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**TWENTY YEARS AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE USSR:  
CONTINUITY AND CHANGE**

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## From Soviet to ‘Soviet’ Elections?

By Stephen White, Glasgow

### Abstract

Soviet elections, up to the Gorbachev years, had lacked a choice of candidate, let alone of party. But from 1989 onwards, they were largely competitive, and from 1993 onwards under a postcommunist constitution they were multiparty as well. Under the Putin leadership, from 2000 onwards, there was a movement towards ‘authoritarian elections’ in which control of the media and of the state itself meant that candidates and parties favoured by the Kremlin could normally be assured of success. The unexpected outcome of the December 2011 election suggested that arrangements of this kind were no longer secure; and although the re-election of Vladimir Putin to the presidency was not seriously in doubt, it was clear that he would be under some pressure to govern in a different way.

### Elections in the Russian Federation, 1991–2008

There had always been elections in the Soviet Union. But they were ‘elections without choice’: not just of party or candidate, but even, in practice, of whether to vote at all. At the last unreformed elections of this kind, in March 1984, 1499 candidates fought it out for the 1500 seats available, as one of them had died shortly before polling day and there had not been enough time to replace him. Turnout was a massive 99.99 per cent, and the vote in favour of the single list of candidates in the two chambers of the Supreme Soviet was 99.94 and 99.95 per cent respectively. This clearly left little room for improvement.

One of the successful candidates on that occasion was Mikhail Gorbachev, already seen as the most likely to succeed an ailing Konstantin Chernenko. His address to the party congress in March 1986, his first as General Secretary, made clear there would be changes in what had become an increasingly discredited system of representation, and at the 19th Party Conference in the summer of 1988 these reforms were the central element in a far-reaching package of ‘democratisation’. An entirely new election law was adopted in December 1988, which formed the basis on which a new parliament was elected in March 1989. A whole series of party leaders, including a candidate member of the Politburo itself, were rejected by a newly enfranchised electorate; in Moscow itself Boris Yeltsin returned to national politics with a margin of victory so large it entered the Guinness Book of Records.

A new constitution, adopted in December 1993, appeared to consolidate these changes in what was now a postcommunist country. There was a commitment to multiparty politics, a separation of powers and the supremacy of law, as well as the usual democratic freedoms. The new parliament, the State Duma, brought together equal numbers of deputies elected by constituencies across the whole country and deputies put forward in a national party-list contest. There were 13 of these

parties or associations in the December 1993 election, and 8 of them won representation. The first Duma was elected, exceptionally, for a two-year transitional period; later elections took place every four years, from 1995 up to 2011, with presidential elections following a few months later. Russia, it seemed, had finally embarked on its long-delayed ‘transition to democracy’.

And yet there were worrying signs. The most successful parties, in the first elections, were either right-wing nationalist (the Liberal Democrats) or post-Soviet (the Communist Party). The all-powerful presidency was in the hands of a rather different figure, but his unpredictability and occasional ill health made it difficult to maintain a stable government with a consistent set of policies. With a stalemate at the centre, the republics and regions began to assert their own authority—even ‘independence’. An attempt to impose central authority in Chechnya led to a costly and long-running conflict. And a lack of effective central authority undermined law enforcement. Meanwhile, social divisions widened, the economy contracted steadily, and in 1998 the currency itself collapsed when the government defaulted on its international obligations.

There was no suggestion, under the Putin leadership from 2000 onwards, that elections should lose their place as the central mechanism by which the Russian parliament was formed. But it became increasingly clear that they would be elections at which the Kremlin could expect to secure the kind of parliament it wanted, rather than leaving it to ordinary citizens. One of the most important ways in which it could achieve this objective was through its control over the broadcast media, particularly television. Another was what became known as ‘administrative resource’, by which the authorities could use their control over secretaries and meeting rooms, public buildings and transport to advantage the candidates and parties they favoured. As well as this, the law itself had changed in 2005, eliminating the single-member constituencies entirely and leaving all of the

450 seats in the hands of parties that had been able to satisfy the requirements of an increasingly demanding law on political parties.

### 2011 Duma Elections and its Impact on Russian Politics

There were few who thought the Duma election of 4 December would mark a significant departure from this well-established pattern. Leadership approval ratings were still high. The economy appeared to have survived the international financial crisis that reached Russia at the end of 2008, and government forecasts suggested a 3–4 per cent rate of economic growth over the immediate future (Putin, in his speech to the United Russia congress in September that agreed to nominate him to the presidency, promised to raise growth still further, to 5–6 per cent annually). The most basic indicator of all, size of population, was beginning to show an increase after many years of decline. Indeed the only question for pollsters, when I visited the Levada Centre in the summer of 2011, was whether the ruling party, United Russia, would win an overall majority of seats in the new Duma or simply the largest number.

And yet at the same time there were worrying signs from the leadership's perspective. There was little evidence that the economy was shifting away from its heavy dependence on the exploitation of the country's enormous mineral resources, which left the state budget heavily dependent on the world oil price. The size of the government bureaucracy had been increasing, not diminishing. Capital flight was continuing, or even accelerating. And increasing numbers of the younger and better educated were seeking their future in other countries. Perhaps most important of all, corruption had apparently been increasing, in spite of Medvedev's promise to reduce it; and this was the basis on which a campaigning lawyer, Alexei Navalny, came to public prominence in early 2011, particularly through his claim that United Russia was a 'party of crooks and thieves'.

Party officials had already accepted that United Russia's share of the vote in the 2011 Duma election would be lower than in 2007, when Putin had agreed to head its list of candidates. In the event, it took 49.3 per cent as compared with 64.3 per cent in 2007; but this was still sufficient to secure a majority of seats in the new Duma (238 of the total of 450). The other seats went to the Communist Party (92), A Just Russia (64) and the Liberal Democrats (56), at least some of whom could be expected to be supportive. But in much of the country United Russia's share of the vote was very much lower. Indeed, there was hardly a national result at all. In Chechnya, United Russia had 99.5 per cent of the vote; in Dagestan, 91.8 per cent; in Ingushetia, 91

per cent. In Yaroslavl, on the other hand, United Russia won just 29 per cent, in Karelia 32.3 per cent and in St Petersburg 32.5. The worst-performing regional heads were called to the Kremlin a few days later to account for their shortcomings; a few resigned immediately, the first of them was the Vologda governor, in whose region United Russia had won just 33.4 per cent.

All of this was a familiar pattern, not just in Russia, but in the other post-Soviet republics. What was unexpected was the public reaction that began to develop after the election had taken place, particularly, but not exclusively, in Moscow. Small numbers appeared on the streets on the evening of the polling day itself. The following day, Monday 5 December, about five thousand took part in protests, although little of this was reported by the mainstream television or newspaper outlets. The first wave of demonstrations peaked at the end of the week, Saturday 10 December, when as many as 50,000 assembled in central Moscow and similar numbers in other parts of the country. The Moscow demonstrators approved a five-point manifesto, at the top of which was a demand that the entire election be repeated, this time with genuine opposition parties; another was that the more than a thousand people arrested in earlier demonstrations should be released. At least superficially there were parallels with the 'Arab spring' that had overthrown the autocratic rulers of Egypt and Tunisia earlier in the year, after electoral outcomes that had also appeared to be fraudulent.

