the rise, almost everywhere. Until the covid-19 pandemic dramatically reshaped the international scene, the illiberal ascent was the most striking trend in world politics, stretching from the United States and Europe to Russia, from Turkey and Israel to Brazil, India, and the Philippines.¹ This paradigm shift has been described in a variety of terms: far-right, populist, nationalist, national-populist. Yet it is the concept of illiberalism that most fully captures the nature of the movements that are challenging liberal-democratic systems around the globe.

These movements explicitly identify liberalism as their enemy. They denounce, in varying proportions, the political, economic, and cultural liberalism embodied in supranational institutions, globalization, multiculturalism, and minority-rights protections. They do not necessarily make up a coherent ideology; rather, they represent an interconnected set of values that come together in country-specific patterns. Illiberals in different settings stress different issues, with some emphasizing Christian roots, others chiefly fomenting xenophobia against migrants, still others trumpeting their defense of the traditional family, and so forth. Where illiberal parties are in power, their worldviews intertwine with authoritarian and patronal practices of governance.

Illiberalism is not simply the opposite of liberalism, nor is it a synonym for nonliberalism. There are many other ways to be nonliberal: Classic authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, for instance, are nonliberal without qualifying for the title “illiberal.” Illiberalism is thus better understood as a form of postliberalism—that is, as an ideology whose exponents are pushing back against liberalism after having experienced

it. This distinction is essential to disentangling the recent electoral successes of illiberal movements from developments in nonliberal regimes, such as China, where citizens never experienced a period of liberal dominance.

Russia's moral and financial support for illiberal movements in Europe has received wide attention. Commentators often present Russian president Vladimir Putin as the "godfather" of all illiberal leaders, from Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán and U.S. president Donald Trump to Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro. Putin has indeed been blunt in his rejection of liberalism, which he described in a June 2019 *Financial Times* interview as having become "obsolete."² As early as 2013, he made an impressive profession of faith in the "traditional values" frequently opposed to liberalism: "Without the values embedded in Christianity and other world religions, without the standards of morality that have taken shape over millennia, people will inevitably lose their human dignity. We consider it natural and right to defend these values."³

Yet while Russia is seen as the leader of the global illiberal trend, scholarship on the Putin regime itself remains focused on other concepts, such as authoritarianism, patronalism, and (to a lesser extent) populism. In discussions of Russia's foreign policy, illiberalism comes up mainly as a feature of the Kremlin's toolkit for asymmetric war, especially its disinformation operations.

It is a mistake, however, to view the promotion of illiberalism as merely a cynical political ploy by the Putin regime. In fact, for Russian elites and for a large part of the population, illiberalism supplies an appealing framework for making sense of the world. It is, for many Russians, a genuine producer of common sense. Russia was precocious in its adoption of an illiberal creed, which makes sense if we remember that the country experienced liberalism at its most disruptive in the early 1990s and came to associate it with a host of traumas: the collapse of the communist regime and loss of the Soviet empire, a total disruption of everyday life, a radical rupture in established values, a decline in socioeconomic conditions, a sharp decrease in life expectancy, and more. It should come as no surprise, then, that for a large part of Russian society, illiberalism as a rejection of liberalism after having experienced it is appealing, offering a sense of returning to normalcy.

There are at least three reasons to view illiberalism as meaning-making in Russia. First, it existed in Russian society before being coopted by the regime and gradually "étatized." Second, there exists a lively school of contemporary Russian thought arguing that the country's future can be secured only by embracing the illiberal project. For the thinkers behind this school—known collectively as the "Young Conservatives" (*mladokonservativy*)—illiberalism is no backward-looking ideology but rather an engine of revolutionary dynamism, uniquely capable of pow-

ering rebellion against the global liberal status quo. Third, illiberalism is fundamental to Russia's perception of the liberal world order and the country's place within that order.

In discussions within Russia, the term illiberalism as such is not used; rather, the preferred descriptor is conservatism. In the United States and in Europe, of course, conservatism is not equivalent to illiberalism. Classic conservative political parties believe in some forms of political liberalism and often defend economic liberalism, while opposing cultural liberalism. In the Russian context, however, the two terms are effectively synonymous, with conservative ideas centering on a clearly articulated rejection of liberalism.

