

Will the Kremlin Revive the Russian Idea?

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During the first week of September 2005, Russian President Vladimir Putin made two foreign trips, each aimed at advancing Russia's energy policy interests. The North European gas pipeline project, unveiled in Germany, will directly connect the Russian gas transportation network with the European gas network and bypass transit states along its route, lowering the risk and cost of transporting Russian gas. In Greece, Putin urged the speeding up of another project, the oil pipeline between Bulgaria and Greece, also designed to remove intermediaries on the way to European energy markets. Both visits fit into Russia's current economic pragmatism of making the best use of its vast natural resources.

But between Putin's two trips there came a pilgrimage to the Holy Mount Afon, the birthplace of Orthodox Christian faith. The media showed him participating in the service and talking to the Orthodox clergy about Russia's mission in the world. Thus, a powerful sacral message was inserted between usually profane gas and oil concerns.

Putin's visit to Afon followed a series of sporadic and contradictory attempts by the Kremlin to formulate a new national idea fitting the realities of the 21st century. This memo summarizes the recent search for this national idea, also referred to as the Russian Idea, and suggests that it is likely to intensify in the near future as a response to worsening demographic and social crises.

What is the Russian Idea?

Although the term Russian Idea was first coined in 1888 (by philosopher Vladimir Soloviyev) the tradition of intellectual reflection about Russia's identity originated earlier. It was always connected with the need to make or justify an important historical choice made by the country's elite. The Russian Idea comprises a set of basic values that constitute the self-identity of Russians across social divisions and coalesce into a national project or historical mission. The Russian Idea provided societal integration and justified most of the grand mobilization projects throughout Russian history. It gave answers to several key questions: In which way is Russia different from other nations? How should this difference be translated into its political and economic constitution? Who are Russia's allies, and who are its enemies? The best known official version of the National Idea was advanced by Sergei Uvarov, Russia's minister of education in the 1830s, who summarized it in the triad "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationhood (*narodnost*)."

A closer look at the Russian Idea is quite simple and boils down to one general principle: the universal is always higher than the particular. More concretely, it means that spiritual concerns are higher and more meaningful than material ones; collective values and goals are superior to individual ones; and international or multinational identities take precedence over narrow ethnonational ones. From this, commentators usually deduce idealism, communism, and empire. Mythology of the national character asserts that when Russians get too centered on economic, individual, practical, and localized issues, they become depressed and get drunk. Only a great challenge, a mission of grand historical importance, or a catastrophe ("times of trouble") bring relief and meaning to life and generate constructive effort. In other words, Russian society can be integrated and mobilized through universal projects that convey idealist, collectivist, and imperial tunes. These projects are formulated by the state and the intellectual elite. In this sense, the Great Orthodox Empire, the USSR, and, later, the world socialist system all managed to incorporate basic pattern variables contained in the Russian Idea. So despite the secular character of the Soviet regime, part of the Russian intelligentsia, influenced by the views of the philosopher Nikolai Berdiayev, saw communism as a realization of the old Russian Idea.

In Search of a New National Idea

During the 1990s, the Communists, who by then had incorporated national-patriotic slogans, positioned themselves as the only true defenders of the National Idea. The ruling elite, on the contrary, absorbed particularistic values corresponding to the advance of the market and private property. The National Idea was mainly exploited by the opposition. In 1996, however, after former President Boris Yeltsin was reelected and defeated the Communists, he announced a contest for a new

National Idea. Thus, Russia's administration attempted to address the problem of social disintegration and moral crisis that had struck Russian society with the advance of the market system, as well as to take ideological initiative away from the left flank. The contest produced a brief and inconsequential discussion in the official newspaper *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, as well as a curious brochure by Igor Chubais (the elder brother of Anatoly Chubais) who formed a small think tank to respond to official demand. Proclaiming the uniqueness of Russia's history, Igor Chubais came up with a remix of Uvarov's formula that now became "The Gathering of Lands, Communitarianism (*obshchinnost*), and Christianity." In 1996, this did not have any effect, and the first post-Soviet search for the National Idea was soon dropped and supplanted by more practical issues: another round of privatization, IMF loans, and the consequences of the 1998 crisis.

