

OPPOSITION AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN RUSSIA

Many analysts and public opinion makers in the West conflate the notions of Russia's non-systemic liberal opposition and the country's civil society. Indeed, despite garnering [the](#) support of [a](#) minority of Russia's population, non-systemic liberal opposition represents a well-organized civic group with a clearly articulated agenda and the ability to take action. Yet, does Russia's civil society end there? A closer look at the country's politics shows that Russia has a substantial conservative-traditionalist faction that has also developed agenda for action and formulated opinions. This group is anti-liberal rather than illiberal ideologically and pro-strong state/[pro](#) geopolitically independent Russia rather than pro-Kremlin politically. The interaction between liberal and conservative civic groups represents the battle of meanings, ideas, and ethics, and ultimately determines the future trajectory of Russia's evolution. Thus, the analysis of Russia's civil society must represent a rather more nuanced picture than a mere study of the liberal non-systemic opposition. This article will examine the complexity of Russia's civil society scene with reference to the interplay between the liberal opposition and conservative majority factions. The paper will argue that such complexity stems from ideological value pluralism that falls far beyond the boundaries of the liberal consensus, often skewing our understanding of political practice in Russia.

Introduction

Following the events that ensued [after](#) the December 2011 Russian parliamentary elections, the study of civic activity in [Russia](#) became highly topical. We can make two immediate observations on the nature and methodology of Russian civil society research. First, the media and some academic critics tend to equate Russia's civil society with the liberal opposition to Putin's government. While liberal oppositional movements undeniably have [a](#) civic character and represent a significant part of Russia's civil society, much of Western analysis tends to appropriate this opposition's narrative for the purpose of narrating Russia's entire civic activism. Hence, these critics often focus on what they see [as](#) suitable, relevant, and reflective of [the](#) political and philosophical consensus prevalent in the West. As a result, those movements, personalities, and ideas that mirror core European political values receive wide analytical and media focus, while others that fall beyond the bounds of the existing liberal consensus are shelved, [considered](#) irrelevant or even plain

erroneous. Yet, those ideas, which may appear at first glance to be at odds with the contemporary Western context, may prove upon close examination to be of the most immediate political significance for Russia.

Second, the balance between the coverage of the 'active and latent' (Keane 1989) components of mobilisation is not always adequate. Researchers tend to confine their analysis to the visible side of mobilisation, thus ignoring its latent dimensions. This approach tends to ignore the fact that civic activity begins with the emergence of what Melucci (1989, p. 248) calls 'an alternative framework of sense'. It starts with a change of mindset (Williams 2001) and often functions within the 'invisible realm of social consciousness' (Havel 1989, p. 397). By taking these points into account, the study of the ideological landscape, in which the struggle for hegemonic interpretations, semantics, meanings, ideas, and cultural codes takes place, must become a cornerstone component of the literature on civic movements in Russian. Hence, I propose that Russian civil society could be studied through the prism of struggling ideological factions whose views have a radically different philosophical and existential premise.

In light of the above, this article is not about empirical analysis of existing social movements and their relationship with each other and the state, even though some empirical examples will be provided. Rather, this paper is focused on the study of the ideas and values, around which the formation of movements and activity is possible, and in some cases, has already begun. The discussion is in four parts. The first part will detail the framework in which Russia's political debates take place. I argue that Russian society functions within the conditions of value pluralism, in which radically different factions with incommensurable values and ideals of the good life struggle for hegemonic discourse. This system

differs from the Western practice of political liberalism and may well be a particular feature of contemporary Russian discourse. The following parts discuss the key points in which the ideas of struggling civic factions diverge. This relates to their understanding of freedom, attitudes to post-modernity and to the architecture of international relations.

Value Pluralism and the Lack of Consensus

Let me open this section with the proposition that [the](#) Russian discourse functions within the conditions of distinct value pluralism. This makes it different from the political liberalism framework that is established in the West. Drawing distinctions between these two systems will help us to understand the nature of Russia's ideological discourse and political activism that could be built around it. The [idea of](#) political liberalism is driven by liberal *consensus* politics. This paradigm rests on the assumption that it is possible to deduce, through logical reasoning and rational consensus, the best form of life for humankind. This implies that society is driven to find *consensus* on the good way of life within the liberal framework in hope that there will be a subsequent 'step-by-step convergence of all values with liberal values' (Hampshire 1991, pp. 24-5; Kymlicka 1997, p. 24; Gray 2000, p. 18). This conception stands in opposition to the idea of searching for *coexistence* between alternative lifestyles outside the consensus base that could grant [recognition for](#) each alternative lifestyle and [an](#) equal place in the discussion.

John Rawls, in his classic 1993 [work](#) *Political Liberalism*, systematises liberal consensual politics by advocating the need to develop the so-called societal 'base consensus', or consensus on fundamental values. [This](#) could act as a framework within which alternative comprehensive ideas of the good life can

develop and flourish. The contours of the political liberalism base consensus, however, are also invariably liberal in that only ideas and lifestyles that comply with the liberal practice, or at least give their participants the 'right of exit' (Kymlicka 1995, p. 168) to the wider liberal culture, will be considered 'reasonable' (Rawls 1993, p. 64) and fit for inclusion into the base consensus framework.

In this light, the much-celebrated conception of toleration also presupposes the existence of a universal understanding of the good life, which is invariably based on a liberal foundation. Toleration of the non-liberal ways of life is seen as the concession of the liberal truth to competing ideas, and not as a genuine attempt to find a pathway to a 'critical but sympathetic dialogue with other ways of life ... seen not as objects of willing or grudging tolerance but as conversational partners in a common search for a deeper understanding of the nature, potentialities and grandeur of human life' (Parekh 2006, p. 111).

Such thinking has its origins in the monistic traditions of Plato and Aristotle and monotheistic Christian conceptions, which merged during the medieval and early modern times (Williams 2006; Gray 1995). Rational pursuit of an ideal form of life deploys the Aristotelian monist conception of virtue, which claims that there can be one universal truth and those who hold on to other truths merely choose the wrong premise for deductive exercise (Gray 1995, pp. 40-2). As MacIntyre (1988, p. 142) describes it, 'the apparent and tragic conflict of right with right arises from the inadequacies of reason, not from the character of moral reality'.

There is, however, another competing tradition of Western thought that offers a radically different approach to alternative ideas of the good life. This

tradition tends to avoid *consensus* politics and seeks *coexistence* mechanisms that could ensure a meaningful dialogue between incommensurable and conflicting ideas of the good life. It is the pluralistic tradition expressed by early writers such as Thomas Hobbes and David Hume (see Livingstone 1984; Williams 2006, p. 270, p. 273; Gray 2000, p. 49 for Hume's philosophy of common life) and continued by Isaiah Berlin, Michael Oakeshott, John Gray, and Bhikhu Parekh in their pursuit of the contemporary value pluralism doctrine.

All these thinkers argue that there could be a number of comprehensive conceptions of the good life, whose fundamental premises are incompatible, conflicting, and incommensurable. The emphasis is made on the peaceful accommodation of competing human values and not on a rational consensus among those values. This idea should not be confused with moral relativism (Gray 1995, p. 44), for those thinkers stand behind universal values, among which justice, equality, and truth remain the most stable (May 2011). Yet they claim that various societies or groups of people could have different *modus vivendi* for arriving at these universal values (Gray 2000, pp. 8-11).