State-Backed Illiberalism

Russia did not become the beacon of illiberalism overnight. Many observers have stressed the "conservative turn" that followed the Bolotnaya Square protests of winter 2011–12, when tens of thousands of Russians took to the streets in a rejection of fraudulent legislative elections and of Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency following the four-year term of Dmitry Medvedev.⁴ But illiberal attitudes began to solidify in Russia much earlier, in a gradual process spanning more than three decades. Originally just one viewpoint in a pluralistic ideological landscape, illiberalism rose to a dominant position thanks to its success in securing state backing.

It is worth remembering that conservative attitudes already held sway over many aspects of late-Soviet society. While left-wing ideas of progress and equality were at the core of the official Marxist-Leninist doctrine, and while Soviet authorities voiced some advanced ideas about, for instance, women's rights, right-wing social conservatism was prevalent. As Maria Lipman explained, "This included prudishness—preaching 'high morals,' professing chastity, condemning adultery and premarital sex; criminalizing male homosexuality; practicing a virtual ban on talking about sex or mentioning it in art, film, or literature; and rigorously censoring art and media for moral and political impropriety."⁵

Through the reformist years leading up to the Soviet Union's fall, some politicians continued to promote socially conservative views. In the early 1990s, they gathered broader support from a public traumatized by extraordinary disruptions of accepted social values and of everyday life. Conservative sentiment in this period centered on the perceived need for stability and predictability, a strong leader able to enforce law and order, and a revival of statism and patriotism. "Traditional values" were not stressed to the same extent that they are now, but questions of religiosity and of demographic decline were prominent. Politically, conservatism in the 1990s translated into support for the revived Communist Party under Gennady Zyuganov and the misnamed, ultranation-

alist Liberal Democratic Party of Vladimir Zhirinovsky. The Russian Orthodox Church gave voice to conservatism in the cultural field, positioning itself as the champion of morality, patriotism, and a timeless Russian culture. At the grassroots level, a vibrant illiberal civil society took shape, including far-right vigilante groups (Alexander Barkashov's "brown shirts" and Cossack groups) as well as grassroots movements (such as the *zemstvo* network, inspired by Alexander Solzhenitsyn's ideas) that enjoyed financial support from certain oligarchs.

Illiberalism had thus become an animating force in Russian society even before the state took up this ideological posture.⁶ What has happened during the twenty years of Putin's rule, and especially over the last decade, has been the *étatization* of preexisting illiberal beliefs and attitudes. In embracing these beliefs, the state has been not so much carrying out a deliberate strategy as adjusting to a reality that has grown less and less favorable to the ruling elites. The Putin regime is a shape shifter, regularly purging itself of constituent forces and factions while at the same time working to coopt new segments of society. It draws sustenance from a plurality of ideological ecosystems whose residents compete with one another in peddling their intellectual wares to the Kremlin. This partly explains how Putin's regime has endured for so long and managed to rebound after setbacks.

The Russian Presidential Administration has always perceived itself as a modernist and centrist force that maintains balance among more radical groups with their ideological agendas—for instance, factions within the Orthodox Church milieu or military and security circles. Over the years, however, the regime has lost some of its ideological malleability and increasingly committed itself to right-wing values. It began to engage regularly with an array of illiberal grassroots initiatives and took growing inspiration from them, while at the same time coopting them to serve the political status quo. In the early 2000s, the presidential party United Russia avowed its support for "liberal conservatism"—economic liberalism coupled with political and cultural conservatism. Gradually, however, the regime's amorphous endorsement of conservatism took on sharper definition, with the stress on patriotism, great-power status, and—most recently—"traditional values."⁷ Together with this shift came repressive policies targeting those who did not hew to the official line: a law banning so-called gay propaganda; the blasphemy law adopted in response to a protest performance staged in a Moscow cathedral by the punk group Pussy Riot; a bill that enabled authorities to block offending websites, ostensibly for purposes of child protection; bans on obscene language in films, books, and music; and more.

