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Political Doctrines, Discourses, and Debates in Post-Soviet Societies

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Contents

Post-Soviet Ideological Creativity

Aleksander Etkind & Mikhail Minakov

1.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the people of its former republics have witnessed the return of history into their new—and old—homelands. The former Soviet populations lived in a world with a predictable future, and thus, as Aleksei Yurchak has well phrased it, "everything was forever until it was no more" (Yurchak 2013). Political thinking and the social imagination of individuals, small and large groups in USSR were directed and limited by the ideological monopoly of the state with its specific worldview, language, and regime. And the dissolution of the fundamental ideas and grammar of this monopoly during the time of Perestroika (1985-1991) caused the walls, which had long been guarding the Union, to collapse irreparably.

The Soviet vision of a preordained and predestined future has been replaced by a feeling of limitlessness of individual and collective endeavors. Unpredictability of the future was coupled with a sense of vulnerability vis-à-vis history. The challenges of an open future have led to a multitude of ideological responses in the enormous space lying between Tallinn and Vladivostok, Murmansk and Osh, Magadan and Chisinau. Human creativity has been boosted in all spheres, including politics and ideology. Formerly engaged in the dogmas of Soviet Marxism, political and ideological creativity provided these new societies, emerging from the ruins of the USSR, with an opportunity to build freer and more just polities. History has repatriated the post-Soviet lands as a plurality of political ideas and a clash of ideologies.

However, the disappearance of the "great" Soviet society was not as rapid as the changes in the political realm. The new societies of Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia faced tectonic transformations, which led to a flourishing of different phenomena related to ideology. But the social structure adapted slowly. The new social

reality had to normalize political competition, multiparty systems, private property, the significance of money, the coexistence of consumerist lifestyle and totalitarian traditions, and the contradictions between democratic politics and oligarchic economies, between atheism and religious renaissance, and so on. Events throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries inspired new ideological frameworks, which allowed individuals, institutions and social groups to accept and interpret the new political and socioeconomic reality in a way that was eclectic, relativistic or—the most popular ideological term of the epoch—post-modern. Though philosophical genealogies of the post-modern and post-Soviet conditions were vastly different— if not opposite—these concepts often merged or conflated in their popular usage.

The new states and societies were immersed into a period of state- and nation-building, as well as the birth of new capitalist economies. The vast and drastic changes in lifestyles coincided with the spread of individualism, neoliberalism, democratic liberalism, libertarian anarchism, ethno-nationalism, religious conservatism, anti-progressivism, which frivolously combined or even merged in a public sphere that had been long deprived of critical discourse. Attempts to establish new ideocratic regimes based on ideological monopoly and then attempts to return to the political and ideological pluralism constituted chaos. All these contradictions needed revision and rational order. However, the resulting hierarchies could hardly sustain the new critical atmosphere.

Stemming from this chaos, the post-Soviet social imagination was striving for certainty and normalization. The massive discontent and revolutionary quest for new forms of social, political and economic life paradoxically coincided with the collective desire to "return to normality" and to "join the civilized world" (these expressions were the buzzwords in the late Soviet/early post-Soviet media). The idea of return also had a transitory intention: breaking away from the Soviet dead end, the Russian, Ukrainian and Lithuanian societies were striving to go back to their "natural" or "correct" past. Leaders of the Baltic countries, Ukraine and Russia saw the February Revolution in 1917 as the model for their republican experiments. Along with new legal experiments on the restitution

of property and historical myths that made heroes of the nationalist leaders of the pre-Soviet era, the ideological creativity of 1991 tended to use forms and models of the late 19th/early 20th century for the post-Soviet societies entering the 21st century.