The contemporary Western system, at least in its political dimension, functions rather more on the designs of the consensus thinkers, such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant, as well as contemporary writers such as John Rawls and F. A. Hayek, who dominated much of the American-centric strand of political science and philosophy of the twentieth century. David Cameron's speech at the 2011 Munich Conference, which promotes the idea of 'muscular liberalism', is a good example of this consensus-driven approach: "We need a lot less of the passive tolerance of recent years and a much more active, muscular liberalism. A passively tolerant society says to its citizens, as long as you obey the law we will

just leave you alone. It stands neutral between different values. But I believe a genuinely liberal country does much more; it believes in certain values and actively promotes them. Freedom of speech, freedom of worship, democracy, the rule of law, equal rights, regardless of race, sex or sexuality. It says to its citizens, this is what defines us as a society: to belong here is to believe in these things. Now, each of us in our own countries, I believe, must be unambiguous and hardnosed about this defence of our liberty'.¹

This embedded politically liberal viewpoint is partly the root cause of the situation, in which a large volume of media commentary on Russia adheres to ideological rigidity by measuring this country's politics with a liberal ruler, tolerating at best everything that falls out of the 'reasonable' or 'accepted' narrative, or 'expressing progressive hopes' that Russia will at some point 'correct' her ways and comply with the accepted base-line behaviour. At the same time, if we are to apply the methodological division on consensus and coexistence politics, it becomes clear that Russia, for all its idiosyncrasies and shortcomings, has not been able to function within the consensus pattern. It has not been able to construct a baseline consensus on fundamental values in either liberal or non-liberal guise.

The ideological landscape of Russia's discourse is composed of conflicting ideas and values that struggle, as equal partners, for ideological hegemony. The author will not debate the extent to which this situation has been the country's conscious moral, existential, and philosophical choice, and not a merely

¹ Former Prime Minister Tony Blair had also suggested shaping the ideology of British Muslims in a more liberal direction and changing this group's attitudes toward American and British foreign policy. A range of similar statements have been made by various politicians from the left and the right (see Pugh, 2009, p. 173; see Chebankova 2012 analysis of Russia's multiculturalism as opposition to the 'absolutisation of liberalism').

circumstantial will of history. Yet, the plurality of conflicting incommensurable ideas and values remains rather evident for attentive observers. Vitaly Tretyakov, Professor at the Moscow State University and influential public intellectual, selects Russia's three conflicting value baskets: traditionalism that stretches from the Imperial period and represents Russia's conservative ideals, Soviet-era values represented by the socio-cultural and behavioural consensus formed in the USSR, and European values that secured hegemony during the late Soviet and the immediate post-Soviet periods.²

Each of these broad value baskets is represented by correspondent ideals of the public good and socio-political goals that propose trajectories for Russia's future development. Yet it is also evident that all three areas are heavily intersected. Russia's traditionalism, for example, could substantiate some of the Communist era values and socio-psychological behavioural patterns. References to European liberalism are common in all strands of Russian thought. Moreover, the traditionalist and ex-Soviet advocates often unite in their critique of the liberal idea, thus, allowing us to group them under a unified traditionalist-conservative umbrella of the left and right spectra.

At the same time, both these groups managed to reach some consensus on base fundamental values within their respective segments. The traditionalist-conservative group shares the baseline consensus assumption that history, culture, political culture, internal energy and unique creativity of the Russian people must determine the country's political evolution independently from any potential external influence. This faction repels the idea of straightjacketing Russia into foreign, and primarily Western, developmental models. Mikhail

² 'Chto Delat? Kak Sokhranit Edinstvo Natsii?', http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oCFXx_AHT_E.

Delyagin, a left-wing opposition economist, claims: people need 'the renaissance of the Russian civilization based on our own particular identity, hidden and washed out during the lifetime of the entire generation. Previous developments have shown that the Russian civilisation cannot be built on the basis of identities borrowed from outside. [At the Valdai Forum](#) Putin named [the](#) ultra-liberal model of development as unacceptable, thus undermining all the attempts to shoehorn the country back into the 1990s in the framework of the liberal *perestroika-2* project'.³ The Russian liberal tradition, on the other hand, builds on the ideas of Peter the Great, who strove to emulate Western political and economic systems and thus achieve Russia's modernisation and development. This strand of thought, though also very diverse, shares the political liberalism consensus of the West, and generally feels positive about the convergence of values on the liberal ground.

One may rightly argue that the proposed pluralistic division fails to build a nuanced picture. People migrate between these value baskets and may, depending on circumstances, affiliate with each one of them at some point of their life. Moreover, while assessing Peter and his liberal posterity, we should remember that he also exhibited strong nationalistic tendencies, and, while attempting to adapt the Western idea of the good life to the Russian context, remained Russia's ardent defender, focused on consolidating the country's great power positions in military conflicts and in opposition to other European powers. Some [Russian](#) liberals also hold this line. Furthermore, contemporary traditionalist-conservatives often stand in a stark opposition to the extant

³<http://delyagin.ru/articles/61353-forum-stranoj-nadezhdy-prezident-putin-vnezapno-protyanul-rossii-ruku.html>

political elite led by Vladimir Putin, and, as mentioned above, this ideological camp is extremely diverse, being composed of democrats, proponents of a strong or minimalist state, as well as supporters of left or right wing ideologies. Finally, the ideological disposition of the elite is also mixed and includes representatives from both spectra.

Yet, bearing these limitations in mind, the crude traditionalist-conservative versus liberal categorisation still gives many observers methodology for analysis (Kuchins and Zevelev 2012; ISPI RAN 2012). This is because in the area of substantive fundamental issues, the values and proposed lifestyles of each strand are conflicting, and it is decisively difficult to reach consensus between their semantic understandings, value judgments, social goals and objectives. Hence, in the discussion of fundamental values of both sides, we can merely hope for coexistence between them, not consensus. This existential conflict represents a keystone of Russian consciousness and may well be viewed as a characteristic feature of Russian discourse. The split between these incommensurable values and ideas of the good life represents some indigenous form of Russian 'value pluralism'. It makes Russia's political situation starkly different from that in the West. This state of affairs calls some observers to brand Russia as the 'territory of unrestrained freedom' for the heat of political debate, as well as the height of ideological rhetoric, and mutual accusations are peculiarly intense (Dzhemal 2011; see also Shemyakin 2013).⁴

Having made propositions on the lack of consensus, we should qualify that traditionalistt-conservatism (in its Soviet, post-Soviet, and Imperial

⁴ A brief look at Russia's social and televised media could substantiate the claim over the degree of differences among these factions.

reincarnations) wins [an](#) ideological majority against liberalism. Russia's sociologists (Gorshkov 2009, p. 23) claim that traditionalism, despite the pressure of liberalising, transformative, post-modernist trends, upholds its influence on Russian society and constitutes the core of the Russian value system. It is indicative that, between 2005 and 2008, the share of liberal modernists declined among younger groups of [the](#) population (aged [under](#) 25) from 37 to 27 per cent and the share of traditionalists increased from 29 to 39 per cent (Gorshkov 2009, p. 17). Hence, researchers conclude that, despite [the](#) serious influence of the alternative strands of political discourse, Russia's social psychology is still based on some aspects of traditionalist-conservatism. It therefore represents a constant value that cannot be changed overnight on a whim or under the transformative pressures of [a](#) political moment.