Having acquired state backing, illiberal civil society found itself empowered. The Church emerged as the main actor in this domain, more conservative in its values and more critical toward the Soviet legacy than state authorities. The Moscow Patriarchate has tried, with a mixed

record of success, to make its presence felt in ever more areas—first on questions of patriotism, and more recently on societal issues such as gay marriage, juvenile justice, domestic violence, and abortion. It has also sought to physically dominate the urban space by building new churches.⁸ Beyond the church, the state's backing of illiberalism has strengthened the position of myriad ideological entrepreneurs with their own agendas. Several oligarchs, including Vladimir Yakunin (the former head of Russian Railways and sponsor of various transnational initiatives under the title “dialogue of civilizations”) and Konstantin Malofeev (a major funder of the Russian-backed secessionists in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region and now a promoter of monarchism for Russia) have devoted their cash to building Russia's brand as the new illiberal power.

Today, conservative values are widely held in Russian society. Public-opinion polls demonstrate that views on abortion, marriage, and, in particular, homosexuality, grew more conservative from 1998 to 2017.⁹ With the government's adoption of a “traditional values” agenda, the conservative lobby has certainly become more vocal. Nonetheless, attitudes, legislative norms, popular behavior, and even pronouncements by public figures still vary widely according to region, generation, and so forth. At least in large urban centers, the daily lives of average Russians are hardly guided by rigid moral codes. And despite the pressures on those who diverge from the state-sponsored moral outlook, members of the urban middle classes and younger generations tend to hold more liberal attitudes.

In the three decades since the Soviet collapse, the place of illiberalism in Russia has evolved through an ongoing dialogue between the state and society, between regime actors seeking to secure the political status quo and illiberal champions aiming to speed the state's adoption of their preferred language and policies. Authorities have built a cultural hegemony around ideas and values initially backed only by a vocal plurality of Russians—a development that has led to the marginalization of the minority who do not share illiberal values, and sometimes the repression of this group. Sacrificing some of its earlier ideological plasticity to promote illiberalism has helped the Putin regime to shore up popular support. Yet it runs the risk of ceding ground to movements far more reactionary than the regime itself, and has alienated the more liberal minority whose members make up a disproportionate share of the country's “brain trust.”

The Young Conservatives

The Kremlin's embrace of illiberalism entails more than just deploying authoritarian strategies of rule. It also reflects engagement with a new strand of conservative thought, one dedicated to charting Russia's course as a weakened great power and building a broad ideological consensus around the regime. Western observers have been obsessed with

thinkers such as Alexander Dugin, the philosopher of neo-Eurasianism—but Dugin’s colorful radicalism, an eschatology inspired by European fascism, does not offer the practical ideological foundation that the

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Putin regime needs for its political strategies. Far better suited to this purpose, yet virtually unnoticed by Western commentators, has been a homegrown school of conservatism that has sprung up under the Kremlin’s protective umbrella.¹⁰

The members of this school are the Young Conservatives. The name is a reference to the German Young Conservative movement of the 1920s. The group comprises younger thinkers (all born in the 1970s) disap-

pointed with dominant backward-looking ideologies, whether Soviet nostalgia or Dugin’s Eurasianism (which the Young Conservatives denounced as a fantasy eccentric in its imperial imagination and esoteric in its intellectual references). The movement bills itself as a more pragmatic, “healthy” conservatism, offering up concrete and implementable projects for the new Russia. Like all conservatives, of course, these thinkers face the challenge of determining which part of the past needs to be “conserved”—an even more fraught question for Russia given the radical ruptures that mark its political history. The Soviet legacy poses particular quandaries, with the fallen revolutionary regime paradoxically standing for conservative ideals (above all, stability and a strong state) in the eyes of today’s nostalgics.

For almost two decades now, the Young Conservative circle—including figures such as Mikhail Remizov (b. 1978), Boris Mezhuiev (b. 1970), and Egor Kholmogorov (b. 1975), as well as a number of lesser-known thinkers—has been feeding its ideological products to the Kremlin. Their ideas have aided in Russia’s rebranding as a conservative power defending Christian and European traditional values. Both Mezhuiev and Remizov have been contributors to the quarterly *Notebooks on Conservatism* (*Tetradi po konservatizmu*), published by the Institute for Social-Economic and Political Research, a think tank partly funded by the Kremlin.¹¹ Deputy chief editor of a major Russian newspaper from 2013 to 2016, Mezhuiev is a prolific commentator on Russia’s political life. Remizov is the president of the Institute for National Strategy and the core thinker associated with so-called leftist conservatism, while Kholmogorov now works with Orthodox businessman Konstantin Malofeev at the latter’s monarchist internet channel Tsargrad.