Were the elections 'free and fair'? And either way, what are their political implications? The OSCE's observing mission was certainly sceptical. The elections had been well administered, they reported, but United Russia and the state itself had been too closely associated, and there had been 'frequent procedural violations and instances of apparent manipulation' during the count. Some of the mission's individual members, however, offered a rather different opinion in the interviews they gave to the Russian media, and other observing missions, including the one that was sponsored by the Commonwealth of Independent States, were much more positive. There had certainly been some technical faults, their chairman told Russian television, but not of a kind that could have substantially affected the outcome. The head of the Central Electoral Commission, Vladimir Churov, laid particular emphasis on the close accord between the results that were announced on 9 December and the predictions of the major survey agencies, which were indeed very similar.

What did ordinary Russians make of it? How 'honest' were the elections, for a start? According to a post-election survey, conducted for the author and associates by the Levada Centre immediately after voting had taken

place, about a third (34 per cent) thought the election had been 'largely' or 'entirely honest'; but nearly half (47 per cent) took a different view. Perhaps a better question was to ask if the results that had been announced on 9 December had at least 'corresponded to reality'. The proportions were approximately reversed: half (51 per cent) thought they had done so, but there was a substantial 30 per cent who took the opposite view. And there was substantial support for the aims of the demonstrators: 43 per cent supported them 'largely' or 'entirely'; and about the same proportion (42 per cent) took the opposite view.

The Kremlin seemed to be listening—at least to some of these concerns. There was no concession to the central demand of the protestors, that the elections should be cancelled and repeated. But they did concede that the electoral system itself should certainly be reconsidered, and by early 2012 the necessary legislation had already been introduced into the Duma. Single-member constituencies would be revived in some form, so that ordinary electors could believe they had a personal representative in the legislature. The right to vote 'against all' the candidates and parties might be restored. And governors should once again be directly elected, although perhaps in a way that will allow the Kremlin some ability to filter the candidates beforehand. Putin's own suggestion was to install web-cameras in all polling stations. This, at least, could be implemented before the March

presidential election; any changes to the Duma election law could only take effect when the next parliamentary elections take place, in 2016.

Would this be enough? It was certainly true that the protestors had a diverse range of objectives: some were concerned about the electoral system itself, others had more general complaints about corruption, others still were more worried about the environment. All the same, what the demonstrations made clear was that the central authorities had less control over this developing movement than ever before. And the main reason for this was the spread of forms of electronic communication that could largely bypass the state itself. About half of our respondents (51 per cent) used the internet to some degree, and a very substantial proportion (40 per cent) used the various new social media, particularly indigenous networks such as Odnoklassniki (Classmates) and V kontakte (In contact).

It was hardly a 'Twitter revolution'. But neither was it (as Putin tried to suggest) an attempt to overthrow the Russian government with foreign funding. Unless the Kremlin takes more account of the public concerns that has led to these unprecedented demonstrations, including the abuse of their position by a privileged and apparently unaccountable officialdom, it is likely that these new forms of communication will allow increasingly effective challenges to be mounted in the future.

#### *About the Author*

Stephen White is James Bryce Professor of Politics at the University of Glasgow. His research interests focus on post-Soviet politics, with special emphasis on elections, political elites, public opinion and the media, and he recently published 'Understanding Russian Politics' (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

## The Russian Economy and Russian Economic Policies since 1991

By Philip Hanson, London

### Abstract

Post-communist economic transformation, like old age, is not for wimps. Even in countries that are commonly regarded as success stories, like Estonia and Poland, the going has been tough. In Russia, as in other CIS countries, the change from centrally-planned socialism to market capitalism has been particularly difficult. It has also been only partly successful. In what follows, I offer some thoughts on economic transformation in general, followed by a brief narrative and an even briefer assessment. My conclusion is that Russia, along with the whole of the CIS, has been weighed down by extremely poor initial conditions and by a lack of either elite or popular appetite for radical liberalisation of the economy.

### Liberalisation, Stabilisation, Privatisation and Russia

Centrally-planned communist economies have, if one ignores their black-economy transactions, centrally controlled prices and output levels and entirely or predominantly state-owned production units. To enable these arrangements to function, foreign trade must also be run by the state. Capitalist market economies have mostly uncontrolled prices, outputs and foreign trade and mostly private ownership of resources. Therefore a country moving from one system to the other (and alternatives to these two have yet to be discovered) must liberalise and privatise. Also, centrally-planned economies tend to be shortage economies and liberalisation therefore produces a leap in price levels, so there has also to be macro-economic stabilisation to prevent the one-off leap in prices turning into prolonged high inflation.

The reform prescription of liberalising, stabilising and privatising is therefore unavoidable. True, that leaves considerable scope for variations in pace and timing and in the attention given to the development of appropriate institutions. But the changes have to be made. There is no reason to assume that they can necessarily, within a generation or so, be made in such a way that a well-functioning market economy emerges. In Russia a capitalist, market economy has emerged, but not one that functions well.

### 1990–1998: from ‘Catastroika’ to the Beginnings of Recovery

The reform team led by Yegor Gaidar was formed in 1991. It became the reform wing of the new Russian government at the end of that year. Its members, with Gaidar himself as acting Prime Minister, held key economic posts. In the immediate run-up to the formation of a new Russian state, the economy was in a systemic vacuum: the controls of the centrally-planned economy had broken down and market arrangements were not yet in place. The initial conditions in which the new government had to operate were dire. A decline in economic

activity had begun earlier, in 1990. Inflation, too, was already a problem: over 90% in 1991.

The Gaidar team described themselves as a ‘kamikaze’ squad. They believed that the forces ranged against liberalisation, stabilisation and privatisation were massive and that resistance to their reforms was deep and widespread. There was, first, some popular attachment to the ‘Soviet way of life’. For all its shortcomings, the Soviet social order was a Russian invention. Alexander Zinoviev’s assertion that ‘...they [Western cold warriors] aimed at communism but killed Russia’ articulated a feeling that was shared by many. Then there were all those in the Soviet political and economic elite who rightly feared a loss of power in a new order.

The other big obstacle was the huge economic distortion that the new Russia inherited: large and extensive shortages along with decades of protected production that was uncompetitive and in some cases even value-subtracting (industrial output worth less on world markets than the raw materials that went into it). These were worse than the initial distortions in Central-East European economies.

Price liberalisation was the only way of dealing with the extreme shortages of 1990–91. The result was consumer-price inflation in the twelve months to December 1992 that exceeded 1500%. Or rather, that inflation was the result of two things: the initial leap in prices and the failure of the first attempt at macro-stabilisation in mid-1992.

