



Picture credit: Garry Knight 'Humanity before profit'/Flickr, licensed under CCO 1.0, original cropped)

Expert Comment

Western liberalism and Russian left conservatism in search of international hegemony

Elena Chebankova (2018)

Copyright © 2018 by Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute

The right of Elena Chebankova to be identified as the author of this publication is hereby asserted.

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the original author(s) and do not necessarily represent or reflect the views and opinions of the Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute, its co-founders, or its staff members.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, please write to the publisher:

Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute gGmbH
Französische Straße 23
10117 Berlin
Germany
+49 30 209677900
info@doc-research.org

Western liberalism and Russian left conservatism in search of international hegemony

Elena Chebankova

Executive Summary

The world is entering a new historical phase in which the economic, political, and cultural hegemony of the Western world is being reconsidered. The language of 'polarity' is increasingly capturing international political discourse. Accordingly, pressures arise to complement the existing international relations literature with a meaningful theory that considers the emerging centres of political influence as a significant structural factor in international political conduct. The question of which factors become decisive in securing the role of a global or regional pole of influence is part and parcel of this theorising.

This paper examines the significance of ideational factors in achieving global or regional hegemony. The article argues that classical Western liberalism has been able to formulate answers to existential human questions for several centuries. However, it has now begun to generate a wide range of ethical dilemmas and contradictions. As a result, a number of alternative public doctrines informing domestic and international policy and conduct have emerged. The paper discusses Russia's ideology of left conservatism as one potential ideational strand that has the ambition to challenge Western neo-liberal hegemony and provide answers to the contradictions and dilemmas generated by contemporary Western leadership.

Ideational factors in sustaining hegemony

Hegel claimed that the Absolute (the eternal spirit) elevates some states to the position of a 'world historical hero', grants those states a moment of geopolitical glory, and then that same spirit forces them to fade away from the historical scene (Pinkard, 2002). A large number of European countries experienced periods of geopolitical glory by building impressive empires and ruling vast masses of land and people. However, almost all of those former empires lost their hegemonic positions, eventually giving way to new claimants.

Which factors have been decisive in the rise and fall of those civilisations and empires? From the point of view of a rationalist, it could be argued that, while economic and military factors play an important role in constructing world hegemonies, ideational components exert a significant, if not decisive, influence. In most cases, erstwhile world leaders had economic and military resources to maintain their positions, but despite that, lost their hegemonic grip due to ideational limitations. These included the corrosion of spiritual consolidation within society, the dissolution of a base consensus on core values, internal corruption, the breakdown of domestic elite consensus, and changes in the political and ideational environment in the wider world.

Indeed, a closer look at military and economic factors points at their dependence on ideational aspects. The military dimension of hegemony, for example, necessitates the state of exception in which war becomes a possibility and the sacrifice of life could sensibly be demanded. Such a *political* (in Schmittian terms) state of affairs calls for the elite's ideological commitment to advance their hegemonic plans and to request citizens' readiness to die in defence of the commonwealth. Equally it demands an adequate level of public commitment and trust to volunteer one's life for the benefit of the community.

Economic hegemony could hardly be seen as fully-fledged hegemony, for it has an anti-political vector. The unimpeded pursuit of economic freedoms creates a world of mere entertainment, illusory comfort, and hedonism; devalues the meaning of human life; and

threatens to reduce humanity to the Hobbesian ‘ideal of civilisation’ – in which humanity becomes one partnership in “production and consumption” (Meier, 2006, p. 34). In its logical conclusion, personal freedoms move to the plane of being increasingly borderless, self-indulgent, transitory, and commitment free. The onset of such an atmosphere would signify a gradual ideational decline, for the neutralisation of values debases the entire idea of discourse. Such a society becomes gullible to manipulation. It is unable to resist the tyranny of external and domestic claimants, and it is powerless to assert world hegemony as a result.