The liberal wing, at the same time, also remains stable and accounts for nearly 30 per cent of the population with annual fluctuations [of 5-10 per cent](#) (Gorshkov 2012). More importantly, it has high mobilisation potential in that it is represented by a well-organised political minority with a clearly formulated political agenda, which gives it a strong chance of obtaining leverage in the struggle for hegemonic discourse. Political history of new social movements in Europe (see Keane 1989, Giddens 1990, Habermas 1997, della Porta 2009) demonstrates that well-organised minorities with [a](#) clearly articulated and actively pursued *self-actualisation* agenda are often more effective in achieving their goals than passive and conformist majorities that hold to particular cultural and political opinions.⁵

⁵ The influence of philosophical ideas [on new social movements/well-organised minorities?](#) remains instrumental. Judith Butler, for example, ideologically substantiated the emergence of

This state of Russian value pluralism might well be a brief moment of history that could pass under the pressure of corrective policies. The sheer impossibility to bridge gaps in value positions invokes the search for the so-called 'spiritual clamps' (to use Putin's lexicon) that could help launch Russia's unique consensus politics. Critics of both spectra lament the situation in which Russia does not have clearly formulated ideas of the good life and institutions that could promote this idea consistently. Traditionalists are leading the process. Spokesmen from the arts, cinema, social science, and sport advocate the need to formulate the main dimensions of Russian national identity. It is suggested that the contours of this identity must rest on the base ideological consensus, which should, much in the Rawlsian (1993, p. 14) fashion, be disseminated via the institutions of daily life such as churches, schools, clubs, and other outlets of the public sphere.⁶ In many ways, Putin's 2013 Valdai speech on the subject of Russia's identity did not come as a surprise, for it reflected the debates that simmered within Russian society for quite some time.

It is the view of the author that, if the search for this baseline consensus is to go ahead in a systematic fashion, such steps may limit the extant pluralism and impoverish Russia's political landscape. These steps would invariably straightjacket the country into a new form of indoctrinating consensus politics. It matters not if the base consensus turns out to be Western liberal, which would

queer politics. Negri and Hardt had a serious influence on the anti-globalist movement. Marcuse influenced the new left of the 1960s. The list could go on.

⁶ Eminent film producer Nikita Mikhalkov suggests that Russia must establish the baseline consensus on important cultural and historic issues and on this consensus must be reflected in art, cinema and culture ('Rossii Predlozhili Smenit Kulturnuyu Elitu', *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 10 October 2013). This idea has been expressed earlier by Russia's Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky ('Bez Ideologii Chelovek Stanovitsia Zhivotnym', *Ekho Moskvy*, 8 September 2013, available at <http://www.echo.msk.ru/blog/statya/1152670-echo/>). Alexandr Prokhanov supported these statements in various interviews with the Echo of Moscow.

appeal to many Western observers of Russia, or traditionalist, which would be welcomed by Russia's hardliners. The ideological rigidity of any of those strands would threaten to eliminate the 'unrestrained' ideological freedom, in which various ideologies could learn to *coexist* with each other rather than to assimilate with one another. Hence, the task of Russian society is to find ways and mechanisms for *coexistence* of these radically different trends, as opposed to building a yet another *consensus*, in a liberal or traditionalist guise. The current situation of radical pluralism could well be Russia's unique feature and her distinct path, while establishing viable ways of *coexistence* may fulfil Russia's deeply held historical dream of implementing a meaningful existential alternative.

Each side should not fear one another. The liberal discourse brings a unique breath of fresh air into the traditionalist-conservative majority, even by merely alarming this majority to the prospects of radically changing or replacing their values with a new set of incommensurable ideas of the good life. The traditionalist-conservative discourse, on the other hand, is distinctly anti-liberal, albeit not illiberal. Traditionalism searches for freedom, justice, happiness, glory and greatness albeit doing so through the prism of a political alternative to liberalism. They defend Russia's originality, a multi-polar world based on cultural originalities of other nations, traditional Christian values, the idea of Russia as a state-civilisation, which encompasses a pluriverse of ethnic groups, religions, and cultures, multiplicity of ethnic groups and nations, creation of a nation-state-oriented elite, as opposed to maintaining the rule of the global cosmopolitan neo-liberal elite, and establishment of the Eurasian Union as an institutional bloc capable of promoting independent socio-cultural and economic

development of its composite members.⁷ Traditional-conservative preoccupation with an alternative ideal of good governance stems partly from Russia's historic search for existential otherness and partly from the unsuccessful application of Western post-modern liberal values in the immediate post-Soviet landscape, as well as the subsequent clash of some of these values with Russia's cultural and historic self-perceptions.

Moreover, civic and political activity always builds around clearly formulated ideological discourse. Russia's civic and political activism, her civil society, is also constructed around those ideological lines. The activity of the liberal opposition hardly requires much introduction. The *white ribbon* rallies, the non-systemic opposition attempts at changing Russia's politics reach mass media headlines and constitute the heart of academic analysis on Russia's civic movements. Many traditional conservative movements also conduct various activities. The work of these movements is seen through the functioning of various pro-Church Orthodox Christian organisations, Cossack and local wars veterans movements, Youth Associations *Against the Post-Modern World*, Sergey Kurginyan's *the Essence of Time* movement, Eduard Limonov's National Bolshevik party (which had a temporary alliance with liberals during the 2000s), the *Stop Kham* (stop-the-rogue) group that struggles against parking and traffic violations, the Izborsky Club intellectuals who influence public opinion through university teaching, lecturing, and public debate. It is also seen in the functioning of organisations that hold some close ties with the state: the Seliger Youth Club, which must not be dismissed cynically as it is composed of various youth groups

⁷ See Maxim Shevchenko, *Osoboe Mnenie, Ekho Moskvyy*, 28 October 2013. Putin's Valdai's 2013 speech reflected this traditionalist-conservative sentiment *in many ways*. This has *even* been in the making in the thought of Russia's fundamental conservatives (see Chebankova 2013).

who are engaged in widely different aspects of civic activism, the Putin's Popular Front that gives many traditionalist-conservative-minded individuals [the opportunity](#) to join politics, youth and civic organisations involved in the *Georgievskaya Lenta* (Ribbon of St George) actions, the National-Liberation Movement, and the like. Unfortunately, such activities are much less covered in the Western and Russian liberal press. Yet, dismissing the emergence of activity with distinctly non-liberal ideological premise may cloud our judgment on the processes taking place in modern Russia. The argument I posit here is that it is a mistake to understand Russian civil society in liberal or traditionalist terms only. Rather, it is composed of both traditionalists and liberals, and their dialogue and struggle for ideological hegemony determine the evolution of civil society in this country.

To continue this discussion we have to select the areas of ideological rupture that inhibit consensus formation among those factions. I [have selected](#) three important areas, in which the ideas of liberals and traditionalist-conservatives are conflicting and incommensurable (1) understanding freedom, (2) appreciation of the post-modern world and modernity, and (3) approach to the current and future architecture of international affairs. I will discuss these issues in what follows.

The Idea of Freedom

Both Russia's liberal and non-liberal activists grant the idea of freedom [the](#) foremost importance. Even a casual observer of Russian public debates could not fail to note that the discussion of freedom as a social value occupies a

significant place among various other debates on values.⁸ This observation, however, begs the unavoidable question on the nature of freedom, as both sides understand it, and an answer to this question must shed light on an equally important question on the place that freedom holds on the hierarchy of other possible social benefits. Deployment of philosophical methodology could once again help explicating the approach of Russian activists to these questions and their consequent attitudes to policies that lead to realising or attaining freedom. Two competing trends can be distinguished that provide existentially different ways of approaching the idea of freedom and securing the good life lodged in freedom, peace, and stability. These are the much-underappreciated classical republican tradition and the liberal trend. Hence, before embarking on the Russian debate, I would like to provide a brief excursus to these classical definitions of freedom, as they are peculiarly instrumental in the contemporary Russian scene.

