

A More Realistic Vision of Russia's Greatness

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Perhaps the central message of the collapse of Soviet communism can be summed up as follows: If it is to survive and flourish on the world stage, Russia needs to develop a different kind of *realpolitik*. Unfortunately, Russia's rulers have often been drawn to a kind of Machiavellian realism that emphasizes the necessity of using authoritarian or unscrupulous methods to hold their vast country together. The country has paid the price.

The use of traditional forms of *realpolitik* often simply means the pursuit of short-term gain at the expense of healthy long-term development. Peter the Great may have won the Great Northern War, but his impatient modernization strategy polarized the country at a cultural level in a way that was never fully resolved under the tsars.

Likewise, the expansion of the Russian state under Catherine the Great may have added to Russia's European reputation, but — in relation to Poland at least — it incorporated into the empire a disruptive population that was always hard to manage. Such contradictions were also present in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when the territory of the Russia kept expanding while the divisions between state and society worsened.

The violent methods used by Vladimir Lenin and Josef Stalin, while they secured the Bolshevik hold on power, also created long-term problems. A state that had been created by terror found that it was dependent on coercion for its survival. It was difficult for Stalin's successors to break with these methods, and this made it harder for them to respond creatively to social and political change — both at home and in the Eastern bloc. For example, the regime's failure in 1968 to follow the lead of the Czech reformers and rethink the official ideology set the country back by a couple of decades. With hindsight, it is clear that the dissidents who protested the invasion of Czechoslovakia were patriots, not troublemakers.

The emphasis on conscience and repentance that was typical of the late perestroika era was essentially a response to this kind of realpolitik. Liberals rightly interpreted the events of 1989–91 as a judgement on a closed society, stressing the need for a more transparent mode of government and a stronger commitment to the law. In addition, there was also a strong patriotic agenda in the late 1980s that sought the rediscovery of suppressed national identities. But the energy that drove the collapse of the Soviet Union was also linked to a deep moral unease about the dark side of Soviet history.

Part of former President Boris Yeltsin's appeal as a leader was that he understood the moral as well as the political failure of communism. There was courage and boldness in the way that he sought a more democratic way forward. But the corruption that accompanied his reforms led some conservatives to become wary of the democratic project, and this has led in the years under Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev to the stalling of the democratic process, and a move back to more authoritarian methods of rule. The narrowing of the space for civil society to operate and the manipulation of the electoral and legal systems for political purposes suggest that older forms of realpolitik are still very much alive.

Yet Russia's best chance for influence in the world may now be through exercising a softer form of power. It is striking, for example, that many of Russia's neighbors do not trust the Kremlin. Yet when trust-building measures are embarked upon, it is noticeable what a significant effect they can have. For example, when the government decided to release additional documents about the Katyn massacre, it immediately brought a positive response from Poland and the European Union. Actions of this kind — which would have been unlikely in the Soviet era — are a valuable contribution to national security.

At one level, the country is not well placed to pursue the soft-power option. Russia is still a very hierarchical country. Yet, for all the authoritarianism of the country's history, it is important to remember that there are other traditions to build upon. Rhetorically, Putin and Medvedev have generally endorsed a form of "liberal conservatism" that combines a belief in a strong state with a more liberal agenda. And there is a healthy Russian intellectual tradition in this area, represented by such thinkers as Boris Chicherin and Peter Struve. Yet, in practice, the conservative principle has been applied to politics, and the liberal one to economics. The result has been a drift to authoritarian modernization, Chinese-style. But this combination is not well suited to addressing the problem of corruption. You cannot have an economic system that is free of corruption and a political system that is so dominated by patronage.

There are other traditions too. For example, Russia's most famous dissidents, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov, have much to offer, even if they came from different

ideological positions. In "From Under the Rubble," Solzhenitsyn tried to articulate a humbler vision of Russian political action, emphasizing the importance of religion, repentance and internal development. Sakharov's more secular commitment to human rights also had much to commend it. Both men gave expression to forms of resistance that were simple and easily adaptable: Solzhenitsyn with his call to "Live Not by Lies," in an essay by the same name, and Sakharov with his determination to speak out against injustice in the spirit of Tolstoy's famous essay about capital punishment, "I Cannot Keep Silent." There were elements here of a genuinely Russian tradition of nonviolence.

From earlier in the 20th century, the ideas of the Vekhi authors also point to the existence of a different kind of realism in Russia. The thinking of Semyon Frank, one of the authors, for example — another "liberal conservative" — is a case in point. In his last years, Frank talked of the need for "Christian realism" as an alternative to Soviet utopianism. He had in mind a political philosophy that combined a wise gradualism with an awareness of spiritual and ethical realities. Of course, he was talking about general principles, it is always easier to resolve problems in theory than in practice. But the concept of Christian realism is another expression of what might be needed in Russia today.

Two kinds of realism are at war in the country: one that defends a more authoritarian form of power in the name of survival and stability, and another that seeks to ground politics in a stronger legal framework, while at the same time fostering a more ethical tradition of conscience.

If a future is to be imagined that involves a more balanced and ultimately more realistic vision of Russian greatness, then the country's leaders will need to embrace this more moderate, ethical form of realpolitik. If they do that, the country will surely be better equipped to contribute the best of its wisdom and culture to the world. That is something to dream of.

Philip Boobbyer is a senior lecturer at University of Kent's School of History. This comment is a shortened version of an essay that appeared in "Rossia na Rubezhe Vekov."

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