From this point of view, hegemony is achieved mainly via the ability of a particular civilisation to invoke a positive response to its core values in the rest of the world, to become a metaphysical inspiration, an example to follow, and a rival to envy. In Fichtean terms, it is the ability to produce and advance a specific *Kultur* (culture, ideology, and metaphysical environment) that could have a claim on discursive hegemony, establish a specific ‘regime of truth’, and produce specific knowledge that satisfies public curiosity, ignorance, and doubt. Such knowledge must tend to the compelling desire of humans to resolve existential issues such as the nature of “truth, happiness, reality ... for this is what they [humans] mean by ‘good’” (Berlin, 2002, p. 32-3). Indeed, reliance on ideational factors as sites of domination, resistance, and change represents, according to Levi-Strauss, a universal condition of humankind that sustains all human societies, be it the modern Western community or beyond (Giddens, 1979, p. 21; Harkin, 2009, pp. 45–46). Claims over the authorship of hegemonic ideas grants countries, civilisations, and cultures the ability to take hold of intellectual, cultural, and economic leadership.

Discursive ideas were the agents of the rise and fall of civilisational hegemony well before the Age of Communication and the Industrial Revolution. Christianity, as an example, has spread from a “small sect to a world dominant system of ethics” and had a decisive impact on the evolution of Western civilisation. Islam captured most of the Middle East, consolidating the political and economic power of the region, and spread as far as Southeast

Asia. Chinese Confucianism migrated to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, influencing the political organisation of these regions (Fukuyama 2015, pp. 534-5). European crusades to Jerusalem and the Eastern Roman Empire resulted in the reassessment of socio-political arrangements in Europe and led to the emergence of Thomism, scholasticism, the adoption of the Justinian legal code, which ultimately fuelled the developments of the Renaissance, and with it, Reform of the Church and Industrial Revolution (Frankopan, 2015; Herrin, 2007; Meyendorff, 1989).

Historians often argue that Western Europe started to secure its discursive and civilisational hegemony from the 15th century onward, wresting these positions from the Eastern Roman Empire, as well as Middle Eastern Empires, which had been considered at the time to be the centres of trade, religion, learning, and sophistication. Furthermore, the advances in technologies of communication of the 21st century significantly facilitated the interchange of knowledge and made the entire political process ever more dependent on the discursive mapping of historical and spatial redistributions.

The contemporary West and the crisis of hegemony

Having discussed the importance of the discursive realm for securing global hegemony, it is important to observe that the Western world is experiencing a crisis of its extant hegemony due to a range of ideological and political dilemmas. The West still enjoys considerable influence over the world via its dominance over international economic instruments, such as the emission of the main reserve currency and dominant decision-making powers in chief trading and lending organisations. There have been no significant successes militarily in recent times. Even though a large number of campaigns have been pursued, their results led mainly to regional political chaos rather than meaningful military victories. Of particular importance, however, is the gradual ceding of ground in the discursive realm, in which the ideological underpinnings of the Western way of life is losing its former authority. Demands

for traditionalist, conservative, and left leaning ideas have surfaced instead. Let me examine the broad trajectory of these ideological processes.

While the Western intellectual tradition encompasses different lines of thought, the liberal trend lent its tenets to the foundations of the contemporary moral, political, and institutional framework of the West. It could be argued that liberalism constitutes the political, cultural, and institutional timber of the West and is an integrated part of its moral and discursive attractiveness.

At the same time, the 20th century unfolded under the banner of anti-liberalism, or liberal revisionism. Liberalism was seriously challenged by fascism and communism, as well as varied non-totalitarian centre-right and centre-left collectivist doctrines intellectually upheld by Joseph Schumpeter and Karl Polanyi. These competitors, however, left the political scene one by one in the course of the century. Fascism collapsed at the end of World War Two. The political and institutional waning of socialism, communism, and other forms of collectivism occurred between the 1970s and 1990s. Socialist regimes disintegrated across Europe. Ideological disaffection with Soviet socialism within the USSR and the rest of the Warsaw Pact countries made a significant contribution to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the collapse of communist states in Eastern Europe, and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

In the event, neo-liberalism emerged as the triumphant public doctrine to inform policy in Western European society and soon conquered as the global hegemonic discourse. Liberalism and individualism were viewed not as just another ideology but as an endogenous part of behaviour informing human conduct. The ideas of liberalism have been proclaimed as leading to the most effective economic growth and social development. The application of any other ideological doctrine was regarded as “fanciful, utopian and fraught with highly damaging unintended consequences” (Gamble, 1996, pp. 5-10). The Western realm, as the politico-institutional heartland of the liberal doctrine, has become a natural leader and

political mentor to other states wishing to join the 'correct' way of social development. At the same time, those developments have been fraught with various forms of ideological tyranny that have begun to dampen the liberal victory and, with it, the Western grip on global ideational hegemony.