Another limitation for our societies' political imagination was posed by the idea of copying. The limitlessness of politics after the dissolution of the USSR was also seen as a period when transfer of Western experience could have guaranteed democratic and economic success for the new Eastern Europe and Western Eurasia, according to some experts (Stefes 2006: 10-11; Gaidar 2010: 17-18). However, neither transition through transfer, nor transit via return delivered the promised success and return to normality. New forms of collective life took over the post-Soviet societies where neopatrimonialism, patronal networks, mafia-state, neo-imperialist politics, neo-Sovietism, neo-nazism, and demodernization became as strong as the democratic tendencies. The Baltic countries, in spite of the strong EU influence, still have considerable obstacles to being functioning democracies (Maciukaite-Zviniene 2009: 29-30; Krastev 2018). In the last twenty years the other 12 post-Soviet republics were slowly losing Perestroika's emancipatory impulse (Hale 2016). Even the most "democratic" countries out of these 12 remain in a state of semi-freedom with only a weak association with the EU (Nodia, Cenusa and Minakov 2017). The situation with democracy and the rule of law in six de facto post-Soviet states is even worse (Fischer 2016: 5-7; Minakov 2019). This unexpected current post-Soviet social reality was created by an interplay of revolutionary and restorationist strategies (Umland 2017). Overcoming Marxist, Stalinist and Brezhnevist pasts, post-Soviet authors have demonstrated an outstanding creativity in various genres of ideological storytelling, from non-fiction to fiction, from philosophy to utopia, and from history to fantasy.

2.

These and many other processes connected to ideological creativity and political imagination in the post-Soviet societies have been studied by many individual scholars and research groups. One of

the networks that unites the political scholars, sociologists, political philosophers and historians studying post-Soviet societies, cultures and ideologies was organized around *The Ideology and Politics Journal*.

The Ideology and Politics Journal (IPJ) was established by a group of scholars from Ukraine, Russia, Belarus and the USA in 2011 to analyze ideology in its political, social, and conceptual forms, at the core of post-Soviet societies.[1] Very soon the Journal became a communication platform for researchers who study ideological processes in Belarus, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries. Researchers from this network published their studies in IPJ, transforming it into a unique chronicle of the development of new societies influenced by the multiplicity of ideological forms.

From the outset, IPJ has been devoted to the study of how post-Soviet societies acknowledged the new socio-economic reality, as well as the changing values and guiding ideas for new political systems and cultures. Its authors have also considered how these societies represent themselves and their pasts, and how they project their futures.

Since philosophy, social science, history, and political science operate with many different, often conflicting, definitions of ideology, the IPJ community of scholars agreed to define ideology in the widest sense possible. The definition of ideology includes (in no order of preference):

- A system of political ideas and beliefs;
- Unanimous instance of power dispositions legitimation;
- A false consciousness created by the dominating class;
- A symbolic system utilized to make sense of the social reality.

1 Since the Ideology and Politics Journal is an open access peer-reviewed journal, all its issues, as well as information on its editors, Board, code of conducts etc. are accessible on its website at www.ideopol.org. All IPJ articles go through a process of anonymous double peer review. The IPJ publishes its materials in English, Russian and Ukrainian.

In this manner, it is possible to reconcile the neo- and post-Marxist, liberal and neo-liberal, morphological, poststructuralist and postmodern interpretations of ideology.[2]

We also look at ideology as intrinsically linked to political imagination. Political imagination is an intersubjective faculty that simultaneously creates affectionate and cognitive adherence of individuals to a political collective. Among the phenomena associated with political imagination are political ideologies, utopias and visions of common future, nostalgies and memories/oblivions of common past, as well as euphoric or critical assessments of the social now. Thus, the creative force of imagination hegemonically prescribes what is collectively possible and impossible, normal and deviant, justified and unfair, legitimate and forbidden. And authors of the IPJ studied how this human faculty manifested itself in the post-Soviet societies.

3.

After 13 IPJ issues were published, authors of a body of research articles appealed for publishing in a separate book that could provide an insight into contemporary ideological situations in the post-Soviet societies. After a thorough selection of the articles published in IPJ from 2011-2019, we chose 12 articles. Their authors updated and modified them into the chapters of this book. Together, these texts—and cases they illuminate—constitute a coherent study of the contemporary post-Soviet political thinking and social imagination.

