



Russian ideological state apparatus

Nancy Pathak

Research Scholar, Center for Russian and Central Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

Abstract

Unlike the popular western belief that there is absence of legitimacy of the Russian state and the elites are ruling completely undemocratically, the ground reality reeks of heavy popularity enjoyed by the Russian Leaders. We cannot argue that all the policies of the Leadership is working in favor of a western styled liberal democracy, but the Russian masses have always wanted a strong leadership and elites in Kremlin are delivering stability and strong government. There are various ideological and political factors that are contributing to the legitimacy of these Elites. This paper tries to study many of such factors which have led to popularity of these Elites among Russian masses.

Keywords: Russian elites, Russian democracy, ideological state apparatus, Russian leaders, propaganda

Introduction

Russian bureaucracy and Elites have been criticized time and again for managing the democracy and sabotaging it in their own interest. Bureaucracy as well as the political and economic elites worked together to sabotage the democratic functioning of the public institutions. They have used their privileges in more than one ways to loot the Public treasury and natural resources of Russia for their own benefits. But the debate goes much beyond the control exercised through the laws and the economic manipulation. The control of the state goes beyond these mechanisms. It goes on to claim the kind of legitimacy that Weber claims is a must for the modern day bureaucracies to survive. These mechanisms are the ideological state apparatuses that Louise Althuiser has so extensively studied and written upon. Even Rousseau has explicitly expressed that a state cannot enjoy legitimacy until the power is enjoined with rights and the obedience is accepted in the name of duty.

So Russian Modern state also has its own ideological state apparatuses that keep the Russian state legitimate in the eyes of the citizens. If not all it has managed to convince some, and more than some population of the nation for sure. There are several opiums through which the Russian state today maintains its legitimacy.

Russian Nationalism

One of the foremost ideological tools that Russian state uses today is the idea of nationalism. The notion of Russian Nationalism emerged from the historical idea of Great Russia (Velikaia Rus). John B. Dunlop also claims that Soviet social and political system was based on national principles. It can also not be forgotten that in the end was only the feeling of ethnic nationalism which led to breakdown of Soviet state. One of these states was also Russia. Nationalism became the biggest ideology after the collapse of communism in Russia. This was assessed quickly by the Russian elites. Putin who

was a face, handpicked from St. Petersburg bureaucracy became popular within some days. It was not a co-incident that he was portrayed as an ex-Soviet spy driven by Soviet nationalism. Natalia Gevorkyan, who was also part of the team commissioned with the job to write Putin's biography also mentions in a biography that the people in Kremlin wanted to highlight his past in glorious lights. He was portrayed as an ex- KGB man who kept nation before people. With this, the Russian official propaganda became nationalist, militarist and authoritarian, just to prove that right people were in command. They could do anything possible to protect Russian interests. Soon Putin became popular and was successfully elected as the new President of Russia after Yeltsin.

This became a possibility only with the help of another means of gaining popularity. Putin administration soon also developed an image of the protectors of the rights of the ethnic Russian.

The Creation of 'Other' in Russian imagination of a Nation

In Russia today the Russians are portrayed as the oppressed majority. The propaganda is that the Russians do not have their own ethnic republic like the Chechens, Udmurts or Tatars. Also the federalism in Russia does not adequately represent the majority. Neither has democracy represented the wishes of the majority as per the expectations they had from the new Russia. But if such a treatment was given to the ethnic Russians the "others" were also not getting the best treatment in the Russian federation either. History is replete with such examples. Certain events in late nineties ignited the hatred against the ethnic minorities in Russia.

Earlier the concept of Russian world i.e *Ruskii Mir* had been created under the leadership of the Sergey Chernyshev, in 1990's to re-emphasise the concept of the ancient shared civilisational space. This concept was taken forward in 1999

by Schedrovitsky and Ostrovsky who then included all the Russian speaking population in the notion of new Russia. This eventually brought in, whole of the Russian speaking population in it, even in those territories which did not form the part of the Russia. Much of this population constituted parts of East Europe also. While on the other hand a huge population of non-Russian population was excluded from this definition. Eventually when Putin assumed the office in 2000, it gave a new turn to the whole Concept to Russian World. The Putin administration started crying that Russian population was in demographic danger. The history of this development goes back to before Putin was even elected as the President. In 1999, Moscow faced its own 9/11. The apartments in Moscow got bombed and killed many citizens. The rebels from Chechenya were pointed out as the main perpetrators behind these bombings. The Chechen trail in that event could never really be proved through the investigations following those events. But, before anything could be proved Chechenya was attacked by the mainland Russian military elites on the thought after planning of the elites sitting in Kremlin.