The outcome of liberalisation and further failures in stabilisation was a prolonged decline in output accompanied by high inflation (see Chart 1). This messy state of affairs culminated in the crisis of summer 1998. Attempts at macro-economic stabilisation were short-lived. They failed to produce hard-budget constraints on producers. When the rouble money supply was squeezed, enterprise managers resorted to non-monetary settlements (barter, IOUs, payment delays). These, in turn, were propped up by subsidies to the state suppliers of gas and electricity; the subsidies were made possible by

government borrowing. When the pyramid of government short-term bonds collapsed, this virtual economy collapsed with it.

Meanwhile a remarkable programme of privatisation was carried out: by vouchers in 1992–94, and then by ‘cash’. However, the restructuring of enterprises lagged behind the formal privatisation (see Chart 2), precisely because of the failure to impose hard-budget constraints on producers, whether state or private. Of the three pillars of transformation it was stabilisation, rather than liberalisation or privatisation, that proved to be the most difficult to achieve. Informal networks of officials and managers, abetted by some of the political leadership, had contrived to undermine efforts at macro-stabilisation from generating real pressure on the behaviour at the micro-level of enterprises.

### 1998–2008: the Inter-Crisis Boom

The 1998 crisis forced the government to let the rouble exchange rate fall. It went from around R6 to the US dollar to around R24 in a couple of months. This devaluation kick-started a recovery. Officially-recorded GDP in 1998 was just under 56% of its 1989 peak. Many enterprises had been unable to pay their way (except by barter, IOUs, etc) because they could not compete with imports at the previous exchange rate. The devaluation gave them a chance of revival. To the surprise of many analysts, they took the opportunity. The reforms of the early 1990s, for all their shortcomings, had at least created a population of firms capable of responding to price signals.

Then the oil price began a long, though not continuous, rise, bringing in a growing flow of revenue from oil and gas and—since other commodity prices also rose—from metals as well. Rising oil prices drove Russian GDP (see Chart 3). They increased state, household and company incomes and therefore aggregate demand. Some of the revenue from oil and gas was siphoned off to off-shore bank accounts and holding companies; some was used to pay off external debt, and some was sterilised as a matter of policy by placing it into the Reserve Fund and the National Prosperity Fund. The remainder stimulated demand and therefore domestic economic activity.

In the inter-crisis boom, GDP grew at an average annual rate of 6.8%. Because the starting-point was so low, however, officially-measured GDP at the end of the boom in 2008 was still only 7.4% above the level of 1989. However, the steep rise in oil prices produced a large improvement in Russia’s terms of trade, enabling real incomes to rise faster than GDP. I estimate household consumption in 2008 to have been approximately 2.3 times its level in 2000. The corresponding ratio for GDP is just under 1.7.

Fast growth in incomes sucked in imports. The annual rate of growth of car imports in 2000–08 was 51.5%, of refrigerators 14.3% (derived from Russian Customs data). Yet the growth of exports (chiefly because of rising oil and gas prices) was such that Russia continued to run a large trade and current account surplus.

Policies in this period were an odd mixture. Under Finance Minister Aleksey Kudrin, public spending was held back until the electoral cycle of 2007–08. By creating reserve funds based on oil, and latterly on oil and gas revenues, he provided the instruments that helped Russia get through the 2008–09 crisis. His (mostly) prudent policy-making, however, co-existed with policy failures at the micro-level. Informal, corrupt links between business and officials, without independent courts to protect property rights, continued to characterise the business environment. Some early liberal reforms in 2000–03 were followed by a highly-visible shift back to state control. This was signalled by the arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky in late 2003 and the subsequent state acquisition of most of the assets of his Yukos oil company.

### After Mid-2008: a New Era?

The year-on-year fall in Russian GDP in 2009 was a remarkable 7.8%. Some countries, e.g. Estonia, fared worse, but the striking feature of the Russian fall in output was that it greatly exceeded the damage done by the first round of the global financial crisis to other large emerging economies and to other major oil exporters. The scale of this set-back, despite the neat synchronicity displayed in Chart 3, cannot be explained simply by the fall in the oil price. My conjecture is that it was caused by the fall in the oil price combined with a very low level of confidence in Russian institutions. This combination produced a panicky withdrawal of capital from Russia by both Russian and foreign-owned business.

The global crisis of 2008–09 was a ‘balance-sheet crisis’. It was always likely to be followed by borrowers trying to reduce their debt and lenders trying to cut back their outstanding loans. This has been damaging around the world, and certainly so for Russia, whose banks and companies had in 2004–08 massively increased their international borrowing. In addition, confidence in an ever-rising oil price was shaken and for the first time the working-age population began to fall. At the same time, the European economy, the customer for about half of Russia’s exports, stagnated and threatened to implode. In other words, four key sources of growth either dried up or became more uncertain.

For this reason growth has not returned to previous rates, but has been about 4%. In most projections to 2020 growth of that order or somewhat less features

in the baseline scenarios. And there is a considerable downside risk as well.

Confidence in the Russian economy has decreased. Private capital flows into and out of the country had produced net positive (in-) flows in 2006 and 2007. Before and—worryingly—since those two years, there have been net outflows of private capital. In part this reflects net debt repayment, but even that means that much old borrowing is not being rolled over. Part of the outflow is a direct expression of low confidence in the country's future.

### Assessment of Russian Economic Policies since 1991

Russia has had some effective, liberal economic policy-makers: Yegor Gaidar, Anatolii Chubais and Aleksey Kudrin, to name just three, who achieved a great

deal. The economy has become a mainly-private-enterprise, market economy. In the boom years fiscal reserves were built up in a prudent manner and many (if not all) would-be big spenders were resisted.

Yet the business environment remains very poor. Of 49 upper-middle-income countries included in the World Bank's 2012 Ease of Doing Business rankings, Russia comes well down, at 40<sup>th</sup>. This reflects the failure to overcome the heritage from the Soviet Union. Extreme initial distortions of the economy contributed to the acute difficulties of the 1990s. The continuing institutional weaknesses—lack of impartial courts, pervasive corrupt links between business and the state, and a mostly torpid bureaucracy—have deep social roots. Perhaps an inspiring statesman at the helm, a Mandela or a Havel, might have made a dent in these problems, but no leader of that stature has emerged.