Young Conservatives position themselves as the heirs of Russia's nineteenth-century conservative thinkers. They especially champion journalist Mikhail N. Katkov (1818–87) for his argument that a civilized state can only be a national state (meaning that the Russian nation should be at the core of Russia's statehood); Konstantin Leontiev (1831–91) for his theories of Russia as a fundamentally conservative great power inspired by the Byzantine model; and Nikolai Berdiaev (1874–1948) for his religious philosophy and stress on Russia's uniqueness. But they are familiar with all the classic Western thinkers, regularly referring to Max Weber, Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, Samuel P. Huntington, and Karl Mannheim; they invoke Oswald Spengler and Carl Schmitt, as well as representatives of the European New Right such as Alain de Benoist.

While this Russian neoconservatism has some similarities to the Western neoconservatism that emerged in the 1980s, epitomized by the political programs of Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, it differs sharply on the economic dimension. Young Conservatives denounce Western neoconservatism for defending economic (neo)liberalism, and thereby aligning itself with liberal individualism and liberal globalization. Russian conservatism is predominantly leftist in its economic prescriptions, favoring state intervention, large-scale public-service provision, and the renationalization of some private sectors.

Young Conservatives advance a classic definition of the conservative credo: Conservatism is a "call to belonging" in both time and space.¹² It rejects abstract universalism, instead inviting individuals to be rooted in historical continuity with past generations and anchored in their national and local territories. Because of its rootedness, conservatism is intrinsically connected to nationalism. It entails "faithfulness to oneself, to one's historical and spiritual path, and the ability not to submit to alien influences while remaining open. . . . Conservatism is always national: national conservatism is above all love for the historical image and recognition of the creative force of one's people."¹³ In the Russian context, still shaped by the devastating experience of the 1990s and the resulting backlash against Boris Yeltsin's market reforms, being conservative means championing a "conservative evolutionism" and distrusting the government's "reformist syndrome . . . according to an abstract plan . . . borrowed from abroad."¹⁴ Being conservative also means believing in Orthodoxy as a Russian cultural cornerstone that has persisted through political ruptures and transformations.

Grappling with Liberalism

One of the most interesting doctrinal contributions of the Young Conservatives concerns the relationship between conservatism and liberalism. In contrast to some of their ideological competitors, Remizov,

Mezhuev, and Kholmogorov voice no nostalgia for the Soviet past. Rather, they emphasize the need for the new Russia to be in line with the times. For them, conservatism is not backward-facing but rather forward-looking: Russia must establish itself as a conservative stronghold in order to keep a future open for itself, rather than being relegated to a subordinate role in the U.S.-led liberal order. On this view, conservatism represents the only possible path to a “restoration of the future” for Russia.¹⁵ Young Conservatives reverse the conventional view of the relationship between conservatism and liberalism: They argue that since liberal ideologies currently dominate the world, advocating liberalism means backing the status quo. Realizing conservative principles, by contrast, requires sweeping change—and so conservatism finds itself on the side of resistance, protests, rebellion, or even revolution. In the current world order, conservatism embodies movement, and liberalism immobilism.

Remizov brings another interesting point to the discussion. For him, the moral liberalization of the 1960s and 1970s marked the West’s transition from modernity to postmodernity. Under these conditions, taking up the mantle of conservatism means defending classical modernity against the postmodern. This is less of a contradiction than it might appear: Classic modernity was born from the fruitful combination of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and its opposing force, political Romanticism, making conservatism “the co-author of the *moderne* of the contemporary epoch.” He further explains:

If earlier conservatism defended the institute of the decaying agrarian society, dynastic monarchy, clericalism, and so on, then conservatism today defends the collapsing institutions of the modern which are connected with the national state of classical rationality, and with what one might call classical European values, against the postmodern and contemporary European values.¹⁶

This profession of faith lends itself to a particular view of Russia’s role in the current world order. Young Conservatives believe that Russia constitutes a specific state-civilization that has, in theory, the potential to challenge U.S.-led globalization. Under present conditions, however, it can no longer afford to dream of being a rival superpower, and should on the contrary promote isolationism. These thinkers denounce imperialists such as Dugin who still believe that Russia can challenge the United States. Their prescription is a more modest one: “We have no need to either dispute or lighten the U.S. hegemonic burden, turning it into a sparring partner in the global ring.”¹⁷ Rather, Russia should take on the role of “a rebel province of the global empire.”¹⁸

