

Postmodernity and Modernity as Political Terms in Russia's New Conservatism

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In his 1995 book on “the invention of Russia,” the philosopher and art theorist Boris Groys ascribes to Russian culture “an extreme sensitivity to the West’s discontent with itself, to the desires and aspirations that the Western political and cultural system cannot satisfy.” At the same time, he posits that Russia has again and again “offered itself as the realization of these Western dreams” and thus sought “simultaneous connection with and opposition to the West.”¹ This diagnosis—the interplay of extreme sensitivity, connectivity, and opposition—with which Groys seeks to define the constants of Russian culture, is a good frame of reference for the rise of a new Russian conservatism as a variation of a broader movement that claims to renew conservatism in order to challenge the established European and global order. While Russia’s new conservatives invest much in the reconstruction of their own intellectual history, its core concepts must be understood in the context of recent Western analyses and debates, and in its interactions with the European New Right.

Referencing Karl Mannheim, Michael Freeden defines modern conservatism as a counter-ideology and counter-movement to the “progressive ideologies” of the 19th and 20th centuries, liberalism and socialism.² According to Freeden, modern conservatism constructs and varies its ideological core concepts through argumentation with these two ideologies, which are themselves constantly evolving. (Unlike Marx’s, Freeden’s definition of “ideology” is neutral.) I consider Freeden’s interpretation an appropriate framework for understanding new conservatism, because conservative proponents in Russia and Europe intend to do exactly this: to create and mobilize an international political counter-movement. They embrace the idea of being “conservative” as a *self-description* while rejecting the labels of “populist” or “right-wing populist.”

¹ Boris Groys, *Die Erfindung Rußlands* (Munich: 1995), 10.

² Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: 1996); Freeden, “Morphological Analysis of Ideology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, ed. Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargent, and Marc Stars (Oxford: 2013), 115–37; Karl Mannheim, *Konservatismus: Ein Beitrag zur Soziologie des Wissens*, ed. David Kettler, Volker Meja, and Nico Stehr (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), 94–95.

Indeed, the populist label is inappropriate, because it underestimates the intellectual endeavor to create a new political ideology that cannot be reduced to a communication strategy with a narrow conceptual core applicable to both the left and the right.³

Representatives of the New Right in Europe have contributed to the core concepts of the new conservatism alongside Russian ideologists. Metaphorically speaking, they have used two mirrors in this process: whereas Russian conservatives (once more) have used their image of Europe and “the West” to sketch a Russian alternative, the European Right’s image of Russia is a significant aspect of its counter-sketch of a “sovereign” Europe. The precise configuration of the core concepts and topics vary in different national contexts, especially when we look at the neonationalist economic agenda of the new conservatives and the radicalism of their rejection of liberalism. Significantly, they embed their critique of the recent appearance of liberalism—understood as global market liberalism and representative democracy—in a wider socio-cultural critique of Western “postmodernity” and “postmodernism” in the name of traditional values. In the Russian case, the critique of Western postmodern capitalism that has arisen in Russia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union has fueled the rebirth of the idea that Russia is a civilization with its own unique culture and institutions. However, the conservative reclamation of tradition in the face of the postmodern is not per se anti-modern. A closer look reveals that the new Russian conservatives, like their European counterparts, do not simply name a set of (joint or specific) cultural values, norms, and customs in their conceptualization of tradition. They implicitly or explicitly include images of what Ulrich Beck called “first modernity” and what I call an *imagined classical* modernity as a kind of normative standard for their critique.⁴ Since economic development and technological progress is an urgent matter for Russian new conservatives in order to sustain the country’s world-power status in an era of new global competition, criticism of postmodernity retains the idea of Western decay while at least partly accepting modernity and modernization. However, how classical modernity is conceptualized and accentuated is closely related to the idea of Russia’s identity.

In what follows, I will explore this argument by reading select texts by conceptual ideologists of the new Russian conservatism who hold important institutional positions and therefore have privileged possibilities of influencing

3 See Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (London: 2017). More about the difference between new conservatism and populism in Katharina Bluhm and Mihai Varga, *New Conservatives in Russia and East Central Europe* (London: 2019).

4 Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (London: 1992).