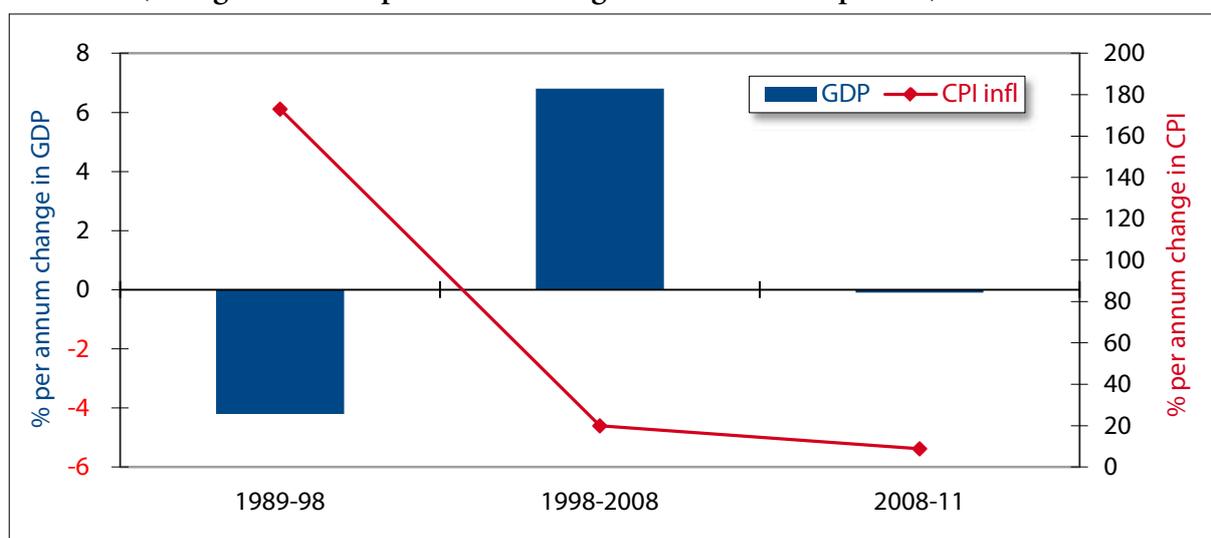
#### About the Author

Philip Hanson (OBE) is an Associate Fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House and an Emeritus Professor of the University of Birmingham. His books include *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Economy* (2003) and (co-edited with Michael Bradshaw) *Regional Economic Change in Russia* (2000).

#### Further Reading

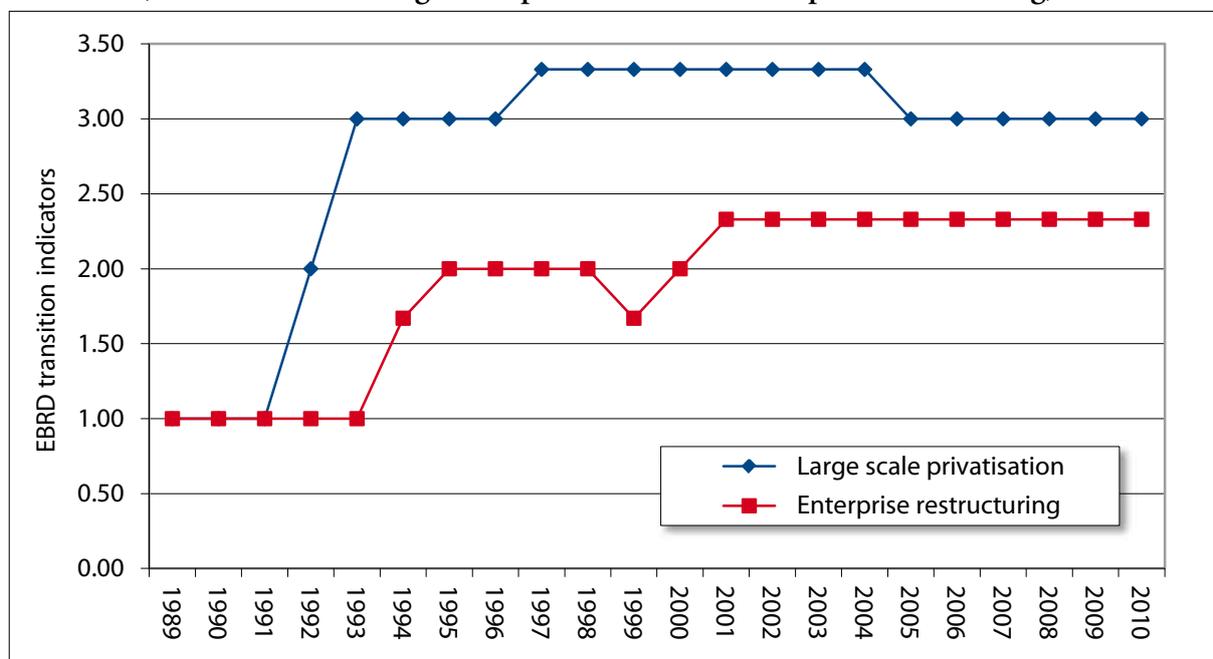
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**Chart 1: Growth and Inflation in Russia: Three Epochs between 1989 and 2011**  
(average annual % per annum changes within selected periods)



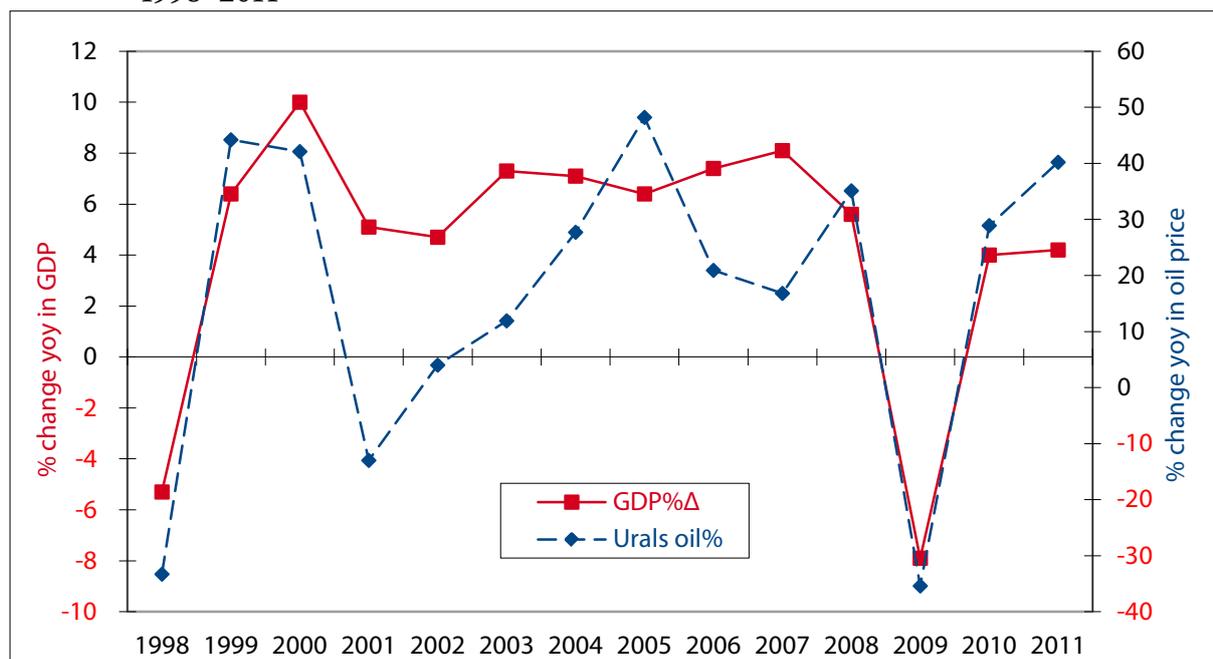
Sources: European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD); Rosstat; author's calculations

**Chart 2: Modest Changes in the World of Enterprises in Russia, 1989–2010**  
(EBRD ‘scores’ on large-scale privatisation and enterprise restructuring)



Note: the range of EBRD transition indicators is from 1 (no change) to 4.5 (situation equivalent to that in a developed market economy).  
Source: European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)

**Chart 3: Changes in Russian GDP and in the Annual Average Urals Oil Price (% year on year), 1998–2011**



Sources: Rosstat (GDP); Central Bank of Russia (oil price).