For both classical traditions of thought the concept of liberty is essentially a negative one. The idea of negative liberty, which has been most clearly formulated and advanced by Jeremy Bentham and Isaiah Berlin, presupposes the absence of opposition on self-regarding action. An agent is considered to be free if he is free from any political, societal or individual interference to pursue his personal idea of the good life. It is, in Charles Taylor's (1979, p. 177) words, 'an opportunity concept', in which 'freedom consists just in there being no

⁸ This, however, does not come as a surprise. As MacCallum (1967, p. 313) aptly notes that 'it has commonly been advantageous for partisans to link the presence or absence of freedom as closely as possible to the presence or absence of those social benefits believed to be secured or denied by the forms of social organisation advocated or condemned. Each social benefit is accordingly treated as either a result of or a contribution to freedom, and each liability is connected somehow to the absence of freedom'.

obstacle'.⁹ John Rawls (1971) advances this understanding of freedom in his *Theory of Justice*. Felix Oppenheim (1970), along with Isaiah Berlin (see Gray 1995, p. 15) argued that freedom is seen in the 'choice among alternatives or options that is unimpeded by others'. MacCallum (1967, p. 314) claims that 'whenever the freedom of some agent or agents is in question, it is always freedom from some constraint or restriction on, interference with, or barrier to doing, or not doing, becoming, or not becoming something'.

Difficulties arise when we ponder the most logical question on the nature of such interference, and subsequently the framework within which individual freedom can be achieved. In liberal thought, individual liberty in its negative sense occupies the most important place in the hierarchy of values. Constraints stem mainly from oppressive state and society. This trend towards liberating an individual from societal pressures is because liberals tend to think that any ideas of 'common good' would devalue their appreciation of individual liberty. Ronald Dworkin (1978a and 1978b, see also Berlin 1969, p. 171; Gray 1983, p. 7) insists that a truly liberal society cannot have any comprehensive idea of common good or virtue for it is composed of different individuals who have competing views and opinions. To resolve this, the state must embrace 'procedural' commitment to value neutrality and treat all people with competing views with respect (Barry 1995; Barry 1973; Taylor 1994, p. 56; Rawls 1971, p. 302, and 239-40, Skinner 2002, p. 162 and p. 165).

The classical republican, and the subsequent neo-Roman tradition, presents a different, and more complex, interpretation of freedom. For this tradition, personal freedom can only be realised within the framework of free

⁹ Taylor contrasts it with the positive 'exercise concept'.

society, thus reversing the order of priorities from liberalism. Hence, individual freedom becomes a function of societal, or commonwealth, freedom. In this intellectual trend the commonwealth freedom is composed of the two most important parts: external and internal. Cicero, who was later supported by Machiavelli and Spinoza, initiated this idea. The external component was also a negative one and understood as the absence of outside interference on the conduct of domestic and foreign affairs. It was thought that only people of the given land could exercise their 'general will' within their domestic politics (Skinner 2002, p. 129). Freedom from external interference played a large part in Roman thinking on good government. As Skinner (2002, p. 129) notes, 'the community is free in the sense of not living in dependence on the goodwill of anyone else, and is consequently free to act according to its own civil will'.

Internally, freedom arises from the absence of tyranny. The latter was understood as a situation in which [a](#) 'powerful individual or faction within a society reduces it to servitude by seizing power and ruling in their selfish interests instead of promoting the common good' (Skinner 2002, p. 129). Machiavelli claims that, if freedom was to be preserved, no single member of the community could try to achieve a status that would enable him to advance his personal interests or the interests of his group at the expense of the rest of the commonwealth. Thus, following Machiavelli, internal freedom must be achieved through preventing those ambitious limbs of society from re-electing themselves to public offices for excessive periods or buying out public support at the expense of the public interest (Skinner 2002, pp. 200-3; see also Gray 1995).

So far we can make two important conclusions. First, in both cases individual freedom is understood in predominantly negative terms as the

absence of opposition to peaceful enjoyment of one's life and pursuit of one's chosen ends. The second observation pertains to the different place that individual freedom occupies in the order of other social benefits and cause-effect logic that helps to achieve individual freedom. The classical republican and neo-Roman tradition states that 'unless a commonwealth is maintained in a state of liberty, (in the ordinary sense of being free from constraint to act according to its own will) then the individual members of such a body politic will find themselves stripped of their personal liberty (again in the ordinary sense of losing their freedom to seek their own goals)' (Skinner 2002, pp. 205-6).

Constraints to commonwealth freedom stem from the two most important social elements: an internal tyrannical party that could act at the expense of others, usurp power, and undermine justice, and an external party that is seen in foreign hindrance to the commonwealth's ability to act independently and implement the general will of its participants. In this case, the commonwealth general freedom, on equally important internal and external fronts, becomes the most fundamental element and guarantee of individual freedom. This does not mean ignoring individual liberty. This means that the common liberty is more fundamental and serves as a cornerstone for individual freedom.

The liberal narrative builds the opposite cause-effect logic. It places individual freedom at the top of the equation and states that if individual liberty were assured, other commonwealth liberties, in both internal and external dimensions, would ensue. This does not mean that those commonwealth components are ignored. Rather, it means that individual freedom is more fundamental than social and, in turn, serves as a prerequisite for internal

freedom, good governance, and respectable standings of the commonwealth in the international arena.

Having introduced this conceptual framework, we have become better equipped to think about the nature of Russian debates about freedom, good governance, and civic activity. Traditionalist-conservatives understand freedom mainly in late medieval, Machiavellian, terms. It lies, first and foremost, in the absence of external constraints and thus can be meaningfully defined by pursuit of state sovereignty. With regard to the aspects of internal tyranny, traditionalists see it in the rise of overly ambitious internal factions and press to curb the influence of ambitious elites who deploy their state positions for personal gains at the expense of the rest of society. Yet, they are often prepared to forgo this aspect, if the first facet of liberty is in danger. Russian sociologists (Krasin 2012; VTsIOM 2012; Expert 2012) speak about the situation, in which the majority of the population did not support the December 2011 protest fully. They partly relate this to traumas of the 1990s, in which the external aspects of freedom have been taken away with the dissolution of the state and the surfacing of internal tyranny with the emergence of a sharp stratification of society. In this light, Alexandr Prokhanov succinctly articulates the traditionalist-conservative list of priorities: (1) freedom for the state from external interference packaged in the idea of Russian sovereignty and the ability to decide her historic destiny; (2) social justice within the domestic scene; (3) individual freedom and rights.¹⁰

Traditionalists produce voluminous literature in both printed and electronic format to defend their positions. Various activists write electronic blogs and promote the republican aspects of external freedom. Conservative

¹⁰ Zlobin-Prokhanov Poedinok.

journalist and civic activist Roman Nosikov aptly describes his understanding of the external freedom: ‘all that belongs to our history – revolutions, which I personally dislike, the victory (1945 EC) that I cherish, the first flight to space, the demolition of Orthodox Churches and their subsequent reconstruction, the adoption and rejection of Communism – belongs to us exclusively. Those were our decisions. We are responsible for those decisions to ourselves only and to God, and certainly not to the ‘Civilised World’, ‘the West’, or ‘Europe’. People, who do not understand the privilege to be free, who judge our history by someone else’s criteria, who constantly search for mentors, masters, and approvals from elsewhere are slaves’.

These thoughts are intrinsically linked to the idea of sovereignty. Most conservative activists think of sovereignty in classical realist terms. Their sovereignty is the sovereignty of Thomas Hobbes, Jeane Bodin, and Hans Morgenthau, which implies that there can be no higher authority above the state (or community) apart from God or that community itself. In this context, conservative journalist Mikhail Leontyev claims: ‘not all countries are sovereign, if sovereignty is understood as the absence of external constraints to conduct foreign and domestic politics freely’.¹¹ To Leontyev, there are a handful of truly sovereign countries in the modern world: United States, China, Russia, Iran, and some others.¹²

The link between the external interpretation of freedom and [the](#) realist interpretation of sovereignty could partly explain why representatives of the

¹¹ Interview [with](#) Den TV.