The 12 chapters of this book are divided into two parts. The first part analyses the diversity of discourses on state and society and related ideologies emerging from the tension between post-Soviet state and society.

In the first chapter, Natalia Koulinka studies the case of the Lukashenko regime in Belarus. At the time of writing (2019) Aleksandr Lukashenko celebrates twenty-five years in power. The author tries to understand how did it happen that the Belarusian voters were able to navigate and choose between the nearly identical

2 For differences of these approaches please see Freeden et al. 2013

promises of social justice and well-being made by all six candidates for the presidency back in 1994? Koulinka draws on the pre-election materials written on behalf of the two most controversial candidates—Zianon Paz'niak, the leader of Belarusian Popular Front "*Adradzhen'ne*," and Aleksandr Lukashenko, who positioned himself as an independent candidate. Her comparative analysis of the candidates' rhetoric provides an analysis of early post-Soviet Belarus ideological thinking, as well as of the stability of Lukashenko's authority after his victory a quarter-century ago.

Kostiantyn Fedorenko analyzes a more recent event, the Euromaidan in Ukraine. Fedorenko studies how Ukrainian liberals and nationalists cooperated in the protests of late 2013/early 2014, and the way they explained the cooperation with their ideological rivals. The author skillfully shows the political complexity and ideological flexibility of post-Soviet protest movements.

Pavel Skigin applies the Weberian analytical model of neopatrimonialism to an analysis of Putin's regime. In this case study, the author examines the hierarchy of patron-client bonds, rent extraction, and the conditional status of private property in contemporary Russia. This chapter offers a promising explanation of the persistent features of Russian political thinking and practice through a neopatrimonial lens, thus rendering the democratic/authoritarian dichotomy somewhat superficial.

Authored by Jesko Schmoller, the fourth chapter examines clientelism and the state in Uzbekistan. The author argues that patron-client relationships constitute a challenge for the emergence of a modern state in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. His analysis of the practice and prevalent thinking patterns in the Uzbekistani public service shows that state and society are not properly differentiated; thus the public and private spheres overlap. Schmoller also shows that the 21st century Uzbekistani state functions as combination of clientelistic practices, with elements of pre-modern social order interacting with the remnants of Soviet formal institutions and informal relations.

Anton Avksentiev and Valentyna Kyselova also use the concept of neopatrimonialism to study how the contemporary Ukrainian state and power elites function. Their research focuses on the

formation and function of parliamentary and regional council alliances in Ukraine. The work is based on the analysis of materials from the 3rd-8th convocations of the Verkhovna Rada (1998-2019) and all acting regional councils of the southeastern regions. Based on the results of their study, Avksentiev and Kyselova argue that the formation of coalitions are based on party antagonisms across the ideological scale, and are common at both the national and regional level. However, regional councils demonstrate that their obedience to Presidential Administrations is stronger than the tie to Parliament. Also, they show that, despite the election results, the "party of power" regularly captures the biggest share of real power nationally and regionally, and, ultimately, it becomes the key coalition player in Ukraine.

Chris Monday studies the post-communist societies (or "the post-utopian nations" as he calls them) and the role of families in their development. Monday argues that these societies are not so much caught in a development trap, as they are shifting structurally towards family rule. For these nations, "the return to dynasty" has provided their economies with the necessary organization. It also provides their polities with some opportunities for development through personalized channels of contact.

The second part of our book is dedicated to the post-Soviet collective memory, imagination and propaganda.

This part starts with a chapter dedicated to the issue of militarization of cultures in Eastern Europe. Egor Isaev studies this problem on the case of contemporary Russia. The author specifically addresses militarization of the Russian movies dealing with recent history and collective memory. Isaev determines the role of history and historical films in the contemporary politics of memory and describes the relations between the state and Russian cinema as systemic. The author argues that historical movies describe Russia's past mainly in terms of wars and conflicts, and the criticism of war is becoming less and less prevalent in popular cinema.