## Change and Continuity in Russia's Foreign Policy

By Andrei P. Tsygankov, San Francisco State University

### Abstract

Since its emergence as an independent centralized state, Russia has followed three distinct foreign policy trajectories. It frequently sided with a coalition of Western states against those whom it viewed as threatening its interests and values. The second trajectory was that of defensiveness or balancing through domestic revival and flexible international alliances. Finally, Russia has historically resorted to assertiveness or unilateral promotion of its foreign policy objectives abroad. The paper reviews the central forces behind Russia's policy and its fluctuations after the Soviet breakup.

### The Formation of Russia's Foreign Policy

Focusing on power, security and prestige is only partially helpful in determining why Russia has historically acted in the ways that it has. Even though Russia's policy makers frequently invoked those objectives to justify their state actions, the broader context for their behavior has been that of values or ideology of national interest.

In different eras the state acted on different ideologies of national interest. Each varying ideology provided the state with the sense of purpose, ethical principles and meaningful context in which to act. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the dominant ideology was that of a Christian autocracy. Soviet ideology fundamentally transformed the national values, replacing Christianity and autocracy with beliefs in communism and single party rule. The new post-Soviet ideology is still in the process of being formed and currently includes values of Russianness (*Rossiyanse*) and a strong state (*derzhava*).

The Russians have not defined their system of values as anti-Western and, indeed, view the West's recognition as a critical component of such a system. That explains the multiple historical cases of Russia's cooperation with Western nations. However, when Russia's significant other (i.e. the West) challenges its actions and values, Russia is likely to turn away from cooperative behavior. Whether Russia will turn to defensive or assertive foreign policy for sustaining its values depends on the perceived level of domestic confidence. If Russia is internally weak, the state typically concentrates on defending the prestige of great power. When Russia enters periods of growing confidence, it may turn to a more assertive promotion of its values. The West's failure to accept such values is likely to encourage Russia to act alone.

### The 1990s: Cooperation to Defensiveness

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia initially pursued a policy of a far-reaching cooperation with Western states. In the aftermath of the failed coup of August 1991, Boris Yeltsin had first formulated and pursued the idea of Westernization as a matter of inter-

national strategy. The idea included radical economic reform, the so-called "shock therapy," gaining a full-scale status in transatlantic economic and security institutions, such as the European Union, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, International Monetary Fund, and G-7, and separating the new Russia from the former Soviet republics economically, politically, and culturally. This 'Westernist' vision shaped the new foreign policy concept prepared in late 1992 and signed into law in April 1993.

The new Russia's leaders saw their country as an organic part of the Western civilization, whose "genuine" Western identity was hijacked by the Bolsheviks and the Soviet system. In the new leaderships' perspective, during the Cold War Russia had acted against its own national identity and interests, and now it finally had an opportunity to become a "normal" Western country. This vision was a clear product of a long tradition of Russia's Westernist thinking which insisted that the country would develop in the same direction as the West and go through the same stages of development. Externally, Yeltsin and his first Foreign Minister, Andrei Kozyrev, drew their inspiration from the West's growing criticism of Mikhail Gorbachev's socialist reform and encouragements to build a pro-Western system of market democracy.

But the Westernist vision was soon met with a formidable opposition, which advanced a defensive vision of national interest. Led by presidential advisor, Sergei Stankevich, and then the Chief of Foreign Intelligence, Yevgeni Primakov, the new coalition included military industrialists, the army, and the security services, and it advocated the notion of Russia as an independent great power. Without implying confrontation with the West, the new group sought to defend the image of Russia as a strong state striving to preserve its distinctness in the world. Yeltsin's appointment of Primakov as Foreign Minister signified the victory of the new vision. Thus, in the mid-1990s, Russian foreign policy changed. The key priorities included improving relations with non-Western countries and integrating the former Soviet region

under a tighter control from Moscow. Statists wanted to pursue “multi-vector” policies, aiming to preserve what they saw as Russia’s independence and develop more balanced relations with the West. They also warned against Russia unequivocally siding with Europe or the United States at the expense of relationships with China, India, and the Islamic world. The country’s National Security Concept of 1997 recommended that Russia maintain equal distancing in relations to the “global European and Asian economic and political actors” and presented a positive program for the integration of CIS efforts in the security area.

This defensive foreign policy was the result of Western states’ unwillingness to accommodate Russia’s ambition of “joining” the West and the Kremlin’s inability to initiate a unilateral response. The Western nations did not provide the rapid and massive assistance that the Russian leadership had expected in response to its new pro-Western vision. Rather, the West decided to expand NATO eastward while excluding Russia from the process. The decision strengthened the sense of Russia not being accepted by the West as its one of its own, and it provided the Statist coalition with the required ammunition for questioning the objectives of the pro-Western government and constructing an image of external threat.

But the new domestic context of growing disorder, corruption, and poverty that had resulted from the Yeltsin government’s reforms was not conducive to an assertive direction. The Soviet disintegration led to the emergence of a whole series of new conflicts in the Russian periphery. Russia lost one sixth of its territory, its economy shrank by some 50% and the state was divided by powerful individuals, with the Kremlin practically losing the ability to govern. The Western states expected Russia to follow their political and economic recommendations, yet programs of Western assistance served mostly to encourage the destruction of the previous economic system and to build relationships within a narrow and corrupt ruling elite.

### **The 2000s: Cooperation to Assertiveness**

The arrival of Vladimir Putin as the new president in March 2000 marked yet another change in Russia’s foreign policy and a renewed interest to engaging the West. This departure from Primakov’s defensiveness had more to do with the new vision promoted by the president, than with changes in Russia’s structural position. Putin endorsed the values of preserving great power status, while embracing the vision of Russia as a part of the West. He also emphasized the European dimension in his foreign policy. Russia wanted to start fresh and re-engage the Western nations into a project of common

importance. After September 11, 2001 Putin was among the first to call President George W. Bush to express his support and pledge important resources to help America in its fight against terrorism. Putin also emphasized Russia as a reliable alternative to traditional Middle Eastern sources of oil and natural gas. Russia proposed a new framework of strategic interaction with the United States and chose a mute response to the U.S. decision to withdraw from the ABM treaty. In partial reflection of Russia’s European priorities, Russia did not support the United States’ military intervention in Iraq, but joined the France and Germany-led coalition of those opposing the unilateral American war.