¹² Undoubtedly, this question gives grounds for heated and contested debates. My purpose here is to merely illustrate the modern *Russian* understanding of these processes and dynamics.

traditionalist-conservative wing often win [an](#) ideological majority. Two radically different thinkers such as Carl Schmitt (1996) and Michel Foucault (1997) claimed on different occasions that sovereignty is legitimate (see engaging analysis of Soboleva 2011). In this light, those leaders who promote sovereignty could be accepted as legitimate; those who knowingly or inadvertently undermine sovereignty find much less support and are generally perceived as illegitimate. The May 2013 Levada centre opinion polls show that [the](#) popular assessment of Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin is mostly negative. 66 and 64 per cent of the respondents think negatively about Gorbachev and Yeltsin respectively, and 21 and 22 per cent view their leadership in positive terms. This is linked to Gorbachev and Yeltsin [mutually](#) presiding over the dissolution of the Soviet Union – a process that represented the loss of state’s sovereignty [which](#) is viewed as a catastrophe by [the](#) vast majority of the Russian population.¹³

Liberals understand freedom as individual freedom often in the post-modernist Western sense. Thus, it is negative freedom, which is perceived as the absence of external constraints on one’s action. Interference, in this case and in contrast to traditionalist-conservatives, is viewed through the prism of internal politics. Liberal activists speak on the need to place an individual, with all his social and bodily needs, at the centre of political discourse. Liberal Nikolai Zlobin, following the 2013 Valdai discussion, also formulated [the](#) three most important ideas that should, in his mind, become central to Russian life. These include: (1) the value of human life, in terms of needs, desires, dreams, and interests; (2) cultural and political sovereignty of Russia; and (3) finally, social justice, in which all will have equal opportunities in socio-economic life and in

¹³ ‘Grazhdane Rossii Progolosovali za Leonida Brezhneva’, *Kommersant Daily*, 23 May 2013.

the court of law. Having said that, Zlobin underscored that human needs and wants must be placed *before* cultural and political sovereignty of the Russian state.¹⁴

Igor Yurgens, chairman of the board of the Institute of Contemporary Development and one of Russia's most respected liberals, similarly distinguishes between individual and commonwealth aspects, and in the order of priorities individual freedom comes first. The state, or the commonwealth, in the classical Lockean tradition, is hired or constructed by citizens to perform a limited number of required functions.¹⁵ Yurgens laments the situation, in which Russia's other parties reverse this order of priorities in favour of the commonwealth. To reinforce his criticism, Yurgens claims that Russia must emulate the institutional structures of those countries, whose living standards are considered desirable and strive to integrate into the family of those states by adopting their existential ideas.¹⁶

When applying this vision of freedom to civic activity, it is common to encounter liberal social media commentaries stating that, with the introduction of the law on foreign agents, 'there are no independent NGOs left in Russia'.¹⁷ While this idea is entirely logical in liberal circles, it makes no sense for the conservative audience. The critical question here again is the nature of

¹⁴ *Poedinok No 93*, Nikolai Zlobin vs Alexander Prokhanov, 26 September 2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-LWBHdvJgJU>.

¹⁵ *Chto Delat'?* Kto Diskreditiruet Liberalizm v Rossii?, 24 February 2012, Issue 346, *Rossiia Kul'tura*, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6xX2-BivWg>.

¹⁶ This is reminiscent of the Utilitarian Principle of liberalism, which is seen in pursuit of those policies that could yield greatest benefits, pleasures, and happiness (see Mill on Liberty, Gray 1985, pp. 4-6) and ignoring some other aspects of life that could constitute the fullness of human experience (see critique of utilitarianism by Kimlycka 2002, Williams 2001).

¹⁷ I have concealed the names of the social media authors for ethical considerations.

dependence. For a conservative activist, 'free' organization is the one, which is free firstly from foreign influence, and secondly from state manipulation. He/she can tolerate co-operation with the government but an NGO's connection to another state and foreign political agenda is quite a different matter. By definition (conservative) such an organization cannot be free.

For a liberal the picture is radically different. As long as an association supports individual rights and freedoms and acts against perceived domestic tyranny – and not collaborating with any agents of domestic tyrannical government – it is independent. Interesting in this context sits the battle between LGBT activists and Russian Orthodox Christian groups. The latter often accuse the former of their political ties with the West and their specific appeal to the Western public, which is evident through their English-language posters and slogans used during their activism. The LGBT activists, on the other hand, accuse the Christians of having tight links with ruling groups in the Russian government, which, in their view, ceased power and digressed to internal tyranny.¹⁸

The height of the negative rhetoric and mutual accusations evolved in the media, and in particular the social media, space. On the conservative side, Alexandr Dugin, Professor of Philosophy at Moscow State University, inaugurated offensive labelling of the liberals by invoking Dostoyevsky's ideas. Dostoyevsky placed his attitude towards Russian liberalism in the mouth of his fictional hero, the lackey Pavel Fyedorovich Smerdyakov – an illegitimate son of the noble Fedor Karamazov and a mute street woman, and a man with a foul

¹⁸ Kamikadze-gei vs Amin <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOti-u57T38> .

sounding surname. Smerdyakov claims that it would be better if Napoleon conquered Russia during the Patriotic war of 1812, thus ensuring that a 'clever' nation replaced the 'stupid one' and changed the rules for the better. Dostoyevsky's stigmatisation of a typical Russian liberal as a 'lackey who only thinks whose boots to clean' (Shatov, *The Possessed*) became the nerve of traditionalist critique.

Hence, the term *smerdyakovshchina* (smerdyakov's mentality) symbolised Russian liberal defeatism and entered the lexicon of contemporary political struggle. In a rather more moderate tone, Vitaliy Tretyakov claims: 'I am tired of the situation, in which representatives of the liberal wing accuse Russia in all mortal sins, show their disrespect and even undisguised hatred towards Russia, and always try to set someone else's example for Russia to follow. I am tired when those people speak from the name of our liberalism and I am not sure if these people are particularly marginalized in the liberal circles'.¹⁹ Social media liberals, on the other hand, label traditionalist-conservatives as 'cattle' (*bydlo*), pro-Kremlin 'patriots', slaves, regressive retrogrades and the like.

The internal aspects of commonwealth freedom, however, deserve special attention. In that both sides can unite in this sphere and represent one universal request for social justice, fairness, and civic struggle in Russia (Sotsiologia Protesta). The differences still exist, yet these differences are bridgeable. Liberals argue for a greater inclusiveness of all segments of population in state governance. Yurgens insists on the need to create 'inclusive institutions' that would ensure that all segments of society are able to form political parties, have equal access to the media, elections, and fair legal treatment. Sergei Mitrokhin,

¹⁹ Chto Delat? Vitaliy Tretyakov.

the leader of the liberal *Yabloko* party, reflects the general liberal opinion by claiming that the extant political elite led by Vladimir Putin privatised access to the lifts of economic and political mobility and created a self-contained system, in which the power and privilege are shared by the selected few.²⁰

Valery Fadeev and Vladimir Pligin approach the problem from an economic point of view. They claim that the Russian state must rely on the ability of Russians to self-organize. To that end, the state should be receptive to the interests of domestic producers, as well as small and medium-sized businesses, instead of giving preference to large corporations and global capital that have close ties with the Russian government. Instead of serving private interests of these holdings, the government should make financial credit available at home, release financing to domestic firms, ensure more funds and political responsibilities for regional and municipal governmental structures, and reduce taxes for sole traders. These steps, in their mind, would constitute a truly liberal program that could ensure individual freedom and responsibility through economic and social means.²¹

Conservative traditionalists also lament the emergence of the narrow circle of economic and political elite that usurped state power. Yet, they are more sensitive to foreign policy dimensions. They also see the cause of injustice and non-freedom in Russia in the actions of corrupt and irresponsible elites. These elites, in the conservative mind, create the gap between state and society. More importantly, Russia's conservatives speak of a unique antinomy within the

²⁰ Sergei Mitrokhin. Voskresny Veher s Vladimirom Solovyevym, 13 October 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Svel8Xw2JFM>.