On the global stage, the one realm in which Russia can hope to build its influence is Europe. For Remizov, Europe can be defined in two different ways. If Europe is understood in terms of its current project

of building a post-Christian society, then Russia thinks of itself as a separate civilization. On the other hand, "If we understand civilization in terms of its roots: antiquity, Christianity, a certain Jewish component through Biblical thought, plus Slavic, Celtic, German, Indo-European roots, myths, then we are quite close to Europe. We have common roots. And our cultural codes are also similar." Faced with the contradiction of Russia's both belonging to Europe in terms of its civilizational roots and standing apart from the current European project, Young Conservatives argue that the appropriate course is to "call for co-existence," making it possible for Russia and Europe to find "grounds for compromise."¹⁹

"Sovereignism" as an Export Strategy

First developed as a response to domestic needs, Russian illiberalism only later became an export product, part of a strategy to increase the country's soft power.²⁰ Theories of soft power inspired by political scientist Joseph Nye often rely on two problematic assumptions: that soft power accrues only to countries with liberal systems, and that the United States is the yardstick for measuring its impact. In fact, soft power can also take authoritarian and illiberal forms. Moreover, while the United States may be unique in the sheer scale of the soft power it exerts around the world, this makes it an exception, not a yard stick; looking through a U.S.-centric lens may obscure the niche forms of soft power that other countries project. Russia challenges both the abovementioned assumptions. It deploys two forms of soft power: an ideological one, which is to say the illiberal brand, and a niche one, related to the country's own cultural particularities.

In Russia's foreign-influence activities, illiberalism takes the distinct form of "sovereignism." This term, inspired by the French Gaullists, signifies a stress on defending national sovereignty as a key element of both domestic politics and the international order. This outlook has champions at both ends of the ideological spectrum: Rightists cheer on the defense of national identity against multilateral organizations, multiculturalism, and minority rights, while leftists see themselves as safeguarding the people's sovereign democratic will against unrepresentative forces such as technocratic institutions, corporations, and neo-liberal policies. Promoting sovereignism thus enables Russia to speak to constituencies on both the far right and the far left.²¹

Moscow advances this ideology across three different domains: political, economic, and cultural. Political sovereignism asserts that only nation-states command political legitimacy, as this is the only level at which citizens express their will through elections (even if these elections are neither free nor fair), and therefore that powers properly belonging to the nation-state should not be delegated to unelected supra-national institutions. This calls for a struggle to restore the Westphalian

world order, with the enemies being pan-European bodies, international financial institutions, and international courts—as well as humanitarian interventionism and support by the Western advocacy community for protest-driven revolutions.

In the economic sphere, sovereignty means defending economic patriotism and protectionism against globalization and its ill effects: delocalization of industries and workforces, neoliberal reforms that hollow out welfare provisions, financial capitalism, the dictates of the IMF and World Bank, and so forth. Cultural sovereignty centers on an essentialist definition of the nation—who it includes and what its core cultural features should be. In this view, at the heart of each nation-state is a core nation entitled to promote its culture, while foreigners, migrants, and minorities must accept a second-tier status and recognize the supremacy of the “silent majority.”

The three sovereigntisms converge in Russia’s anti-American and anti-Atlanticist postures, with overlapping implications for nation-states—particularly those of Europe, which the Kremlin would like to see turn its back on trans-Atlantic commitments in favor of a continental partnership with Moscow. Sovereign states, according to this outlook, should reject trans-Atlantic associations that merely mask Washington’s selfish strategic interests; they should challenge the dominance of the United States and of international financial institutions by launching counterinitiatives (hence Moscow’s support for the BRICS grouping of emerging economies, alternative banking systems, mechanisms enabling international payments in currencies other than U.S. dollars, experiments with cryptocurrencies, and efforts to promote “internet sovereignty”²²); and they should renounce multiculturalism and minority rights as Western concepts alien to the majority of the world and at odds with traditional values. Sovereignists envision a Europe of nation-states rejecting Brussels’s supranational domination; a Europe of big public corporations working closely with Russian firms; a Europe of conservative values focused on its Christian heritage and the defense of the traditional family.