What is responsible for this possible tyranny? David Runciman (2006, pp. 25-6) foresaw the emergence of oppression from the realm of the modern nation-state, which will attempt to harness increasingly aloof and non-committed liberal citizens to its political and ideational logic. However, one could argue that the idea of the modern nation-state has been significantly transformed since the end of World War Two and that the nation-state itself, as well as its citizens, was in danger of rising ideological oppression and control in line with the demise of alternative ideational doctrines.

The watershed event was the adoption of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948. At this point it was admitted that there are universal matters that are more important than the sovereignty of a particular state. This signifies a shift from the Hobbesian idea of the state as an imaginary being that represents historical territory, its people, its leaders, and its particular institutions to a supranational mechanism dependent on international bureaucracy, global business corporations, global political elites, and the overarching ideology of human rights. Unconstrained by an alternative doctrine, those actors began to manipulate the remains of the modern nation-state to act in its interests and to advance its political and economic agenda among the reluctant population. New forms of tyranny exercised in thought control, political manipulation, production of ideational simulacra, and political hypocrisy have surfaced. At the same time, this model brought dangers to Western hegemony and inflicted damage on its global moral authority. By the end of the 1990s, the practical application of new liberalism had begun to stagger, and the consequences of that process had become evident. The West has experienced this process across four different planes involving economic, ideological, and social spheres.

First, economic crises and the radical redistribution of wealth towards the rich revived debates on the nature of contemporary capitalist society. Liberalism can only exist within the bounds of the market economy, generating significant economic inequality. Liberals welcome this inequality as an instrument of innovation and growth although they argue that this political structure must guarantee equal access to the economic system. The equality of such access became highly problematic because, in an apt observation by Francis Fukuyama (2015, pp. 464-6), political and economic elites sought to convert their wealth into unequal political influence. From this point of view, excessive monopolisation of power coupled with extreme socio-economic inequality came across as the main challengers to the political system's stability in the contemporary West. It drained the attractiveness of the Western way of life and undermined the socio-political myth of the overall richness, prosperity, and wealth of the so-called 'golden billion'. The increasing gap between poverty and wealth became morally and politically explosive and seriously tarnished the discursive story of the contemporary West.

From this point of view, classical liberalism is still viewed in Voltaire's original sense as an appreciation of personal autonomy and freedom (understood as the absence of external arbitrary interference implemented with impunity). At the same time, it is also regarded as an ideology that originated in the past, obtained some universal purchase power in the course of its life, and ceased to be a unique property of the West. *Contemporary* liberalism (or neo-liberalism), on the other hand, has increasingly been seen as a distinct Washington Consensus product. Hence, it is often narrated in crude terms as an institutional and value system that serves the interests of global capital and promotes the freedom of financial speculation on a global scale. It is also seen as a system that submerges multiple aspects of human life to the economic needs of the market. Among those are the foundational principles of modern social life such as education and self-development, social solidarity, commitments to local and national community, social justice, and survival of the

commonwealth. Viewed from this angle, liberalism is experiencing difficulties with its discursive hegemony in both Western and non-Western realms. The Trump presidential victory, as well as the successful performance of the maverick democratic candidate Bernie Sanders, have not been accidental. The same could be said of radical European parties at both the right and left ends of the political spectrum. These developments demonstrate a serious mistrust by ordinary people of their political leaders as well as in their extant political system.

Second, contemporary Western discourse shifted from its original liberal task of promoting a value neutral state that ensured the survival of differing ideas of the good life. This was seen via the political and media marginalisation of non-liberal and traditionalist lifestyles pursued by the so-called political liberals. Parekh (2006, p. 110) notes that liberals have a "... persistent tendency to make it [liberalism] their central frame of reference, divide all ways of life into liberal and non-liberal, equate the latter with illiberal, and talk of *tolerating* and rarely of respecting or cherishing them. The crudity of this distinction would become clear if someone were to divide all religions into Christianity and non-Christianity and equate the latter with anti-Christianity".