²¹ Chto Delat? Tretyakov.

Russian political situation. The elites, they argue, represent the neo-liberal, global, cosmopolitan party whose interests lie on the side of transnational turbo-capitalism, and have little to do with the interests of Russia as a nation-state. They are highly sceptical of the neo-liberal agenda in the economic sphere, as well as the personal allegiances and affiliations of the Russian neo-liberal elite. Mikhail Delyagin, a conservative critic of the Russian government, incessantly blames the ruling party for its neo-liberal economic position that leaves a small few with unrestrained wealth and the majority at the well below average living standard. Andrei Fursov, conservative intellectual, termed this situation as the rule of offshore elites (*ofshorokratiya*).²²

Sergei Kurginyan, the leader of the *Essence of Time* movement, argued that representatives of Russia's big business could not be considered [part of the](#) national bourgeoisie, or national elite. Rather, he claims, they procure money in Russia in both legitimate and illegitimate ways, and channel the proceeds to the West. Maxim Shevchenko, an eminent conservative journalist, talks of the emergence of two parties – the elite party and the people's party. The elite is entrenched in the resolution of transnational issues and questions of global governance. People feel helpless under the pressure of the tremendous machine of state bureaucracy, corruption, elitism, the system of punishment, and in some cases a distinct lack of justice. The conservative task is to replace Russia's existing elites with the national elites in the positive sense of the word. The task is to reconcile the state and society, turning the state into a truly Lockean *civil society* concept.

²² Chto Delat? Tretyakov; see also Maxim Shevchenko *Osoboe Mnenie Ekho Moskvy*, 28 October 2013.

Shevchenko, in the wake of the December 2011 [traditionalist-](#)conservative rally in *Poklonnaya Gora*, claimed that people gave the state conditional support.²³ The state has been granted [the](#) benefit of [the](#) doubt in the framework of the anti-revolutionary drive that falls within the external freedom logic, in that the majority of [the](#) Russian public have been apprehensive of the potential *perestroika-2* or Orange revolution scenarios that could be associated with the White Ribbon movement.²⁴ Hence, this people's party is determined, in Shevchenko's mind, to engage the elites in the defence of social justice and to take power at the municipal and local level before proceeding to the task of replacing national elites.²⁵ Alexandr Prokhanov, Mikhail Leontyev, Alexei Pushkov often held to the same idea by insisting that the public, having made sure that revolutionary developments have been kept at bay, is now expecting the state to address the most pressing issues of social justice (see also Delyagin 2013). The potential of this mass-based traditionalist-conservative movement, dissatisfied with both the liberals and the elites, was seen in the Biryulyevo protest in October 2013.

Modernity and Russia: an Uneasy Relationship?

The philosophical matrix that evolves [as a](#) result of the debates on the nature of modernity becomes the keystone of Russia's civic debates, marking a

²³ Shevchenko, *Russia.ru*.

²⁴ This sentiment can be drawn from various opinion polls conducted during the after~~math~~ of the December 2011 protests, which state that over 40 per cent of the Russian population did not support the activity, and if [they](#) supported the general idea of social justice [they](#) have been sceptical about revolution, uprooting the government, overthrowing Putin or any other radical action that could lead to social upheaval (see FOM (Foundation for the Research of the Public Opinion) 2011; Levada Centre 2013; Krasin 2012; ISPI RAN (Institute of Sociology RAN) 2012). VTsIOM and FOM polls also show that some 30 per cent of the respondents felt anxious about the white ribbon protests; the public image of many opposition leaders, such as Boris Nemtsov, was negative, which was also related to the 1990s experiences (VTsIOM 2012).

²⁵ Shevchenko, *Russia.ru*.

watershed between traditionalist-conservatives and liberals. Interestingly, all participants of the debate, from the liberal to traditionalist-conservative spectrum of left and right, agree that Russia follows a special path towards modernity that is divergent from the West. Yet, this path is narrated and assessed differently. While both conservatives and liberals agree that modernity has not occurred in Russia 'properly', in the Western understanding of the term, they disagree on what Russia is to do about this. Likewise, the attitudes and appreciation of the nature of Western modernity and the post-modern world by Russian liberals and conservatives is starkly different. This leads to different proposals on the nature of Russia's developmental trajectory.

Russian liberals understand modernity in line with its various Western observers as a political and economic project that 'reflects growth-oriented planning and production, a pluralist political system, in which class politics is replaced by interest-group struggles, and with a strong bureaucracy that can regulate relations among, and between, money and human capital' (Aronowitz 1988, p. 46). These thinkers and activists feel that the modernity project in Russia has been crippled and that the country should struggle to implement this project fully setting such a goal as the main objective for the country's future. Vadim Mezhuev, chief researcher at the Moscow Institute of Philosophy (RAN), insists that 'one cannot talk about Russia's modernity in any meaningful manner in that modernity implies civil society, citizens, and a legitimate state that guarantees equal opportunities and justice to all. None of that has been realised in Russia at any time of her modern history'.²⁶ Thus, to Mezhuev and to most of

²⁶ "Chto Delat? Chto Takoe Post-modernism?" Vitaliy Tretyakov's Collection of Philosophical Debates, 27 February 2005, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5byQgL3Zs>. See

his liberally minded colleagues, Russia's priority lies in building these fundamental elements of modernity before logically proceeding to the progressive post-modern age. Post-modernism in this case is welcomed as a finalisation of the modernity's fundamental endeavour to grant 'justice and equality to all' (Aronowitz 1988, p. 47; [Eisenstadt 2002](#); [Wagner 1994](#)) and as a logical extension of its socio-cultural paradigm. 'Since I live in Russia', claims Mezhuev, 'I am a devout modernist, but if I were to live in the United States, I would have stood [with](#) the post-modernist positions'.

For Russian liberals, post-modernity's main attraction lies in its emphasis on multiplicity of norms, forms, cultures, discourses, and life-styles, as well as the absence of universal ambitions of modernity's main ideologies. The absence of meta-narratives, liberals claim, provides multitudes of new opportunities and changes a single-dimensional matrix of the real lifeworld. Meta-narratives must finally give way to particular, personal narratives of each individual man (Mezhuev 2009). It is from this point of view that Irina Prokhorova, a founding member of the Civic Platform political party and the editor-in-chief of the New Literary Review, praises post-modernism as an era of peace, toleration, and opportunity, to which Russia should strive after it had dealt with constructing modernity in the Western fashion.