However, in the mid-2000s, Russia’s policy shifted in a more assertive direction. The Kremlin challenged the United States’ global policy of regime change as “unilateral” and disrespectful of international law. In response to Washington’s decision to deploy elements of a missile defense system (MDS) in Europe, Putin announced his decision to declare a Russian moratorium on implementing the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, which would allow Russia to freely move its conventional forces within its territory. Russia also sought to strengthen its energy position in world markets by building pipelines in all geographic directions, purchasing shares abroad, raising energy prices for its oil and gas-dependent neighbors, moving to control transportation networks in the former USSR and coordinating its activities with other energy-producers. A new foreign policy consensus emerged that an assertive style of achieving the objectives of development, stability and security suited Russia well at that moment in time.

The shift toward assertiveness reflected both the Kremlin’s dissatisfaction with the West’s policies and Russia’s new domestic confidence. The Kremlin saw Western policies as disrespectful of Russia’s sovereignty and independence. Soon after the invasion of Iraq, the United States pushed the entire former Soviet region toward transforming its political institutions and was now working on extending membership in the alliance to former Soviet states, such as Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine. Russia also recovered economically, which allowed its leadership to pursue an assertive foreign policy. By 2007 the economy had recovered to its 1990 level and until the global financial crisis hit economic growth continued at about 7 percent per year. As global energy demand has risen, Russian oil and gas reserves proved a key foreign policy resource.

### **The 2010s: Cooperation to a New Defensiveness?**

Around the Fall of 2009, Russia’s foreign policy began to depart from the assertive course that had culminated

in the war with Georgia in August 2008. In response to the global financial crisis and the United States' attempts to "reset" relations with Russia, the Kremlin revived an emphasis on cooperation. Under Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, the country adopted a more nuanced approach to the outside world—one which was dictated by need to modernize the domestic economy. The new approach stressed the importance for the country to build "modernization alliances" across the world, especially with those nations that could offer investments and technologies for economic development. Having re-established itself as a major power, Russia was now turning to domestic modernization and inviting the outside world to contribute to it. This approach may or may not survive depending on Russia's internal changes and the West's willingness to recognize Russia as a partner.

From Russia's perspective, the Western recognition of the Kremlin's objectives is not sufficient. Russia remains critical of the U.S. proposal to develop the MDS jointly with the Europeans but separately from Russia. At the end of 2010, Moscow shelved its initiative to negotiate a new security treaty with European nations after not getting any support from NATO officials and the United States. The Western nations remained rhetorically supportive of the former Soviet states' bid for NATO membership, whereas Russia maintained its right to protect its interests in Georgia and elsewhere in the former Soviet region. The Kremlin was also unhappy with the West's handling of the Middle Eastern crisis and its involvement in fostering regime change in Libya and Syria, as well as Western criticisms of Russia's own centralized

political system. Even on Afghanistan, the Kremlin's calls to develop a joint strategy did not elicit a serious response from Western countries despite their appreciation for Russia's cooperation.

However, a full renewal of assertiveness is unlikely. Russia must address a number of serious internal issues. Among these issues is the unfavorable demographic balance across regions and in the country as a whole, excessive dependence of the economy on energy exports, declining social infrastructure and an administratively weak state. The latter makes it impossible to make decisions independent from the pressures of special interests and address the country's demographic and institutional problems. Russia's political structure is also excessively dependent on personalities and needs to be reformed further to establish a more reliable mechanism for the transfer of power. Furthermore, Russia is dependent on the West for its economic modernization and preservation of political independence. Western investments are critical for the country's economic modernization. Russia also needs the West's political support, given the fast growth of China and the risk of Moscow becoming a junior partner of Beijing.

This combination of the lacking external recognition and internal vulnerability means that Russia will continue to mix assertiveness with elements of cooperation in its foreign policy. There is also a possibility that Russia may develop some form of a defensive foreign policy. The latter would require articulation of a new coherent vision of national interest.

#### *About the Author*

Andrei P. Tsygankov is a Professor at San Francisco State University. He is the author of a forthcoming book entitled "Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin: Honor in International Relations" (Cambridge University Press, 2012), and has previously published numerous books including "Russophobia: Anti-Russian Lobby and American Foreign Policy" (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and "Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity" (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2nd edition, 2010).

#### *Further Reading*

- Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2nd edition, 2010)
- Mankoff, J. *Russian Foreign Policy: the Return of Great Power Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Rowman & Littlefield, 2011.
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## *Homo Sovieticus*: 20 Years After the End of the Soviet Union

By Sergei Gogin, Ulyanovsk

### Abstract

This article analyzes the nature and origins of *Homo Sovieticus* in the Soviet Union, and assesses its impact on contemporary Russian society. It argues that the establishment of the “power-vertical” by the Putin regime and its glorification of the Soviet past served to reproduce many of the worst traits of *Homo Sovieticus* in Russia, in particular distrust of others, social apathy and deference to authority. However, as the recent demonstrations indicate, if the inter-personal ties destroyed by the Soviet period can be restored within Russian society, then nostalgia for the Soviet era will soon become a phenomenon of the past.

When the USSR’s “Enlightenment” Publishing House issued the English language textbook “Poems, Songs, Plays,” for middle school students in 1967, it included a poem entitled “Wishes.” It began:

*I want to be a worker  
On a Soviet modern plant  
And make machines and lorries  
For our Motherland.  
I want to be a farmer  
On a big collective farm;  
We do like bread and butter  
And to eat them gives no harm.*

The list of priority professions in the poem emphasized doctor, sailor, teacher and, of course, cosmonaut:

*I want to be a spaceman  
And journey to the moon;  
In our Soviet rocket  
We’ll make this journey soon.*

However, this particular prediction did not come true: In 1969 the first man on the Moon was an American, and Soviet feet never touched the lunar surface. The inspirational ending of the poem proclaimed:

*We all are strong and happy  
And gay as well as you.*

Although the last line has a double meaning today, on the whole this poem was typical of the propaganda imposed from childhood—even to teach foreign languages—to create a “new Soviet man” who would consciously build communism. But in the end, following decades of Soviet experiments, a different type of individual emerged, labeled by the emigre-author Alexander Zinoviev as *Homo Sovieticus*, and in common language is usually dubbed “sovok.”

### Who is *Homo Sovieticus*?

Wikipedia in English describes *Homo Sovieticus* as a person who is passive, irresponsible, indifferent to the results of his labor, and sees nothing wrong from stealing from his workplace. He is isolated from global (and particularly Western) culture by the “Iron Curtain”, lives under censorship and easily believes in propa-

ganda. He is used to submitting to an authoritarian state and drinking a lot.

