



*Department of Political Science*

*Final Dissertation in International Relations*

## **Genesis and Development of Russian Conservatism**

### **ABSTRACT**

**Supervisor:**

Raffaele Marchetti

**Candidate:**

Marta Dionisio  
068242

*Academic Year 2013/2014*

The present work focuses on the conservative politic that has recently been undertaken by Russian's political élites, especially after the rise of Putin at the Kremlin. The aim of this work is to reconstruct the origins and the reasons of this conservative trend and to show how conservatism has been and is still now implemented by the Russian Government.

My thesis is that it was Putin who started enhancing traditional and moral values such as patriotism, spiritualism and family values in order to compact and aggregate the Russian population around the idea of a common nation and of common values. The aim of this policy was to reconstruct the Russian State after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the political and economic disorder of the Eltsin Era. I maintain that these conservative ideals made Putin succeed in raising the national pride of Russian citizens, in restoring order inside Russia and in reasserting Russian's fundamental role at the international level. Nevertheless, we can not forget the numerous critics of those who see conservative politics as a government's move to keep power and to silence its opponents.

The work is divided into three parts. First of all, it focuses on the origins of Russian conservative politics, which I tracked back to the first years of Putin's Presidency of the State. This part also analyses the objectives of this policy and it reconstructs the development of the meanings of "conservatism" and "traditional values" over the years. The second chapter of this thesis takes into consideration the recent laws and amendments which have been made with the purpose of protecting traditional values. As it emerges through the analysis, these reforms have often been accused by numerous activists and by many Western countries of jeopardizing human rights and fundamental freedoms of Russian citizens. Finally, the third chapter is dedicated to the consequences of Russian conservatism at the international level. In fact, the emphasis on the protection of traditional values makes Russia embrace the cause of the international conservative activists, the so called "Baptist-Burqa Network"<sup>1</sup>.

Before getting to the heart of the conservative politics, it is to say that Russian culture has always been divided, except for the communist period, between two conflicting souls. On the one hand there is the "European soul", which has been promoted by those sovereigns, like Peter the Great and Aleksandr I, that considered Europe an example of greatness and development, and who tried to import European values in Russia. On the other hand there is the "Slavophile" or "Russophile" soul, sponsored by those who looked for a model of

---

<sup>1</sup> Bob C. (2012): The Global Right Wing and the Clash of World Politics

development based only on Russian's culture and tradition – among them, the tsars Aleksandr II and Nicholaev II. Throughout this work I demonstrate that, while Eltsin tried to bring Russia closer to the European model, on the contrary Putin used conservatism to restore the Russophile soul.

In order to find the roots of traditional values in Russian politics, I believe it is important to understand the situation of the country at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the fall of the communist ideology caused the loss of any kind of political beliefs which could guide the reconstruction of the country.

During the Eltsin Era, the government tried to follow the path of the Western states, replacing the soviet state control over society with democracy and market economy. Not only did these reforms brought along the creation of an extremely powerful economic élite, the “oligarchs”, but it also caused the increase of the country's public debt, the rise of the spread between rich and poor and the worsening of the Russian position in international relations. In a few world, in 1999 Russia was on the verge of collapse.

It was under Putin's Presidency, since 2000, that in Russia begun the economic recovery and the slow upturn at the international level. Putin's objectives were strengthening the country at a political level, increasing the GDP and reaffirming Russia's international position. The economic growth was achieved through the nationalisation of some strategic assets of the country, while the political stability was installed through what Vladislav Surkov called “Sovereign Democracy”<sup>2</sup>, a way of ruling the country based on the role of the leader, the centralization of society and paternalism.

What is relevant for the purpose of this thesis is that it is in this moment that begins the government's conservative narrative. In such an historical moment, when any kind of ideology seemed out of discussion and western values had proven unsuccessful, conservatism seemed the only set of values conceivable to talk to the nation. Putin's purpose was to make Russian citizens proud of their country, their history and their values and to unify Russians under a common set of beliefs. Moreover, he wanted to draw Russia as a country of “special civilization”<sup>3</sup>, which differs from the European liberal model. In the programmatic document “*Russia at the turn of the Millennium*”<sup>4</sup> Putin took a strong position

---

<sup>2</sup> Nicu Popescu (2006): Russia's soft power ambitions.  
file:///C:/Documents%20and%20Settings/Administrator/Documenti/Downloads/pb115.pdf

<sup>3</sup> Brzezinski (2008): Putin's Choice

<sup>4</sup> Putin (1999): Russia at the turn of Millennium. The full text is available online:  
<https://www.google.it/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=0CDUQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F>

as regard as European values: “Russia is not, and it will never become a second copy of the United States or England, where liberal values have consolidated historical roots”. Therefore, Putin encouraged traditional and conservative values among society, using a narrative that appealed to the “Russophile soul” of the country.