Hence, they welcome the replacement of the traditional subject of modernity – a citizen, a rational Man – with a new post-modern subject – a particular person with a culturally specific rationality and personally selected citizenship. This Man is represented by a particularised and narrowly segmented

also 'Chto Delat? Post-Modern', Vitaliy Tretyakov's edited collection of philosophical debates, 17 May 2009, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkQLiGGHxYA>.

civil society that expresses particular and narrow identities of its individual members. Using philosophical terminology, they see no harm in the situation in which the Kantian and Cartesian Man gives way to a particularised, real post-modern Man with his down-to-earth bodily needs and material wants (public speeches of Nikolai Zlobin and Genry Reznik serve as good evidence of this trend). Copleston (1986, p. 163) aptly describes [how](#) the subject changed during the [transitional](#) process [from](#) modernity to post-modernity: 'after God had been killed, it was then necessary to kill Man in the sense that it was necessary to get rid of the abstraction 'Man' in the name of actual men and women, to reject the universal in the name of particular'.

Moreover, Russian liberals view post-modernity as a cultural and lifestyle project, in which the cultural and aesthetic spheres penetrate into the everyday life practice and influence civic and political action. Russia's liberal cultural experts, many of whom are notable political and civic activists, are particularly active in pushing the boundaries of the post-modern culture into the realm of the political. Marat Gelman, Ekaterina Degot, Artemiy Troitskiy, Dmitry Bykov, [and](#) Irina Prokhorova have become active participants of the liberal opposition. Russia sees the development of multiple networks of avant-garde artists with [a](#) political agenda, the most notable of which have been the *Voina* [activist](#) movement and their *Pussy Riot* [branch](#). Marat Gelman, Russia's notorious gallery organiser, launches the most controversial exhibitions, all of which are political, oppositionist, and anarchic in nature that challenge the generally traditionalist paradigm of Russia's society. Many of those people have been grouped into a new social category [and](#) branded as [a](#) 'creative class' (*kreativnyi klass*), whose

purpose is seen in the transition of a new lifestyle project and art into the sphere of the political.

This process escalates social conflict that could be narrated through the description of the evolving tension between tradition and post-modernity. Habermas (1996, p. 41) describes a counterpart Western phenomenon as the one driven by an 'anarchistic intention of exploding the continuum of history' ... [this intention] 'accounts for the subversive force of an aesthetic consciousness which rebels against the norm-giving achievement of tradition, which is nourished by the experience of rebellion against everything normative, which neutralizes considerations of moral goodness or practical utility, a consciousness which continually stages a dialectic of esoteric mystery and scandalous offence, narcotically fascinated by the fright produced by its acts of profanation – and yet at the same time flees from the trivialization resulting from that very profanation'.

Traditionalist-conservatives hold different views. In their appreciation of modernity and the post-modern world, conservatives depart from the proposition that Russia can thrive only if she proposes a meaningful alternative to the West. They place this proposition in a historical context. Byzantium was an alternative to Rome. During the age of empires, Russia's empire had a distinct inland structure, which housed multiplicity of political regimes. This presented an alternative to the British Empire, which gave its political system to almost every dominion (Kymlicka 1995). The twentieth century alternative idea was realised in the attempt to implement the Communist system. This very contemporary alternative grows out of Russia's commitments to the main parameters of classical modernity, as well as its active rebellion against the post-

modern world pursued by the West. This idea represents the nerve of conservative thinking and fuels traditionalist-conservative civic activism.

Having said this, Russia's modernity is also assessed in [an](#) alternative light. While conservatives agree with the liberals that modernity has not properly taken root in Russia, they do not insist on mending Russia's modernity to the point of compliance with the Western benchmark. Rather, they propose finding, creating, narrating, and constructing Russia's own modernity project (Chebankova 2013). Russia's biggest problem, they think, is to find ways of reconciling the country's tradition of 'alternativism' with the desire to build a truly modern, just, and prosperous society. Sergei Kurginyan speaks about the failure of Western modernity in Russia with a degree of satisfaction. He sees it as yet another sign of Russia's alternative destiny. Russia, according to Kurginyan, is not a 'modernity-able country' (*nemoderniziruemaya strana*) in the Western sense, and constructing this type of modernity would defy Russia's eternal aspirations of finding a different existential narrative.²⁷

In turn, Kurginyan thinks that Russia must combine the Soviet experience, as well as the history of imperial Russia, with contemporary pressures towards justice, equality, and technological progress. By doing so, Russia would be able to construct the so-called 'upper modernity' (*sverkhmodern*) and not slide to post-modernism or [the](#) archaic, each of which could be equally destructive for the country's future. Dugin (2008), as his opponent from the right, laments Russia's current version of modernity. He brands it archaeo-modernity – a situation, in which the discourse of western modernity has been awkwardly superimposed on Russia's traditionalist structure. This superimposition resulted in the mixed

²⁷ Kurginyan, Lecture.

and ugly forms of modernity, in which Russia desperately tries to emulate the West. Dugin's solution is similar to that of Kurginyan, yet he dresses it in the guise of Eurasianism, which once again means drafting Russia's alternative project of modernity.

Equally significant is the conservative perception that, if Russia were to build Western modernity, she would have to follow logically into the post-modern age. This is unacceptable to the vast majority of Russia's conservatives, who treat post-modernity and its ideology as an existential enemy. Thus, creating a distinctly Russian alternative, which would be devoid of the post-modern aporias, becomes a pressing necessity. Russia's conservatives rely on the cultural, historic, Christian, and Islamic traditions of both Russia and Europe in the hope of renewing some immunity to criticism of 'formative' values that could result in the emergence of stable identities and grant individuals their vanishing sense of security.

Russia's conservative tension with the post-modern project is down to three main reasons. First, they are uneasy with the multiplicity of post-modern norms and forms from an ethical, moral, and aesthetic point of view. Second, they lament the post-modern historiography as inconsistent with the goals of Russia's technological modernisation and geopolitical aspirations. Third, and strongly linked to the second, they reproach the post-modern world for devaluing the significance of the nation-state as a key subject of international politics.

First, from an ethical point of view, the Russian conservative argument is rather similar to the American neo-conservatism that laments, in the Western context, the dissolution of protestant ethics and its replacement with the

hedonistic and narcissistic trends of the post-modern life (see Bell 1979; Lasch; Sennett). Andrei Fursov regrettably calls this process 'de-Webberisation' of society (see analysis in Chebankova 2013). In this context, many of Russia's conservatives praise early classical liberalism and decisively disentangle it from contemporary liberal (or 'post-liberal') political thought. They turn to J. S. Mill and Immanuel Kant to claim that those authors upheld metaphysical ground, advanced the conceptions of morality, reason, virtue, merit, and self-development and insisted that ethical as well as moral considerations must take precedence over considerations of utility, expediency, and pursuit of bodily pleasures (Gray 1996; [Berlin 2006](#); Fukuyama 2002).

Equally, Russia's conservatives praise early Western liberals for the introduction of fundamentally important principles of freedom of consciousness, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and equality for all before law (Narochnitskaya 2012). Yet, they accuse the West, as well as Russia's contemporary liberals, for taking those early ideas to their logical extreme and turning the original concepts of freedom of thought, consciousness, and enterprise into the conception of freedom from all forms of collective identity, such as nation, class, ethnic group, family, and gender (Dugin 2008, Kurginyan and Tretyakov 2009, Narochnitskaya 2012). These are perceived in post-modern liberal thought (see [Eisenstadt 2002](#), Butler 2004, Mouffe 1988, Andersen 1983, Lyotard 1998) as socially constructed, couched in highly ideological terms, and therefore, impeding one's action.²⁸

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²⁸ Francis Fukuyama (2003) provides an insightful conservative critique of this development in the Western thought in his *Our Post-Human Future* work.

