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## The Challenges of Rebuilding Russia: Forming New Russian Conservatism

Notes from Abroad

Vladimir Zolotych

If we look at the Russian conservative movement, we can identify several small parties: for example the Party of Russian Unity and Concord and the Conservative Party of Russia. The conservative movement includes a wide spectrum of ideas, approaches, and programs. On the one side—there are social and traditional conservatives, on the other side—there are the libertarian and economic conservatives.

Today, more and more Russian mass media and politicians are using the term “conservatism.” This concept—the word itself—now causes less alienation among ordinary Russians than it did earlier. This is despite the fact that, on the one hand, for eight decades society considered conservatism as something negative or extremist. During this period rigid stereotypes about conservatism were generated. On the other hand, most of the Russian mass media was controlled by radical liberals, who generally profess the ideas and methods of Cultural Marxism and who demonstrated sharp hostility to alternative ideas and criticism.

Quite often today such ultra-liberals pounce on any positive mention of conservatism in Russia. We call such persons “neo-Bolsheviks.” Despite these obstacles, the word and idea of “conservatism” is gaining currency in Russia. Having been disappointed by radical liberalism as it is practiced today in Russia, ordinary Russians have begun to consider conservatism as an alternative, as a symbol of stability and prosperity.

But conservatism can mean different things to different people. Every political party or social group and even individuals have their own philosophical or popular understanding of what this word “conservatism” means. We can often see displayed an incorrect understanding of this word.

Today, some Russian politicians who have a vague understanding about the depth and principles of conservative traditions use this word, not having a firm grasp of its essence. Some of them hope to revive the Old Russian conservative tradition, which was crushed in 1917. Others confuse nostalgia with totalitarian society, and still others mask their radical ideas by using this word. Communists, Liberals—Soyuz

Pravykh Sil (Union of the Right Forces), the “Party of Authority,” “Edinstvo” (Unity)—everyone along a wide political spectrum tries to improve their image by announcing themselves as supporters of conservative ideas, or at least some of these ideas. An interesting fact is that leaders of “the Union of Right Forces”—a well known liberal group—are trying to persuade people that they are also western type conservatives. This is just another confirmation of the popularity of conservatism in contemporary Russia.

History has proven that the principles of Western Christian Culture have worked well over centuries in developing civil society, and if Russia is to be successful in the future, it is important for her to reaffirm her own conservative tradition. In general, it is possible to assert that a theme of conservatism is crystallizing in the modern politics of Russia.

Before moving to the question of the role of conservative ideas in the political and cultural life of contemporary Russia, it is useful to briefly consider the concept, sources, essence, and kinds of conservatism, including those that arise from the Russian tradition.

Russia has a thousand years of conservative tradition, the sources of which are rooted in Orthodox religion and in Russian religious philosophy. Conservatism as political thought began forming in Russia in the beginning of the 19th century in the epoch of Alexander I, while at the same time, the development of liberal reform was underway and forming its own liberal theoretical basis.

The Founder of Russian conservatism was the well-known historian Nikolai Karamzin. His first completed account, written in 1811, was a manifesto of political conservatism entitled—“A Note about Ancient and New Russia in Its Political and Civil Attitudes.” From the end of the nineteenth through the first half of the twentieth century, Russian conservatism has received a theoretical foundation in the works of such writers as Boris Chicherin, Ivan Il’in, Semen Frank, Petr Struve, Konstantin Leontyev and others. Thus was conservatism finally established as an independent direction of philosophical, public and political thought.

Therefore on the one hand, the works of Russian conservative writers from Karamzin and Leontyev to Alexander Solzhenitsyn must now be read and discussed. Unfortunately, many of their books were not available during the whole communist period, and even today some of them are not easy to find, especially in Russian’s provinces. But on the other hand, it is necessary to pay special attention to key works of Western conservative thinkers, especially to the contribution of Russell Kirk, who stressed the primary importance of the organic development of traditions rather than only economic and political systems. His approach has much in common with the ideas and views of Russian traditionalists, including Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

Especially important to Russia is the issue of the relationship between popular and high culture, which Russell Kirk wrote about so deeply and profoundly. To be more precise, we need to understand the role of high culture in the development and support of the popular culture; teachers, church leaders, writers, artists and historians need to work together to re-establish traditional forms of community life. It is well known that such traditions and institutions were seriously damaged by seventy years of communist rule. This situation presents severe difficulties for Russians as they try to revive the culture of the Russian people.

As world experience shows, conservative ideas are especially valuable in those periods when the society ceases to trust social and political institutions, when there is an erosion of moral and ethical values, when criminality increases, and when discipline is undermined. The Russian scholar Nikolai Nachapkin has stressed some reasons for the appearance of conservative approaches in contemporary Russia.