But what does Putin mean by “traditional values”? In the abovementioned document Putin considers conservatism as based on three pillars: patriotism, statalism and faith in the greatness of the nation, which were supposed to replace the role that ideology had during the communist era and to be the basis for the reconstruction of Russian society. In this way, society and the government could be unified under the same values and struggle for a common scope: the Resurrection of Russia. This was the idea of the Putin’s party, United Russia, a center-minded party, open to any kind of alliance in the name of the nation. In addition, these values are in some ways linked to the values supported by the Orthodox Church, I mean spiritual and moral values.

This sort of “ideology at low cost<sup>5</sup>”, as it was defined, was also enhanced during Putin’s second presidential term, when he was re-elected by the 73% of voters. This because the majority of the population considers Putin the hero who saved the nation, who reinstalled Russian national pride and who gave Russia a restored international weight.

Things were different, however, during Putin’s third presidential term (from 2012), after four years of the Medvedev presidency, a period characterised by a timid *rapprochement* with western values. The third coming of Putin at the Kremlin was marked by a wave of political protests that marked the end of the depoliticization of Russian civil society and influenced the government’s position with respect to the opposition. In fact, as a consequence of the protests, and in order to respond to the fall of consensus and to strengthen the approval by the conservative majority, Putin started an even more conservative battle. In doing so the Kremlin transformed the simple conservative narrative in the real basis for its every-day politics. All the laws and reforms which are examined in the following chapters show that conservatism became a guideline for concrete policies.

What to say, then, about the restoration of conservatism in Russian policy-making? The interpretations differ. If we consider the firsts eight years of Putin’s Presidency, conservatism can be seen as the cyclic (re)emergence of Russian specific slavophile soul

---

[%2Fwww.uio.no%2Fstudier%2Femner%2Fhf%2Filos%2FRUS2504%2Fv14%2Frussia-at-the-turn-of-the-millennium.doc&ei=9q2VU8a6J8mR1AWdpYE4&usg=AFQjCNH15gKQpwteloHDUMNnty-tJh4jQA&sig2=qaDW\\_K9qVjJzDeGyi6IMkQ](#)

<sup>5</sup> Brzezinski (2008)

(Naumkin 2010) and as the attempt to replace communist ideals. As Putin himself put it: “The question of who we are and what we want is a priority in our society, and it is evident that we can not develop ourselves without a national, cultural and spiritual auto-determination”. According to Brzezinski it is true that Russia has its particular culture and traditions, which differ from the European ones. Nevertheless, he assumes that Putin’s conservative rhetoric is undefined and incomplete, primarily because it lacks of an accurate plan of what Russia should become. Other scholars, like Lilia Shevtsova, claim that Putin’s rhetoric is just a way of governing, and they see the pretext of traditional values to increase personal consensus and to justify authoritarian and repressive measures.

Things differ if we consider Putin’s third presidential term. According to the majority of the interpretations, conservatism is now used to pursue the pragmatic interests of the ruling class, first of all the need to maintain power after the political protests. In fact, thanks to conservatism the political class is enforced (Laruelle 2013). As Trenin (2013) affirms, after the political protests of 2011-2012, the Kremlin made its conservative politics explicit, in order to actively involve citizens in the restoration of the nation. On the contrary, in the previous years conservatism was a way to compact the population but at the same time to keep it outside the political sphere. Marginalizing political dissent and responding to the strategic needs of the country (such as the fight to the population decline and the growth of religious sentiments) are now the main scopes of conservative politics, while a decade ago they were promoting Russian identity and giving a cohesion to Russian people.

Having talked about the origins, the developments and the possible interpretations of Russian conservatism, it is now necessary to see conservatism put into practice. A second chapter of the work is then dedicated to an in-depth analysis of Putin’s political discourses, laws and amendments to laws designated to strengthen traditional values. First of all, in order to give an idea of the conservative narrative, I considered two Putin’s “Addresses to the Nation”: the one in occasion of the Valdai Conference, (19/09/2013) and the other in occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Russian Constitution (12/12/2013). During the latter speech Putin said: “it is in civil responsibility and patriotism that I see the consolidating force behind our policy. Being a patriot means [...] first and foremost to serve one’s country and society” and he repetitively mentioned the notion of traditional values. Following these speeches, an analysis of the recent laws is presented. I argue that there are four main reforms that respond to the need to enhance traditional values:

- **The “Anti-Propaganda Law”** (23/06/2013): it prohibits any act of propaganda of “non traditional sexual relations” in front of minors and punishes these acts with administrative sanctions.
- **The “Anti-Blasphemy Law”** (11/06/2013): the famous law emanated after the incarceration of the punk group Pussy Riot. It punishes with jail any act of blasphemy, offense or disrespect for religious feelings.
- **The “Foreign Agent Law”**: a progressive reform that imposed to the Ong that operate in Russia to be registered as “foreign agents” if they receive funds from foreign countries. In this way they are subjected to continuous governmental controls.
- **The abortion reform.** In the last years the access to abortion has been continuously reduced and hindered in order to limit the cases of what is considered the “killing of a human being”.