Of course, promoting sovereignty as an ideology does not automatically mean abiding by it in practice. When it comes to actual policies, Russia’s own commitment to these principles is ambivalent. Moscow has, for instance, promoted various supranational projects for Eurasian integration, and at home Russia’s government—like those of other European countries—has pushed for neoliberal reforms in order to ease pressure on the state budget. And while the Kremlin does reliably promote patriotism and traditional values, its approach to cultural diversity is less consistent. Russian media targeting audiences abroad lament that Europe is losing its identity due to lax migration policies that have enabled the continent’s “invasion” by an aggressive Islam.²³ Yet domestic media celebrate Russia’s multiconfessional harmony and the construc-

tive role of the country's Muslim minorities and institutions in nurturing patriotism, conservative values, and support for the regime.

Niche Soft Power

Russia's soft power extends beyond its cultivation of sovereignism and of ties to the far right and far left in Europe and (to a lesser degree) the United States. Moscow also deploys niche forms of soft power that target specific groups, often invoking historical and cultural ties with Russia. The first prominent target group for these strategies has been ethnic-Russian or Russian-speaking minorities abroad, to whom Russian state actors and ideological entrepreneurs appeal using the idea of shared membership in the "Russian world" (*russkii mir*); different variants of this approach exist for audiences in what Russia considers its "near abroad" and for those further afield. Second, Moscow has aimed its soft-power resources at local secessionist groups, which include but are not limited to ethnic Russians and Russian speakers. Most visibly, Russia has cultivated secessionists who have carved out unrecognized breakaway states in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia—but in a continuation of Soviet-era traditions, it has also sought to engage with groupuscules promoting African American, Texan, and Puerto Rican secessionism in the United States. Finally, it has played on fraternal religious sentiment to influence Orthodox countries and communities, particularly in the Balkans. In the Middle East, the Russian Orthodox Church has conducted active paradiplomacy among Eastern Christians.²⁴

This niche soft power is much more modest in scale than its ideological counterpart. Each of these vectors appeals to significant shares of the population only in a limited number of countries, mainly in the post-Soviet space, Europe, and parts of the Middle East, with smaller audiences in the rest of the world. Niche soft power requires target constituencies that have a specific link to Russia, either cultural, linguistic, religious, or through the legacy of Soviet internationalism. Nonetheless, these targeted efforts can complement and augment both Moscow's ideological soft power (as among ethnic Russians in Germany, who support by large margins the far-right AfD party) and its hard power (as with appeals to Orthodox solidarity in the Syrian theater of war).²⁵ Niche soft-power activities also allow Russian ideological entrepreneurs, whether state-affiliated or private, to test out their soft-power toolkit, from media-influence efforts and election interference to the paradiplomacy of the "dialogue of civilizations" and the reactivation of communist-era networks of "fellow travelers."

Even if the overall global footprint of Russia's soft power cannot compare to that of the United States, Russia has had considerable success in developing its illiberal approach, as well as niche strategies that reinforce it. This does not, however, mean that the hidden hand of Russia lies be-

hind every manifestation of illiberalism in Europe and the United States. Moscow can take advantage of the confluence of interests that exists between Russian promoters of illiberalism and illiberals abroad, but it does not generate from scratch illiberal attitudes in other countries. Rather, it creates echo chambers that amplify homegrown illiberal voices.

A Choice of Futures

Like every illiberalism, the contemporary Russian version exhibits country-specific features that flow from the country's recent history and particular cultural tropes. Yet it also has a great deal in common with other illiberal movements. The Putin regime's rightward shift on questions of values, for instance, has parallels to a broader rightward drift in European politics that has led to the withering of leftist parties. In Europe, the future of illiberalism depends in part on whether classic conservatives successfully resist it and offer a credible alternative—or instead decide to join forces with illiberals for electoral gain.²⁶ A similar choice faces Russia: For the moment, the Putin regime still embodies a moderate, centrist conservatism, but this current could be engulfed by forces on the far right. Authorities will have to decide whether to ally with or marginalize more radical voices, in particular those coming from the Russian Orthodox Church.

