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Russia Is Using the Past to Explain the Present

By Gleb Kuznetsov

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In his address to the Federal Assembly last week, President Vladimir Putin turned again to his favorite "historical" method of reasoning to explain to the Russian people what is happening in the country and the world.

In his opinion, Russia has a "right" to Crimea because it has "historically" been part of "sacred" Russian soil, and the West has "always" pursued a policy of containment against Russia.

According to this view, the current situation with sanctions is not a unique "phenomenon," but just one more episode in the epic, generations-long confrontation between Russia and the West. Accordingly, it makes no sense to attempt to identify the specific causes of the problem and try to resolve them through compromise. Instead, Russians should understand that historically it has always been like this and accept the inevitable casualties, conflict and confrontation.

This approach often elicits reactions of surprise and disbelief. How can anyone interpret current developments in the narrow context of events that happened as much as 1,000 years ago — if they ever happened at all, or in the way historians report them? However, it is the understanding of this so-called "history" that lies at the root of the consciousness and world view of today's Russian elite.

The collapse of communist values followed by the deep, well-founded and sincere dissatisfaction felt by all strata of Russian society concerning the ideological vacuum of the 1990s led to Russian politicians feeling somewhat ridiculous or even embarrassed about trying to hold a genuine dialogue about human values.

At the same time, neither Putin nor his official commentators have ever defined what constitutes the "traditional Russian values" that have become the leitmotif of public political discourse in recent years. Apparently, the very fact that they exist is supposed to be enough in itself.

But it remains unclear as to how meaningful and substantive those values are, or whether they are more superficial and confined to mere ritual.

For example, Putin adopted the Russian Orthodox religion as one of the supposed "traditional Russian values" at a very mature age. In the same way, Soviet-era party members were considered "good communists" not if they espoused sincere belief in the ideals of Marx and the other "fathers of communism," but if they attended party meetings and rallies regularly. Today's display of religious conviction is no different.

However, politics is based on abstract ideas, and when a leader does not have a strong belief in God and does not center his policy on commonly accepted human values, events themselves become the predominating paradigm. Thus history — with its limitless storehouse of events, real and imagined — becomes the lens through which modern Russian politicians view the present and envision the future.

In the absence of a moral code, instructive stories from the past occupy the same place for Russia's political class as God does in the U.S. political system and "Man in the Age of Enlightenment" does for the European.

Russia's ruling elite turns to history as a reference point in the same way that politicians in the time of Oliver Cromwell turned to the Old Testament. Taken together, these historical parables or proverbs provide real-life examples illustrating how to behave in any situation. However, these stories are completely devoid of any Christian or spirituality based love for humanity. To the contrary, they are filled with examples of violence, war and efforts to achieve goals at any cost and through any sacrifice.

What's more, Russian leaders can delve into this "limitless storehouse of history" and either extract or invent whatever story or interpretation of events that serves their needs at the moment and declare it part of the sacred heritage of Great Russia.

At first glance, that might seem to pose a danger to international stability and even to Russia's nearest neighbors. In fact, it is more an attempt by Russian leaders to justify their current position through stories and myths about cities that have long been swept from the face of the

Earth and that today hold interest to archeologists alone. And it is probably a sign of the underlying self-doubt the Russian elite feel rather than of any rock-hard confidence in their own strength or that they are right.

At a seminar on Russia's domestic policy, Deputy Foreign Minister Vasily Nebenzya mentioned one more complaint. "Western politicians," he said, "are merely officials who are forgotten after three or four years." Such comments are apparently an attempt to explain to Russians that the ideal politician is more like an Old Testament prophet or such historical leaders as the Holy Prince Vladimir of Kiev.

But is this the "aggressive" approach Westerners so often accuse Russian diplomats of pursuing? It is probably just the opposite — yet another attempt to defend their own positions and to explain why the ruling authorities maintain their perpetual hold on power. After all, would you replace a prophet?

In today's Russia, history is not a science. Rather, leaders use it to lend weight to their interpretation of reality, primarily to make sense of it for themselves. It is one thing when a person says he should do something or, conversely, cannot do something. It is quite another when he begins his speech by citing historical figures such as Esau or Jacob.

The role that Old Testament proverbs play for Americans is comparable to the way Russian leaders cite episodes from World War II — or, from the more recent past, the Cold War — to what is generally an only moderately educated domestic audience.

The historical reminiscences that constantly pop up in the speeches of Russian leaders are not a threat or an attempt to "re-enact" those episodes now. They are an attempt by leaders to find their bearings during a crisis, give their words importance and convince themselves and their people that they are right.

Russian politicians do not intend these "fragments of history" for a foreign audience — where analysts will translate and interpret their significance — but for domestic consumption. Thus the irritation that the Western press expresses over them is largely unfair.

Putin's historical parables are not a guide to his future actions. Each time, they provide a way to describe the reality in which the state finds itself by citing a "higher" source that somehow transcends state budget figures, the price of oil and other, purely economic considerations.

Looking back to historical antecedents helps today's Russian leaders better understand themselves.

Perhaps these repeated allusions to the past are not the best way to bring something "transcendental" into politics, but they are also relatively harmless for others. The sooner Western observers and politicians learn to pass them off as inconsequential, the easier it will be to resolve the current crisis.

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