The next chapter addresses the problem of how and to what extent the anti-democratic, imperial and ultimately antimodernist narratives of the post-Soviet era are influenced by the aesthetics and generic conventions of literary works that in post-Soviet cultures

are commonly known as *fantastika*. Oleksandr Zabirko analyses a vast body of recent Russian and Ukrainian fictional texts, which leads him to the conclusion that the current conflict in Donbass and Crimea was well prepared in both societies' imagination and discourse. The political thinking and social imagination of two neighboring nations were already primed for war and mutual enmity before 2014.

Sergiy Kurbatov and Alla Marchenko deal with the issue how post-Soviet nations remember the USSR. Particularly, the authors analyze representations of Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the USSR, in textbooks on the history of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, published in 1991-2012. Their study shows the ambiguity and diversification of the attitudes towards the late Soviet Union, reflected in different assessments of Gorbachev and his policies. In these assessments one can see the manifest or latent nostalgia for the Soviet past (in the cases of Russia and Belarus), as well as optimism regarding national independence (the case of Ukraine).

In the fourth chapter of this second section, Jennifer J. Carroll pays attention to the rough edges of the geopolitical and military campaigns in Eastern Europe. The author focuses particularly on a specific technique of deception and information warfare currently emerging from within the Russian sphere of influence. Carrol shows that imitation—the deliberate attempt to make one thing appear as though it is really another by mimicking its observable features—typically generates highly influential disinformation campaigns. She also compares imitation with other forms of public deception, and thus tells the story of new ways of social imagination and political thinking management by authorities.

Further, Daria Goriacheva challenges a widespread belief that the Euromaidan uprisings and the subsequent Russian-instigated crisis in Ukraine have brought about a leap forward in Ukraine's long-held aspirations of European integration. She argues that the failure of numerous Ukrainian attempts to join European structures, as well as regular setbacks in the country's democratic transformation, are largely the result of a lack of shared long-term goals between Ukrainian and Western political elites. Based on metaphor-oriented critical discourse analysis, the author examines

Ukrainian and key European leaders' official discourses in the post-Euromaidan era in order to reveal and compare their perspectives on EU-Ukraine relations as well as their view on Russia in this context. In her study, Goriacheva concludes that leaders possess substantially different visions on prospective relations in the EU-Ukraine-Russia triangle, which reveals even deeper differences in political thinking and practice of the three parties.

Our book ends with an interesting chapter looking at how the Euromaidan, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the armed conflict in the Donbas region have affected relationships among scholars based in Western Europe and Ukraine. Darya Malyutina looks at the community of scholars focusing on Ukraine in their work, who should have stayed immune to ideological influences. However, the political conflict divided scholars as well. As Malyutina rightly states, knowledge production is never an individual endeavor; hence the effect of political crises on scholarly communities may be particularly traumatizing, leading to a polarization within the intellectual field. Drawing upon a series of interviews with social scientists and humanities scholars specializing in Ukraine, the author shows that, on the one hand, the conflict has had a strong impact on relationships within the field of Ukrainian Studies and beyond, in terms of disrupting both local and transnational connections in the real and virtual spaces of universities, conferences, and social media discussions. On the other hand, the destructive effect has been far from universal. An increasing number of scholars have discussed the reconciliation and easing of problematic relationships amongst researchers. These discussions focus on the new transnational ways of conducting research, maintaining the connections and establishing new contacts; they draw upon political solidarity rather than differences, and focus on the need to (re)establish a dialogue on a larger scale in the future.

We hope that this collective study of the post-Soviet political thinking and social imagination will foster further studies of ideological creativity of people across the world. Neither for the first nor for the last time, history demands bravery and solidarity in dealing with human-caused catastrophes and crises.

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