Soon after, the elections were postponed and when they were held. Putin who was an unknown bureaucrat from St. Petersburg now managed to win the popular elections in the late 1990s. In 2001-2015, the Kremlin administration started defining immigration as one of the countries priorities. This Russian imagination also led to the formation of Russia's definition of the neighbors and the west. Many of these neighbors included the nation states that were once part of the Soviet State.

Imagination of the neighbor and West (Russian World as extended Russia)

A new concept was framed, the "Principal directions of the federation toward compatriots Living abroad for 2002-2005" which was the first line of policy direction that the Russian state was planning on taking on the issue of Its compatriots beyond the Russian borders.

The document also allowed the administration in Kremlin to play the card of defense Russians in outside its own territory. This was done in the name of conservation of their ethno cultural existence. This allowed them to further form the mechanisms and laws to be able to balance the work force within the country along with maintaining interference in the neighboring territories. Handelling of Crimean Crises was a classic example of it. Putin's spokesperson Sergey Markova clearly stated in an interview that Russian ethnicities were under threat. United States had been fuelling the plan of De-Russification for a very long time in the Russian neighborhood. He claimed that all the positions of power were being held by the Ukrainians and other ethnicities in the neighboring countries like Ukraine. The Russian ethnic minorities on the other hand were were being persecuted in the Ukraine. Hence, it was only justified that Russia intervened in the Ukraine crisis and helped in secession of Russian ethnic region of Crimea. Putin in his address to Moscow in March 2014 clearly stated that. These sentiments have played well at home. The Streets in Moscow which were full with demonstration against the Putin administration were now full with patriots singing praises for their president. After

the annexation of Crimea Putin gave an address to the media in which he went on to cite 19th century Baptism of Prince Vladimir, whose conversion to Christianity led to the transition of the kingdom of Rus into the empire of Russia. And he considered Keiv as a part of that imagined Russian Nation calling it as "The mother of Russian cities". He also remembered the participation of Crimean land in World War on behalf of the then Soviet union. Many during this address cried, and St. George's hall was filled with loud applause at this address. Putin's popularity was at its record highest during the June- July of 2015 due to the developments in Crimea and assertion of Russian ethnic nationalism in the western stretches.

This imagination of an 'Extended Russian hood' and a newer version of Russian World and ideological infrastructure as created by Putin administration are problematic under the principles of International law.

Nostalgia for the Soviet times

The present administration in Kremlin has tried to evoke Soviet period nostalgia among the masses to claim legitimacy for its action. Soviet ideology came as a good justification to the acquisition of the property from the private hands by the state. The Russian elites and bureaucrats also justified it in the name of ease of management of large scale property as well as maintenance of common ownership of resources. These practices were all prevalent during the soviet period. As stated by Richard Sakwa, in his book Soviet Politics in perspective, Soviet nostalgia was evoked in order to legitimize an asocial political practice which subordinated the society to goals which were far away from the day to day realities of the Russian society. Gramsci's insight into the hegemony used to internalize and legitimize a rule in capitalist societies held relevance for the Soviet state and still holds ground for the Russian state today.

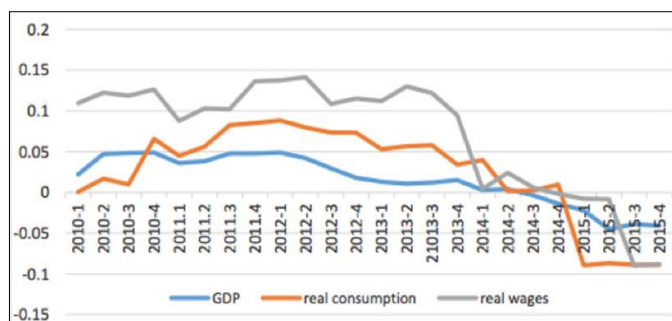
This nostalgia has been used time and again. After the collapse of Soviet, all the other holidays were dissolved, but Victory day was retained. It began to be treated like a sacred holiday. Yeltsin built an entire structure called Pokknolaya hill at the Victory day park in order to commemorate Soviet victory over the Fascist forces. The victory in world war was rose to national cult and the west was expected to respect both Russia and Putin. Even the events of centenary of the October revolution were seen as a good opportunity to ponder upon the idea of United Russia. Many streets in Moscow still retain their soviet name like the Marx, Lenin etc.

This nostalgia is time and again evoked, to recall the imagination of the united Russia. Also as expressed earlier, the nationalization of the private property and the distribution of the private assets back in the hands of the ones chosen by the Kremlin was also justified by the existence of certain practices that continued from the soviet period.