As it is evident, these reforms perfectly match whit the Orthodox Church’s values. Under Patriarch Kirill the Church has gradually became a lobbying agent in the Russian political sphere and it is now able to influence Russian political élites. For instance, the Orthodox Church has been fighting to completely abolish the right of abortion for years, and with the recent legislation it has obtained some remarkable results. In addition, the Church had a role in the promotion of the anti-blasphemy law, since it accused the Pussy Riot of an act of blasphemy when they sang an anti-government song in the Cathedral of Moscow. Last, the anti-propaganda law is in accordance with the Church’s condemnation of the homosexual behaviour, that is perceived as an example of sodomy and spiritual decadence. In fact Patriarch Kirill, as well as Putin, often condemn Western country for their loss of moral values and for the recent pro-homosexual laws.

In addition, this conservative politic is reflected in Russia’s behaviour at the international level. Russia proposes a multi-polar model of the world, based on the dialogue of civilizations and on the combat of the homologation to western values. In order to implement traditional values at the international level, the Russians delegates promoted three main resolutions at the Council of Human Rights. The first resolution was proposed on the 28<sup>th</sup> September 2009 by the delegations of Russia, China, Singapore, Bolivia and Belarus, in occasion of the debate for the “Follow-up and implementation of the Vienna Declaration and the Vienna Program of Action”. This resolution, like the two following-ones in the next years, stated that a better understanding of traditional values could help the promotion of human

rights, and therefore requested the creation of a council to study the situation. This resolution obtained the support of the majority of the council members but the opposition of European countries.

As it was predictable, this resolutions, as well as Russia's internal reforms, clashed with the opposition and criticism of Russian liberal activists, supported by Western states. They consider traditional values dangerous for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Going on, a third chapter analyses the deep relation that Russia has established with the so called "Baptist-Burqa Network"<sup>6</sup>. The above-mentioned is an international conservative network which originated during the Cairo Conference of 1994 and that has become relevant in the last twenty years. Consisting in a "coalition of convenience" among religious representatives (such as Christian, Islamic and Jewish religious believers) and conservative states, this network has by now gained a solid position at the international level. Its main purposes are the defence of the traditional family and the fight to Western progressive values. Since the beginning of the new century, the deputies of the Russian Federation increasingly supported and were supported by the actions of this network. This link is evident during the international debates, in international forums such as the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Here, the deputies of the Russian Federation often make alliances with Islamic conservative countries, such as Pakistan and, where possible, with the Holy See. Russia supports the campaigns in favour of traditional values and, above all, it agrees on the need to stop the dangerous spread of Western values. Some examples of this alliance are the support Russia gave to the right-wing Italian activists during the dispute about the crucifix. For all these reasons, Russia is by now considered one of the leading countries of the *World Council of Families*, an international association based in the United States with the aim of supporting the traditional family.

In conclusion, it is undeniable that we are witnessing a slow but targeted shift of the Russian policy to traditional and conservative values. These values, consisting in a renewed patriotism, spiritualism, morality and faith have been supported by the ruling élites after Putin's rise to the Kremlin. Beginning during Putin's first Presidential term, passing through the "sovereign democracy" of the second term, this conservative narrative became a real basis

---

<sup>6</sup> Bob (2012)

for internal and external policies in Putin's third Presidential term, especially after the political protests of 2011-2012.

The interpretations to this shift are numerous and controversial, ranging from a normal Russian way of ruling to a governmental way to install an authoritarian government. What is not controversial is the fact that, thanks to these values, Putin succeeded in restoring order inside the country, in jump-starting the economic development (under a conjunction of market model and state control) and in giving Russia the international position it had lost. He did so by promoting traditional values, a sort of state ideology that replaced the role communism had in the previous century. Like communism, traditional values unify the population around a common myth and a common belief. In this sense, Putin was able to restore the Russian national pride, which had been smashed after the fall of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, human rights activists saw Putin's conservative reforms as authoritarian and repressive of fundamental rights and freedoms.

In conclusion, my intention was to show lights and shadows of a political trend of Russian politics, but I think that, in order to have a better comprehension of this phenomenon, we have to wait for future developments.