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Putin's Slavophiles Gain Over Westernizers

By Alexei Bayer

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In Russia, the past is never left alone. Passionate debate still rages in the country about Josef Stalin, and it is not uncommon to hear political arguments about Nicholas II, Peter the Great and even Ivan the Terrible. William Faulkner must have had Russia in mind when he wrote: "The past is never dead. It isn't even past."

Since the early 19th century, the central divide in Russia has been between Slavophiles and Westernizers. The latter wanted Russia to be part of the European civilization and to adopt modern democracy. The Slavophiles, meanwhile, saw Russia as separate and special. They regarded the West with suspicion, accusing it of meddling and insisting that the government ban damaging foreign influences.

Ironically, the Bolsheviks began as radical Westernizers, importing into Russia a revolutionary creed that worshipped progress and rejected all forms of nationalism. Within a decade of coming to power, however, they turned into isolationists and, eventually, extreme

Slavophiles.

Under the Communists, Russian isolation proved an economic, political and military failure. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country opened its borders and embraced the democratic principles and rule of law that prevailed in Western industrial democracies. But the old divide remained. Democratic reforms were mostly cosmetic, similar to the skin-deep Westernization attempted by Peter the Great in the early 18th century, while a Russian version of the Weimar Republic's "stab in the back" theory emerged almost immediately to explain the Soviet collapse as a sinister plot by Washington and its stooge, President Mikhail Gorbachev.

Today's Russia is something of a hybrid, straddling the East-West divide. It preserves the monster state built during eight decades of communism, but its functions have been largely privatized and criminalized by government officials, well-connected oligarchs and siloviki. The huge army of bureaucrats has adapted the machinery of the Soviet state, including its massive law enforcement apparatus, which had been created to administer and protect the Communist system, for purposes of personal enrichment.

The administration of President Vladimir Putin has kept Russia open to an extent unprecedented over the past 100 years. However gradually, Russia continues to integrate into the world economy. It needs world markets to sell its natural resources and buy imports. Moreover, the kleptocrats whose interests Putin represents want good cars and designer clothes. They want to eat at fancy restaurants, travel abroad and send their kids to foreign universities. They buy real estate around the world and keep their money in foreign banks. At the same time, Putin and his entourage have consciously and cynically promoted the nationalist, xenophobic and isolationist aspects of the Slavophile creed to keep real democracy out. That way, the kleptocrats could go on despoiling the country without fearing accountability or restraints typical of democratic societies.

But the openness has inevitably strengthened the pro-Western camp, which is calling for meaningful democratic reforms. Meanwhile, petrodollar wealth has misled the nationalist wing into thinking that Russia is a rich country that should cut itself off from the perfidious West. The clash came out into the open with the start of the protest movement last year. The reaction to it has been a string of increasingly bizarre laws and court decisions, as well as the birth of a militant Orthodox movement.

The recent expulsion of USAID is a milestone in this process. The delicate balance maintained by Putin over the East-West divide is collapsing, the situation is veering out of his control, and the isolationist wave is gaining an upper hand.

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