Economic development of the New Russia and the modernization project

New Russia started its path with a lot of hopes and aspirations towards the project of democracy, modernization and liberalization of economy. People had built up hopes that they were on the path to development like other western countries. But the blatant market reforms had put the economy in a state

of shock. The people were short of supplies and the market had been placed open for loot. The people who wanted Liberal economy based on western model by the beginning of the New Russia were now disillusioned with it. The economy started doing well as soon as Putin came to power but it wasn't really a result of the economic modernization project. He had slashed taxes in order to benefit private sector but also majorly renationalized some of the nation's major key sectors. The economy did start doing well. The reason for it was that the Russians were selling the natural resources like Oil and gas and benefitting from the exports due to high global prices of these commodities. The result was abrupt rise in the GDP. Also there was a boom in the middle class, but this venture was short lived. As soon as the oil prices crashed in the global fuel market Russia's economy also went into a slump. The façade of the Modern economy came crashing. During the years from 2006 to 2014 the GDP of Russia constantly grew and then Russia experienced a major GDP decline post 2014.



(GREGORY 2015) ^[1]

Fig 1: Growth Rates of GDP, Real Consumption, and Real Wages: Russia 2010-2015

In her article “Science Fiction: President Medvedev’s campaign for Russia’s technological modernization” Karti Pynnneimie presented a crucial attempt on the part of the Medvedev administration to modernize Russian economy and high-technological industry and economic infrastructure. She states that there was a commission for modernization and technological development of Russia’s economy which did not bring anything to the table except for fictional researches and claims in the public discourse. These helped create positive images of Russia’s future although these projects were useless in practical use.

These claims to the status of superpower (*derzhavnichestvo*) as studied by Lilia Shetsova says have been based on the façade of modernization. This strategy of the Kremlin elites is two-pronged. These elites create the illusion of the renewal of the regimes. One administrative head hands over the power to another, giving an illusion of the change of regimes but it proves to be eyewash at the best. The way how Yeltsin handed over regime to Putin and then Putin in return gave the baton in the hands of Medvedev only to take it back. The illusion created during the Medvedev period was, that Medvedev as a liberal executive will facilitate modernization and

liberalization of the economy. While Putin took it back from Medvedev on the Promise of development, economic stability and rise of Russia as a power. This is the façade that remains at the top. But Lilia Shetsova claims that the reality underneath is very different. The traditional system has continued. One of the very powerful groups of traditional elites who have managed to keep their place in the system is the military elites and the security services from the soviet times. The military matrix has infact been majorly responsible for managing the dissent of the Russian population whereas the the façade of modernization and economic development is to maintain legitimacy among the people.

The Personality Cult of the Russian leaders

Personality cult can be related to Weberian Charismatic model of authority. In this kind of authority the people are taken by the awe of their leaders to the extent that they follow their authority. Hence, it is the deepest desire of every leader to be able to use their charisma to be able to claim legitimacy from the people. The charismatic personality can be maintained through false propoganda also. The Charisma may not always survive; hence, the Leaders try to routinise the Charisma. The characteristics of Charisma will have to keep changing in order to survive. Soon the charisma is institutionalized. The rationality of the masses makes them believe that business should go on as usual. Hence, for the smooth running of the business the continuity in the authority of the charismatic leader and discipline followed by institutionalization is preferred by the masses. This charismatic authority may not convert into the rational legal ideal type of authority. It may most probably convert into a patrimonial kind of an authority. Post-communist leaders like Yeltsin, his slurring speech, his dwindling health and a personality of an indulgent leader had provided Russia a very pessimistic view of self. In such circumstances Putin came as a macho, alpha male figure. He came across as a firm headed, physically fit, ex-KGB man. He was flying the planes, swimming in the ocean and asking for respect from the west. Such an imagination of a leader certainly blinded the masses for some time. As per the understanding of the Sociologist Yuri Levada that since, most of the state media is controlled by the elites in Kremlin, the masses have come to associate Putin with the Russian pride. His personality cult has certainly acted like the opium of masses.

Conclusion

The Western academics and media may have looked at Russian democracy as a failed project, but as a researcher from outside the Russian and western context, I have had the privilege to look at the Russian democracy without a vested interest. In Moscow, the situation appeared to be much different from what the western media claimed. But the analysis of the Russian society actually brings out that the Political Elites in Russia are enjoying heavy legitimacy in Russia. The society in Russia has undergone a unique process of docilisation and domestication over the years of Tsarist and then Soviet Rule.

The Russian modernity produced a very different individual. A bureaucratic individual who lost any flair for innovation and initiative in the monotony of the planned socio- economic life

¹ The graph has been obtained from the article ‘Russia’s economic Stagnation’, from the website- www.nationalreview.com. The Url for the same is <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/427481/russias-economic-stagnation>.

of Russia called Homo Sovieticus as propounded by Russian dissident Philosopher and sociologist Aleksander Zinovyev. This man depended on the state to such an extent that it also allowed the state to dominate its democratic and private sphere.