This stereotype and caricature of *Homo Sovieticus* requires further elaboration. *Homo Sovieticus* believes that he is only a small cog in a larger government machine, and is a person who conflates the state with society and himself with the state. It is difficult to alter this form of self-identification: for example, three years ago I heard from one of the elderly secretaries of the Union of Journalists that “the main task of a journalist is to help his state.” A *Homo Sovieticus* is an atheist, materialist and nominally an internationalist, believes (or at least he has been forced to believe) that the meaning of life is to work in support of his country and its people, build a better future—and for this he is prepared to make sacrifices, to endure hardships in the present and accept a low salary for his work. He consciously or subconsciously fears the repressive power of the state, hence the tradition of “double talk” when people speak freely in private conversation with their friends, but stick to ideologically correct statements in public. He is used to taking pride in the exploits of the USSR and cursing capitalism. Likewise, he is seduced by the material achievements of Western culture and is envious of its consumer standards. In the words of the famous Russian blogger and lawyer, Alexei Navalny, “the grandeur of the USSR was founded on the self-denial and heroism of its people who lived in poverty. We built space ships and told each other stories about shops where you can buy forty different types of sausage with no queues.” Finally *Homo Sovieticus* believes in hierarchy, measures his own significance by his position in the pyramid of power and is jealous of those who have attained a higher public and material position than he has.

The image of *Homo Sovieticus* is therefore inherently contradictory—at once describing an individual who is personally passive (“we cannot change anything”) and responsible for the fate of the country; on the one hand, enthusiastic in his labor, and, on the other, pinching spare parts from his factory; collectivist and suspicious of others; believing in a bright future and feeling

social apathy. These contradictions draw on two facts: first, that official Soviet propaganda did not reflect the actual state of affairs and people's thinking. And, second, that *Homo Sovieticus* is not a genetic type created in a test tube and in reality probably never existed; instead, the label best applies to a collection of specific human characteristics.

### The Origins of the *Homo Sovieticus*

The notion of *Homo Sovieticus*—as outlined above—developed over the course of the 70-plus years of the Soviet regime. As noted by historian Andrey Zubov, “the Soviet man” evolved as a result of a deeply negative selection process, whereby “the best, most honest and most cultured people were either killed or prevented from having a family and raising children by exile or imprisonment, whilst the worst sort of people, namely those who took part in the creation of this new form of man or silently supported the new authorities, could ‘be fruitful and multiply.’”

One of the most decisive factors in forming *Homo Sovieticus* was the abolition of private property. American historian Richard Pipes argued that private property is the prerequisite for a free society, since only a person who has property and works consciously becomes a responsible citizen and guards democratic institutions, as these in turn protect his property.

But, perhaps it is also worth looking into the more distant past to explain the development of *Homo Sovieticus*. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Tsar Ivan the Terrible created a centralized Russian state, strengthened the system of serfdom, subordinated the principalities of Novgorod and Pskov under Moscow's authority and thus destroyed the early shoots of democratic people power that existed there. The subsequent centuries of serfdom, peasant communes, the cult of a Supreme authority supported by the Russian Orthodox Church and the kind of thinking that these institutions fostered turned Russia into a breeding ground for the Soviet experiment. To a certain extent, this experiment was also extended to other Socialist countries, but in Eastern Europe the period of overpowering communist ideology was relatively short and the break with the Soviet past occurred much more rapidly and therefore the impact of the *Homo Sovieticus* was less than it was in Russia.

### The Return of *Homo Sovieticus*

Many experts agree that two decades after the Soviet Union collapsed, *Homo Sovieticus* is still alive and continues to define post-communist Russia, although *Homo Sovieticus* himself has mutated. As the writer Vladimir Sorokin pointed out, the “mentality has remained Soviet, but this man has come to understand quality.

He wants to have a Mercedes and to vacation in Spain or Italy.” This type of person has also come to form the basis of the Russian electorate; brought up under the conditions of state paternalism, they are more susceptible to manipulation and the rhetoric of the authorities, which is largely aimed at them, particularly during election campaigns.

In power, Vladimir Putin has acted like a social behavioralist, capable of tapping into the old public consciousness of the *Homo Sovieticus* when needed, as seen with his revival of the melody from the old Stalinist Soviet anthem as the new Russian national anthem, his statement that the collapse of the USSR was the main tragedy of the 20th century, and his anti-Western speech at the Munich Security conference in 2007. Also, as noted by Konstantin Troshin, an Ulyanovsk resident who is a supporter of the banned Nationalist-Bolshevik Party and an activist in the Other Russia organization, “Putin plays on old Soviet myths in the public consciousness, nostalgia for the country where people grew up and lived for most of their lives. Putin is a political strategists' creation designed to win the backing of people disorientated by the reforms of the 1990s.

Putin's main idea today—preserving stability—fully corresponds with the thinking of *Homo Sovieticus*, who fears change. If the typical “sovok” response in the Soviet period was “those at the top steal, but leave some for us” today's *Homo Sovieticus* also believes that the current authorities are corrupt, but do not want to change them—instead preferring to retain the status quo of hazy stability. The sociologist Elena Omelchenko also suggests that the nucleus of support for Putin is not made up of *sovoks*, but is comprised of pragmatic individuals from different social strata, who profited during the time of the 1990s reforms and do not want to lose these gains. In the opinion of Omelchenko, those who vote for Putin are “office plankton,” who want to preserve their stable salary, and that today's *Homo Sovieticus* are, first and foremost, bureaucrats and “Soviet capitalists” who are “the heirs of the old mentality that reproduces the Soviet type of elite.” A young communist and lecturer at Ulyanovsk State Technical University, Konstantin Gorshkov, agrees and suggests that “‘sovok’ is a useful term to describe the contemporary representatives of the power vertical who have adopted the worst traits from the old Soviet system: bureaucracy, corruption, the feeling of powerlessness before the system and the desire to fill their own pockets.”

Of course the model of *Homo Sovieticus* is heterogeneous, with differences among the disappearing generation of veterans from World War II, the post-war generation, and the “lost generation” which grew up during Brezhnev's stagnation. Members of the Brezhnev gen-

eration are now coming up to the end of their working lives and make up the grassroots mass of *Homo Sovieticus*, notes Gorshkov.

The head of the Levada Center, Lev Gudkov, explains the revival of *Homo Sovieticus* in Russia by noting that despite the change in the external attributes of the authorities, the structure of power remains the same. “As during the height of communism, society has no way to hold the authorities accountable ... The social system’s key features include a dependent judiciary, politicized police and censorship of the media”. Ulyanovsk State University philosophy professor Valentin Bazhanov also reminds us that one of the features of *Homo Sovieticus* is his fear of the authorities, and sadly notes that in the 2000s this fear returned to Russia. He suggests that despite the chaos of the 1990s, this period was one of relative freedom. However, with Putin’s ascent to power, the sovok tradition of double-think and servility returned. The magazine *Kommersant-Vlast* now even holds an annual competition “Suck-up watch,” which features the most egregious obsequiousness directed at the prime minister and president. Among the competitors this year is Alexei Filatov, the vice-president of the International Association of Veterans of the Alfa counter-terrorist squad, who said that “in critical moments, the Russian people have always been endowed with God’s blessing, including in the form of its leaders. Putin is one such blessing. Only God knows where we would end up without him’.