Following this trend, most Russian conservatives appreciate post-modernity decisively as a form of Anti-modernity. This distinguishes them from the liberals, who as described above, view post-modernity as a logical culmination of the modernity project. Dugin (2009), in his *Post-Philosophy* monograph, claims that post-modernity denies and deconstructs key concepts of modernity. Rationality, instead of being objective and universal, becomes segmented, subjective, and local. Time, instead of being linear, becomes relative and discrete. Instead of the universal Reason and rationality, [the](#) individual is directed by subconscious desires that need to be set free in order to achieve freedom (Deulueze and Guttari 2013). Zakhar Prilepin (2013), Russia's radical intellectual, popular author, and political activist who stands in opposition to the government, writes: 'our new liberalism is devoid of idealism, self-sacrifice, and courage. Yet, there is an emphasis on subjectivism, self-importance of [the](#) individual with all his peculiarities, as well as homosexuality, which has, for some strange reasons, been elevated into the ranks of [an](#) ideology of resistance and freedom. Instead of the emphasis on overcoming one's lower instincts, we gained the right to cultivate all the very poor, the very mean, and the very abominable'.

Russia's conservatives also insist that post-modern society establishes a strict ideological control that forbids formulation of meta-narratives and universal projects prevalent in modernity. Hence, it inhibits a person in his inner inclinations to hold on to the universal, 'stable' and 'predictable' (Bauman 2007, pp. 95-6). It forces an individual to accept the crazy quilt of the particular, develop his own versions of the particular, thus decoupling him from a stable traditionalist perception. Such [a](#) system of existential-philosophy coordinates

eliminates the whole and substitutes morality based on the natural law tradition with idiosyncratic impulses, emotions, sensation, feelings, and wants. Prilepin (2013) continues 'we wished to create a human who has doubts and reflections. Instead, we created a crowd that is far more persuadable than the crowd of the late totalitarian era... we know that in those difficult years people were telling untruths and lies albeit they knew that they were telling untruths and lies. Nowadays people are telling untruths and whims thinking that they are telling the truth in that they are staying within the trend!'

Second, a post-modern society, from the conservative point of view, is devoid of [the](#) capability of deciding its own future. Conservatives are weary that, with the absence of dualities and dialectic, the public cannot have a clear eschatological goal. They think that this limitation could cripple Russia's attempts at [a](#) technological, economic, and political breakthrough and impede her post-Soviet restoration and revival. They think that preventing meta-narratives will also prevent modernization and development of Russia for the latter are invariably reliant on meta-narratives. In present conditions, they argue, a person turns into a *tabula rasa* on which the media could imprint broken digital images and glossy fragments of reality. Yet, when good and evil, ugly and beautiful, reason and unreason, pain and pleasure become relative and particular the 'picture of the world becomes confusing and consistent of tiny particles of information, excerpts of narrative, glossy images, simulacra, and broken digital portions of the whole story' (Kurginyan 2009). A human becomes a product of the system of mass consumption and the means of mass communication (Dugin 2012; [Martynov 2013](#)). This person does not know the past for it is constructed through the screen of television or Internet forums, and

he/she cannot truly grasp the future in that the 'future also becomes wholly indeterminate, and in Derrida's terms, radically undecidable' (Daly 1999, p. 63).

They also warn that a unified system of global interests encompasses the extant particularization of society, thus impeding any coherent organization of mass-based civic activity. The demands placed on individuals to create his/her own particular identity serve the purpose of societal fragmentation, atomization, narcissism and ultimate loneliness of an individual. Hence, an individual becomes incapable of civic action, apart from the action that defends the very particular, incapable of pursuing larger projects for he/she is withdrawn into the private sphere of idiosyncratic wants. It is within this environment, he/she falls prey to large transnational capital, which is in the business of selling attributes of individuated personal identity to consumers, and elites that seek submissiveness in order to pursue the plans of unfair redistribution of wealth (Fursov and Tretyakov 2009). In these assessments, Russia's conservatives are united with some critical Western observers (see Harvey 2005; Sennet 1995).

Finally, and probably most importantly, the main danger of post-modernity is seen in dethroning the idea of the nation-state, as one important form of collective identity (Eisenstadt 2002). Conservatives argue that the dissolution of the nation state project would invariably take Russia, in its current shape and form, down with it (see Fursov, Kurginyan, and Tretyakov 2009). That is a compromise that traditionalist-conservatives cannot make. This brings us to their distinct view on the theory of international relations, which opens yet another debate with their liberal opponents.

Multipolar World

In the international affairs discourse, Russia's liberal-conservative split reveals an interesting antinomy. Conservatives begin acting in a post-modern fashion of particularity when matters concern world politics, while liberals stand for the development of a universal, invariably Eurocentric, meta-narrative. This reversal is related to the hidden objectives of both parties. Conservatives [wish](#) to enable Russia's leap to technological modernization and develop her claims to [an](#) alternative world hegemony in the spheres of culture and politics. They believe that such goals [can](#) be achieved only within the conditions of cultural preservation, nation-state supremacy, and the [system of](#) Westphalia sovereignty. This requires [s](#) resistance to the Western push towards global unification of the world.

It is in this context that the strict adherence to international law, [the](#) United Nations and its resolutions is vehemently defended. Such a system stands behind the preservation of particular cultures, guards the nation-state world structure, and allows drafting alternative projects and goals. In some ways, it could be expressed in Samuel Huntington's 'modernisation but not westernisation' idea. Hence, Russia's conservatives project lies in the creation of the socially just union of culturally distinct nations (the left wing proposal) or in co-operation between distinct cultural zones-civilisations (the neo-imperial right wing Eurasian version), again in the Huntington manner [of civilizational difference](#) albeit with an attempt to avoid the element of the 'clash'.

From this point of view, conservatives reprimand Russia's contemporary neo-liberals, as well as their Western counterparts, for embracing the cosmopolitan positions of Marxism that advocates [a](#) progressive movement to a

uniformed society governed by a set of supra-national institutions. In this liberal picture of the world, conservatives argue, Communist eschatology has been replaced with the ideal of contemporary Western civilization. The ideological institution of the Third International was substituted with the no less ideological and 'equally totalitarian' Council of Europe that has the 'moral authority' to hand out 'civilisational' attestations to aspiring candidates (Narochnitskaya 2012). In these ideas, conservatives draw on the philosophy of Russia's classical conservative Ivan Ilyin (1992, p. 194), who writes that the political system is not 'clothes' that could be changed at any moment; it is, more likely, 'bodily skeleton', a framework that carries muscles, internal organs, and skin. Only politically shallow individuals could think that nations could be given their political system – 'one and the best for all times and all nations'. There is not anything more 'dangerous and ridiculous than the striving to impose a political system on a nation that does not correspond to historical evolution of its people'.

Conclusion

The formation of Russia's civic movements could be studied through the prism of emerging ideas/ideologies and their political struggle for hegemonic discourse. The peculiarity of the Russian situation is that the country enjoys a radical diversity of competing views that precludes the formation of a base consensus in either a liberal or traditionalist-conservative guise. The two competing factions understand fundamental political values in a different light, have a different order of priorities for various social benefits, and ultimately propose the two radically different historic projects for Russia. Their views are, in almost all counts, conflicting and incompatible. In this context, the following

statement of Daly (1999, p. 63) in a classical volume of essays on Marxism becomes very appropriate: 'everything depends ... on the ability of concrete social forces politically to constitute their definition of reality in a historical context of possibilities. In a social formation, any foundation or 'ground' is always the result of hegemonic struggle which, because it is partial and incomplete, is always vulnerable to alternative interpretation'. This rather post-modern struggle between the two Russian alternatives, in which traditionalism is currently victorious, defines political discourse, civic activism, social movements, discourse, and relationships between civil society and liberal opposition, civil society and traditionalist pro-state movements, as well as civil society and the state. The outcome of this struggle will largely determine Russia's future path in history.

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