Illiberalism in Russia encapsulates the disappointment of many Russians, including both elites and ordinary citizens, with the West and the liberalism they associate with it. Over decades of Soviet rule, the West remained a largely inaccessible domain that Russians could idealize even as they criticized it. When travel and communications opened up in the 1990s, Russians discovered a changed West. The old-fashioned mix of political liberalism and moral conservatism had been replaced by a postmodern liberalism—multicultural, feminist, and vocal in defense of ethnic and sexual minorities. Conservatism had become a label used to delegitimize the enemies of this postmodern liberalism.²⁷ In this context, Russia and the Putin regime position themselves as defending the original, old-fashioned, modern liberalism—now called conservatism—against the postmodern liberalism they decry.

In the context of the political crisis of 2011–12, as well as Russia's war against Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, a seeming solidarity grew up between Russia's authorities and far-right groups. Yet the regime has since circled back to a more classic and pragmatic conservative vision. After four years of ideological hardening, with the 2016 arrival of the liberal Sergei Kirienko as first deputy chief of staff, Russia's Presidential Administration began a shift to more pragmatic, *Realpolitik*-oriented agendas at home and abroad. So far, amid a deepening economic crisis, Russia's new government under premier Mikhail Mishustin (who took office in January 2020) appears to be continuing this

swing toward a more mainstream conservatism, with an agenda focused on financial stability and the provision of social services—and now the management of the covid-19 pandemic.

While state-backed illiberalism has allowed the Putin regime to secure years of cultural and political hegemony over Russian society, this approach is increasingly coming under challenge. Younger generations who do not remember the traumatic 1990s, as well as middle-class urbanites working in the private sector, are now exhibiting what one might call Putin fatigue. Unlike the Russian public of earlier years, they do not accept that stability and predictability must be purchased at the expense of modernization. This part of the population desires both liberal reforms, seen as a way of guaranteeing more efficient and accountable governance, and a jettisoning of the “traditional values” agenda that has been gradually captured by reactionary forces such as the Russian Orthodox Church. Yet it would be naïve to imagine that a post-Putin Russia would “go back” to a Yeltsinesque pro-Western posture. This is true not just because the security services and military-industrial complex—which have long made up the backbone of the state—would undoubtedly block any such pivot, but also because there is a genuine social consensus behind asserting Russia’s great-power status. A post-Putin Russia will likely continue to see itself as a counterweight to U.S. power, albeit perhaps in a more nuanced way, and to build its brand around challenging liberal dominance.

Despite signs of fatigue with the Kremlin’s illiberalism at home, this credo still has a significant influence on Russia’s international agenda. Russia may be no more than “a rebel province of the global empire,” but it is working to frustrate any consolidation of a “Pax Americana” and to challenge the liberal world order. While Russia’s newly acquired influence among the international far right looks at first glance like a sharp departure from the Soviet legacy of supporting leftist movements, a closer examination shows continuity. Since the nineteenth century, Russia has been an exporter of revolutionary ideologies to Europe: populism,²⁸ leftist terrorism, and communism. And as the Young Conservatives point out, liberalism is now on the defensive and therefore can be seen as an ideology of conservation, whereas the illiberal credo demands a rebellion against the status quo. Illiberalism thus offers a way for a postliberal Russia not only to establish a new normalcy at home, but also to reject the low status of rule-taker (or even a spoiler or rogue state) that the liberal world order has allocated to it.

One of the most fascinating metaphors for Russia’s illiberal positioning comes from the fashion designer and photographer Gosha Rubchinsky (b. 1984), a cultural icon for the millennial generation. Rubchinsky’s style is epitomized by young men who are paradoxically both *gopnik* (a Russian term signifying something akin to “redneck” in U.S. parlance) and feminized, wearing clothes that combine Soviet and Orthodox motifs with punk-, skate-, and rave-inspired designs. His art has an openly

political message, celebrating Russia as the blue-collar man of the international system.²⁹ In this narrative, Russia—representing the late “second world”—figures as the loser of the post–Cold War era, stranded between a victorious “first world” at the apex of the liberal world order and a rising “third world” empowered by globalization. In this regard, it has much in common with the declining blue-collar culture that now finds itself caught between cosmopolitan middle and upper classes on the one hand and migrants and minorities who inhabit new socioeconomic niches on the other. Russia thus represents on the international scene the domestic social divide that is nurturing a rising illiberalism around the world.

NOTES

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