First, Russia is currently experiencing spiritual, cultural, political, and economic difficulties. Second, the Liberal idea, which appeared in Russia only after the collapse of Communism, could not deeply take rooting on our ground because the principle of liberalism—the absolute freedom of man—assumes independence of the individual from norms and traditions. Third, it is necessary to take into account that Russia always featured strong community bonds in the people—individualism and egoism were not accepted by most groups in society. And fourth, radical liberalism was absolute to an extreme in its principles, and put itself in crisis and is not capable of resolving current political and economic difficulties. Nor is it able to overcome the crisis of culture.

Pre-Revolutionary Russian conservatism was not homogeneous. Alongside the conservative-traditionalists there were also conservatives—“okhraniteli” (guardians), liberal conservatives, and religious conservatives.

And if the conservative-traditionalists wished to return to the traditions before the Peter of Great Russia (which were anti-western), the other conservatives supported evolutionary political and socio-economic reforms of a prudential nature.

The idea of human social inequality is characteristic of all kinds of conservatism. One well known Russian political scientist and politician Vaycheslav Nikonov notes: “For the Russian conservatives, the idea of inequality is important. The history of our country testifies that the ideas of equality are unrealistic; moreover, they are immoral, because they equalize the wise man and the idiot, the criminal and the honorable man, and, finally, result in the spreading of equality by force.” It is necessary to note that even socialism was sometimes based on some conservative ideas: for example, patriotic consciousness, although it was somewhat deformed by the communist ideology. When the war with Germany began in 1941, Stalin gave a manipulative address to his people. He called on his countrymen to rise to protect not international socialism, but the motherland.

As Nikolai Nachapkin writes: “Conservatism in Russia results from her history; it is natural, normal and acts as a component of the culture of our society. Today, Russians face a dilemma: a choice between an educated, healthy democratic conservatism, or the attempted liquidation of conservative manifestations and the growth of radicalism and extreme tendencies in our society.” For Russia, then, it is necessary to embrace the new healthy conservatism which comprehends the mistakes and errors of pre-Revolutionary conservatism and is based on modern western conservatism.

I think this is a predictable process for contemporary Russia because most ordinary Russians are very disappointed by both liberal ideas and wild capitalism. I’ll try to explain why: Years of capitalist economic reforms and social troubles have reduced the population to despair. Because of the disintegration of the USSR and the loss of world power status, the national self-consciousness of a part of the Russians was humiliated. Russia is experiencing now a continuing epoch of wild capitalism, in

which great emphasis is placed on profit and lust for money instead of democratic values. There has occurred the swift decomposition of the norms of culture. The Russian culture, not having an opportunity to revive itself and compete on an equal basis with the Western one, has gone into decline. There have been consequences to the borrowing of the worst in western culture—criminality, the cult of violence, enrichment at any cost, the decline of moral values, the rise of drugs and debauchery. Today, the experience of modernization on the western model, injurious primitive capitalism, and radical liberalism are perceived by many Russian citizens as the cause of the loss of national identity. The unhealthy sensation of anarchy, chaos, and instability prompts in many people a yearning for a return of strong authority. And the theme of strong, responsible authority capable of resisting anarchy is the of some conservative groups.

Thus, in my opinion, in the near future Russia is going to face some major changes. Personally, I would like to see in Russia, some kind of synthesis of social and economic conservatism. Such conservatism would be based on Russian traditions and western experience, be pro-western and free-market, but emphasize the role of the moral and cultural. In the first stage, the State must play an important role in promoting these priorities.

In his new book *Darkness at Dawn: The Rise of the Russian Criminal State* (2003), longtime Moscow correspondent David Satter depicts post-Soviet Russia as a nightmare world of poverty, corruption, and violence. The book describes the consequences of nominal freedom without the rule of Law. Satter describes the Post-Soviet reformers as being in a hurry to establish “capitalism”, without putting in place the necessary underpinnings for an effective free market: “Only the rule of law can assure the basis of a free market’s existence, which is equivalent exchange. Without law, prices are dictated not by the market but the monopolization and the use of force”. Thus did criminal gangs come to dominate the Russian economy.

He writes that “The criminal terror against well-connected Russian businessmen . . . was short lived. Soon the gangsters, businessmen, and corrupt officials began to work together. The gangsters needed the businessmen because they required places to invest their capital but, in most cases, lacked the skills to run large enterprises. For their part, businessmen needed the gangsters to force clients to honor their obligations. Before long, nearly every significant bank and commercial organization in Russia was using gangsters for debt collection. By 1997 a ruling criminal business oligarchy was in place. A small group of bankers and businessmen, all of them previously unknown but with close connections to both gangsters and government officials, had gained control of the majority of the Russian Economy.” The Soviets left behind them a moral vacuum—with consequences that will long afflict Russia. “But corruption and violence are no more intrinsic to the Russian soul than to that of any other nation,” as Satter recognizes when he dedicates his book “to the honest people of Russia.” Building free institutions there will be an uphill task, but to call it impossible would be to despair of human nature altogether. I am optimistic. I hope you are as well.

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**Dr. Vladimir Zolotykh** is from the Udmurt State University in Russia and was recently a Wilbur Fellow at the Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal in Mecosta, Michigan.

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