During the first term of Putin's presidency, the National Idea was reduced to the issue of economic growth. The doubling of gross domestic product was presented as the new national project that concerned everyone, insofar as it promised to improve individual welfare. Likewise, the strengthening of the state was justified by the president and his administration in terms of economic efficiency and GDP growth. The language of economic policy turned into a kind of sacral discourse, promising to solve the country's backwardness and the loss of superpower status. It eschewed the need for transcendence, articulating instead individual material gains, that is, a set of particularistic attitudes. Putin made several statements declaring that economic growth should become the National Idea. In another statement, the National Idea was to be found in competitiveness. Not only was this incompatible with the universalistic requirements of the Russian Idea, it also implied that the search for a Grand Idea as such was obsolete, if not harmful.

An alternative to the official pragmatism emerged in September 2003 on the right-liberal flank, in the form of an elegant post-modern idea of the "liberal empire" authored by Anatoly Chubais, the head of the United Energy Systems (UES) monopoly and a leader of the Union of Right Forces. He attempted to cross-breed the traditional idea of imperial expansion and pan-Slavic brotherhood with Russia's policy in the energy sector and interests of private business. The liberal empire was to be assembled and held together neither by hard nor soft power, but by electric power. UES should acquire electric energy networks and power stations across the post-Soviet space, as it did in Georgia, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, and support the expansion of Russian business into the near abroad. Private business should then promote liberal values in the post-Soviet space, and Russia should become a new liberal missionary in relation to the former USSR, very much like the United States (which is already a liberal empire, according to Chubais). Although the idea of liberal empire caused confusion in the liberal-right camp, support in

nationalist circles, and protest from Russia's neighbors (notably from officials in Ukraine and Georgia), it showed how new content could be squeezed into an old form.

The tragedy in Beslan, North Ossetia, prevented Putin from visiting Mount Afon as originally planned in September 2004. Instead of the call for spiritual revival (that came a year later), the president made accusations against internal and external enemies, called for national unity, and promoted a set of policies to further state centralization. Following that, in November 2004, the popular daily *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (with a print run of four million) published an article by a businessman and former Duma deputy speaker from the opposition Yabloko party, Mikhail Yuriyev, entitled "The Internal Enemy and the National Idea." The article stated that the moment was right to formulate the National Idea and that those who rejected it should be identified as enemies of Russia. The core of the National Idea was made up of the familiar principles. Russia should be a strong state that was also a great Orthodox empire. In addition, it should be a common and free state: comprising a combination of broad concern with other people's lives and an inviolability of a few individual freedoms, including that of private entrepreneurship. Yuriyev's manifesto did not differ much from the mainstream right-nationalist visions. What made a difference was the status of the author, a prominent businessman and former deputy speaker of the Duma, and of the newspaper that published his article. *Komsomolskaya Pravda* still announces new National Idea contests from time to time.

Revival of the National Idea?

Since the 1990s, attempts by the Russian elite to formulate a new National Idea have been unsystematic and contradictory. They oscillated between the economist version and various versions of the Russian Idea taken from the past. It can be expected that attempts to articulate a new National Idea from above will intensify in the near future and that its content will shift toward universalistic and moral elements found in National Ideas of the past.

Putin's recent visit to Mount Afon, the monasteries of which were predominantly Russian in the 19th century and contributed to the Russian presence in the Balkans, can be viewed as a move away from the economist version of the National Idea to one appealing to religious and moral values. The pilgrimage to Afon highlights the Orthodoxy part of Uvarov's classical triad. State building and centralization also strike at the heart of the National Idea, substituting for Autocracy. The problem with the state now is that its existence can no longer be justified in terms of economic efficiency and growth, because there is wide consensus that the new Russian state represents a huge burden on the economy. Here lies the reason to switch to normative and traditional legitimization, and an

appeal to the National Idea can do the trick. Another reason is the growing realization that economic solutions alone cannot solve demographic and social problems. To put it simply, people will not intensify procreative behavior if they are given more money. Population growth in the poorest countries compared to the rich ones is a good illustration. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that when people get more money they will stop drinking rather than switch to better quality alcohol. So, countering the societal crisis requires a revival of integrating values and providing motives other than those stimulating consumption.

The imperialist motive worked before, hence the temptation to use it again. One way to imagine a new empire is as an energy network with nodal points in the Russian heartland. Chubais suggested electric lines, but pipelines, as recent events demonstrate, will do even better. One may question, of course, to what extent the electric and hydrocarbon network empire will be liberal. If such an empire will be built by state officials and a few nominated tycoons, another question, then, is what to do with the rest of the people: how to incorporate the nation into the new National Idea.

