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Russia Has No Plan for the Future

By Georgy Bovt

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Speaking at the Valdai Club in Sochi recently, President Vladimir Putin easily dismissed the slogan, "No Putin — No Russia," put forward on the eve of the event by his deputy chief of staff Vyacheslav Volodin. By doing so, Putin showed that he is a "European" leader and not a Central Asian "president for life," contrary to the wishes of officials like Volodin.

Volodin's slogan might work well for a rally in support of United Russia, but it lacks enough substance to serve as the basis of an entire ideology — despite the efforts by some pro-Kremlin commentators who rushed to find profound meaning in it. The problem is that Putin can reel off from memory Russia's formula for selling gas to Ukraine, quoting the figure right down to the penny, but has no interest in complex ideological constructs.

Putin's three-hour speech at Valdai was aimed primarily at the West. It carried the spirit of pragmatic realpolitik and was unwavering in asserting that Russia is in the right — a crucial stance for a politician whose popularity rests on his power and bravado.

Putin conveyed that the West, and particularly the U.S., had mortally offended Russia and even betrayed it and went on to point out American duplicity and double standards. "We

only wanted what was best for everybody," Putin essentially argued, "but you Americans drowned our good intentions in a sea of hypocrisy, lies, imperial arrogance and unwillingness to consider anyone's interests but your own."

And yet despite the legitimacy of such claims, it is unclear whether any of the Valdai Club members present — who know the intricacies of Russian politics better than anyone — agreed with Putin's arguments. Russia's ruling class, taking its cue from the president, has completely shifted into a world of its own, replete with a separate set of ideas, values and principles.

And the problem is not whether the Russian or Western world is more "correct," but that the two sides have conclusively formed separate camps, unable to understand and unwilling to even listen to each other.

This is the main factor that will shape Russian foreign and domestic policy in the next few years. In his sharply anti-U.S. speech, Putin defined his policy and principles in a way that finds comparison to remarks he made at a security conference in Munich in 2007 and the definitive speech that former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill delivered in Fulton, Missouri, in 1946 in which he popularized the term "Iron Curtain."

But will snarling at the "duplicitous and despicable" West alone provide adequate foundation for creating a meaningful social and political life in Russia?

However archaic and reactionary Russia's realpolitik might seem to what Putin calls "our Western friends and partners," it might very well become a consistent pattern of behavior in the international arena, giving rise to numerous confrontations on many fronts.

And whereas foreign policy is typically a continuation of domestic policy, the opposite is true in Russia, where the so-called Dima Yakovlev law banning American citizens from adopting Russian orphans was born not so much out of Russian lawmakers' love for orphans as it was out of their angry reaction to the Magnitsky Act, which barred a group of Russian officials from entering the U.S.

Judging by recent statements from senior Russian officials, tough anti-U.S. sentiment has become the leitmotif of Kremlin propaganda. It has become the litmus test of patriotism, along with accusations that the West is "aiding and abetting fascists" in Ukraine.

But that cannot fill the ideological void and create a positive image of Russia's future. A country with aspirations of greatness cannot win the world's respect by constantly denouncing Washington, much less by struggling with some pathetic "junta in Kiev."

Moscow leaders might find some meaning in the struggle for the interests of Novorossia in eastern Ukraine and the even larger Russian world. But in that case, they must first infuse meaning into the social life of Russia itself — the foundation of any larger Russian world.

Leaders must first care for their own people, ensure their well-being, standard of living, rights and protection under the rule of law and only then turn their sights to Novorossia and the possibility of further expansion. This idea of an expanded sphere of Russian influence will never work if it is based only on identifying enemies — "foreign agents," people with

dual citizenship and "fifth and sixth columns" of domestic enemies.

What is needed is to formulate a post-communist "Russian Dream" — similar to the American Dream — without letting the country degenerate into unbridled and primitive chauvinism.

When former Soviet leader Josef Stalin denounced the "Yugoslav fascists" of Yugoslavia's then-leader Josip Broz Tito, and when former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev criticized U.S. imperialism while addressing numerous peace initiatives to the "progressive part of mankind" — proposals that were just as devoid of substance as similar initiatives sounding from Moscow today — they were built into a comprehensive ideological system.

At the core of that ideology was an image of the future characterized by communist happiness, universal equality, brotherhood and love. It served as the framework for a system of societal ethics and models of personal behavior leading to career advancement and success.

The current attempt to substitute a coherent image of the future with a hodgepodge of obsolete Soviet ideas only underscores the ideological poverty of the current regime. That jumble of unprincipled, opportunistic journalism, primitive television propaganda and primeval myths about how the Western world wants to enslave Russia, push it to its knees and steal its minerals, land, water and air is no vision of the future. It is only a horror story borrowed from the dusty past that offers no constructive plan or direction.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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