### Reproduction of *Homo Sovieticus*

In outlining his explanation of the mechanisms driving the reproduction of *Homo Sovieticus*, Professor Bazhanov proposes a socio-psychological model based on Jung’s archetypes. He argues that “this latent structure [*Homo Sovieticus*] exists in the public unconscious and manifests itself under specific conditions. At the present time, the conditions that facilitate the revival of *Homo Sovieticus* are political-economic and are caused by the actions of the power vertical.” As a result of the current authoritarian power structures, the worst traits embedded in the Russian nation have been revived, leading to the revival of the phenomenon of the *Homo Sovieticus*. Furthermore, independent researcher Ludmila Novikova draws on psychology to explain that the origins of the “Soviet individual” are found in the totalitarian system that influences everyone and to which an individual must adapt because he or she has no freedom of choice, which in turn changes the individual. People must therefore adopt different psychological coping strategies to reduce the pressure from the system and even to survive within it while finding a moral basis to explain their own adaptation. Interestingly, even today,

Russia’s authoritarian regime exploits these same mechanisms with the goal of manipulating the consciousness of citizens.

For example, in accordance with these mechanisms of rationalization and moralization, people influenced by sovok thinking do not demand the release of political prisoners, but rather, as in Stalin’s time, convince themselves that “our leaders do not put innocent people in jail” or say, as Putin did about Khodorkovsky, that “a thief should sit in jail.” A focus shift strategy allows people to redirect their unhappiness with the regime to a search for domestic and foreign enemies: “NATO is advancing to our borders” or as Putin complained in 2007 “Within the country, there are jackals who line up outside foreign embassies.” Putin’s December call-in show demonstrated the mechanism by which people “identify with the aggressor.” Igor Khalmanskikh, a defense plant worker from Nizhny Tagil told the prime minister, “If the police are not able to work and cannot deal with the situation, my friends and I are ready to come out and defend our stability ourselves.” Novikova has identified fourteen different types of behaviors, illustrated by examples from Russia’s Soviet and recent past, which she argues suggest that either contemporary Russia is experiencing a revival of the *Homo Sovieticus* phenomenon or that it had never gone away in the first place.

By contrast Gudkov, has proposed a “territorial-economic” explanation for the revival of *Homo Sovieticus*. He argues that in large cities, in which the market economy is more noticeable and dependence on the authorities is weaker, political consciousness is more flexible. However, two thirds of the Russian population live in small cities, and it is “precisely in this zone of depression and poverty that the model of a Soviet person is being reproduced. In the larger cities there is greater potential, represented by the supporters of reforms, but it is currently suppressed by the conservative periphery.”

The archaic and authoritarian structure of Russian power and the absence, or poorly developed nature, of democratic institutions are not conducive to political and technological modernization. Indeed, when there is nothing to draw on other than oil and gas, it becomes necessary to turn to the past in search of an ideological model. A new term has even emerged “nostalgia modernization” that describes the process by which the Russian authorities appeal to the country’s past as a form of ideological support for future development. According to the Levada Center’s Boris Dubin, as a result of this trend, the 2000s have witnessed the revival of “propaganda centered on reconciling ourselves with the Soviet past. What was once merely ‘Soviet’ became ‘ours’ and ‘good.’ These socio-economic explanations for the return of *Homo Sovieticus* stress that because the economic

reforms and crises deprived many people of their savings and jobs, they formed a negative view about the end of the Soviet Union. Dubin argues that “people wanted to hide from reality by retreating into a safe past and this trend created fertile soil for such forms of propaganda.”

Interestingly, young people, who never lived in the USSR and have only learnt about it from old Soviet films and the stories of their parents and grandparents, can also hold a positive opinion of Russia’s Soviet past due to such political propaganda and family stories. In Levada Centre opinion polls, 60% of young people believe that life was better in the Soviet period.

The sociologist Elena Omelchenko adds that some young people have negatively reacted to the growing consumer culture by adopting the esthetic of the Soviet past, arguing that “as soon as glamour and showing-off emerges, young people become more concerned with injustice and inequality and protest against a system that is based on inequality. These young people adopt some Soviet symbols as symbols of protest.” Alla Mikheyenko, an Ulyanovsk medical student, for example, said, “I imagine that Soviet society was more fair and humane. At the moment there is a lot of negativity, calls for individualism and exhortations to live only for oneself and one’s family. In the Soviet Union it was not like that. Perhaps people lived in an atmosphere of fear, stagnation and did not believe that their life could change. But that was better than how it is now. Back then, there was stability and certainty that you would not be killed in a dark corner. But today, there is terrorism, crime, and poor medical care, and at the same time there are constant calls for self-enrichment and consumption—it is disgusting.”

The sociologist Boris Dubin argues that the worst effect of the Soviet regime was that it deprived society of the ability to believe in something. In order to make its population passive and subordinate, the regime attacked the social ties that held people together. Today, polls conducted by the Levada Center indicate that people do not feel that they have the power to change anything and that it is pointless to ask for their rights. The only thing that an individual controls now is limited to his or her immediate family.

However, Dubin has also suggested that the December 10, 2011, demonstrations in favor of free and fair elections represented the first time since August 1991 that such a large mass of very diverse people within Russian society came together in support of a better life and prepared to work for the future. The protesters had a sense of community and appreciated that they were able to stand next to each other. ... This is completely different from the model of *Homo Sovieticus*. The mass protests on 10 and 24 December 2011 in Moscow demonstrated that there is still potential in Russian society to rebuild the social and communal ties that have been lost.

Today many Russian observers believe that, with time, the key traits of the *Homo Sovieticus* will disappear. As Other Russia’s Konstantin Troshin noted, “in the near future the archetypal Soviet individual will disappear through natural processes.” In place of the generation that feels nostalgic about the Soviet era, a new generation of young people will emerge that has its own leftist ideology, one which will express its own ideological aims without nostalgia for the Soviet past.

#### *About the Author*

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**ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST**

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Ortung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen ([www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de](http://www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de)), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich), the Resource Security Institute, the Institute of History at the University of Zurich (<http://www.hist.uzh.ch/>) and the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at The George Washington University. It is supported by the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language *Russland-Analysen* ([www.laenderanalysen.de/russland](http://www.laenderanalysen.de/russland)), the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia ([www.res.ethz.ch](http://www.res.ethz.ch)), and the Russian Regional Report. The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

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