Most of the people above the age of 25 in Russia who have seen the Soviet Union still have the nostalgia for the Soviet period. They have longed for a strong and dominating leader. Thus the leadership in Kremlin with its iron hand policies has only enjoyed heavy legitimacy in the eyes of the majority of the population. It is only the younger population under the age of 25 who have grown up in new Russia who have grown under the influence of liberal ideas who long for more democratic rights and more transparency among the leadership. Hence, the democratic values are increasing with the growing generations. The evolution of democratic logic and spirit has been slow but there is growing participation of people in the government. There are younger people participating at least in urban spaces in the municipal politics and there are spaces where the technology is promoting democratic participation and promoting information and feedback in governance. Various citizens' governance projects like the 'Mayors Project'² in urban centers have been put in place which are training the people in civic participation. The democracy might be managed at this stage, but it is budding and raising its head.

The democracy in urban centers in Russia is budding. The progress might be slow but unlike the west believes, it is not dead.

References

1. Alberto Nardelli, Jennifer Rankin, George Arnett. Vladimir Putin's approval rating at record levels. TheGuardian.com. 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/datablog/2015/jul/23/vladimir-putins-approval-rating-at-record-levels> (accessed feb 2, 2016).
2. Barry, Steven Lee Myers, Allen, *et al.* Putin Reclaims Crimea for Russia and Bitterly Denounces the West. News Paper report, Moscow: New York Times, 2014.
3. Dunlop, John B. The faces of contemporary Russian nationalism. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983.
4. Dunlop, John B, Amy Knight (Foreword). Moscow Bombing of September 1999: Examinations of Russian terrorist attacks at the onset of Vladimir Putin's Rule (Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society, Vol. 110). Stuttgart: Deutche Bibliothek, 2014.
5. Gregory, Paul Roderick. Russia's economic stagnation. nationalreview.com. November 23, 2015. <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/427481/russias-economic-stagnation> (accessed feb 1, 2017).
6. Vladimir Putin's Rise to Power. Directed by N.A. Performed by <http://www.advexon.com>. 2016.
7. Jensen, Donald N. Is Radical Nationalism in Russia Getting out of Control? imrussia.org. May 12, 2015. <https://imrussia.org/en/analysis/politics/2250-is-radical-nationalism-in-russia-getting-out-of-control> accessed 2016.
8. Kaljule, Liisa. What happened to Andreas Lapeteus? An upper class Sovieticus caught in the gears of Soviet modernity. Baltic Screen media review, 2014, 5-21.
9. Laruelle, Marlene. The Russian World: Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination. Academic Report, Washington: Center on Global Interests, 2015.
10. Levada, Yuri. Vladimir Unbound. The Economist, 2016.
11. Lo, Bobo, Lilia Shetsova. A 21st Century Myth-Authoritarian modernisation in Russia and China. Moscow: Carnegie endowment for international peace, 2012.
12. Luhn, Alec. 15 years of Vladimir Putin: 15 ways he has changed Russia and the world. TheGuardian.com. May 06, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/06/vladimir-putin-15-ways-he-changed-russia-world> (accessed 2017).
13. Miscellenous. A state of their own: the Russian nationalist agenda. Vostokcable.wordpress.com. August 25, 2015. <https://vostokcable.wordpress.com/2015/08/25/a-state-of-their-own-the-russian-nationalist-agenda/> accessed, 2016.
14. Ostrovsky, Yefim, Peter Schedrovitsky. 1111 marks for 1111 days before the New Millennium. www.archipelag.ru. 1997. http://www.archipelag.ru/ru_mir/history/history_95-97/shedrovicky-1111zn/ accessed, 2016.
15. Pynnoneimie, Katri. Science Fiction: President Medvedev's campaign for Russia's technological modernisation. Demokratizatsiya, 2014: 500.
16. Roth, Guenther, Ckus Wittich. Max Weber: Economy and Society. London: University of California Press, 1978.
17. Sakwa, Richard. Soviet Politics: In Perspective. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.
18. Satter, David. The Less You Know, the Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship under Yeltsin and Putin. United States of America: Yale University Press, 2016.
19. Smith RW. The Concept of Legitimacy. Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory, 1970, 17-29.
20. Spencer, Martin E. Weber on Legitimate Norms and Authority. The British Journal of Sociology, 1970, 123-134.
21. Stark, Werner. The Routinization of Charisma: A Consideration of Catholicism. Sociological Analysis, 1965, 203-211.
22. Walker, Shaun. Tragedy or triumph? Russians agonise over how to mark 1917 revolutions. The Guardian web site. 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/17/russia-1917-revolutions-legacy-lenin-putin> accessed, 2017).
23. Zygat, Mikhail. All the Kremlin's men: Inside the court of Vladimir Putin. New York: Public Affairs, PBG publishing, 2016.

² See the website of the Mayors Project, a government initiative for citizens participation in Moscow city's administration and decision making, at www.ag.mos.ru.