From this point of view, the neo-liberal state began to exercise thought control via the politics of political correctness, identity, and toleration. The *a priori* higher moral ground professed by the proponents of these ideals invoked arbitrary interference into non-liberal opinion, which leads ultimately to self-censorship among those who share traditionalist principles. Universities have been a good indicator of this trend. Having previously been the bastions of critical thinking and free speech, they have turned into proponents of a distinctly left-liberal doctrine, often banning conservative lecturers and presentations. This raised doubts about the extent to which an individual could exercise a choice between meaningfully alternative lifestyles. Carl Schmitt's observation that in liberal society an individual is left alone to be "his own priest ... his own poet, his own philosopher, his own king, and his own

master-builder in the cathedral of his personality” (cited in McCorkmick, 1997, p. 20) seems doubtful in this new environment. Demands placed on a person to be an ‘individual’ and search for ‘individual self-expression and identity’ developed into a mass-based phenomenon converting a liberal society into a mass-based society.

Third, and following from the above, the traditional morality of modernity, which had been the point of moral attraction of the West since the period of Enlightenment, began to give way to new forms of post-modern morality. This new morality redefined the “assumptions about the nature of man, the preconditions for social life, the limits of its possible transformation, and the grounds for practical judgement” (Lukes, 1985, p. 2). In the wake of this process, the nature of liberal morality has made a transition from the *Morality of Right* (Recht or Droit) into the *Morality of Emancipation*.¹ While the classical liberal state claims to pursue the morality of right, its post-modern neo-liberal version has concerned itself with the morality of emancipation. This was seen in furthering the possibilities of a satisfying life for all and adopting the morality of *lifestyle* or *self-actualisation* that forms part of the morality of emancipation (Giddens, 1998, p. 156). This process brought various political, economic, and social minorities to the centre of public discourse, inadvertently shifting the focus from the morality of right to that of the morality of emancipation.

It is also important that the classical morality of emancipation is fundamentally Marxist. Hence, it does not come as a surprise that its contemporary post-modern left-liberal posterity exhibits some crucial differences. The new process of emancipation concerns mainly ‘subaltern minorities’, instead of the Marxian masses of exploited classes. In this

¹ To clarify, the former is concerned with ensuring the rights of men as members of civil society and with granting everyone equal economic and civil liberties (Marx, 1843, p. 162). Morality of Right originates from the ideals of the 1789 French Revolution and the Civil Code developed by Napoleon. The Civil Code, or the Code of Napoleon, guaranteed property rights, called for legal equality, and invoked the principles of social mobility (Fukuyama, 2015, pp. 15-8). This morality laid foundations for the modern bureaucratic machine in Europe and represented a feature of a broad European socio-political consensus. Significantly, this type of morality has a distinct liberal foundation. The morality of emancipation, on the other hand, takes its source from Marx and refers to the liberation of large masses of the population from the chains of injustice, inequality, and servitude. It is aimed at the creation of free people liberated from the bondage of history culminated in the idea of exploitation, and it refers to the ideals of social unity and individual self-realisation.

light, the contemporary liberal discourse has mainly focused on liberating/emancipating an individual *from* various forms of oppressive collective identities. Dispensing with those redundant identities served the needs of the globalising market and rapidly growing international capitalism, as per our discussion above. Among those 'oppressive' identities have been nationality, culture, ethnic group, gender, family, food preference, age group, and some others. Hence, while the new liberal morality of emancipation cast aside the notion of class struggle, it adopted the Marxist idea of shaking the bondage of history and changing the traditional understanding of human nature to fit new economic and socio-political realities. Modern assumptions about human physical capabilities, attitudes to work, home, locality, and family life have been significantly recast.

These dynamics replaced idealistic considerations of the morality of emancipation with identity politics, which serves as an instrument that diverts public attention and divides people into competing minority groups incapable of resisting global political elites with a unified front. Consequently, ideological rigidity and a single-minded obsession with the defence of 'cultural diversity', minority rights, and the repudiation of bigotry tends to reduce Western liberalism to its most radical agenda. This moral environment opens the floodgates to irrationalism and fanaticism and induces flight to a stronger state which could enforce newly obtained freedoms, as per Erich Fromm's suggestions. It also silences far more important issues confronting the Western world: "the crisis of competence, the lack of genuine beliefs in institutions, the spread of apathy; the fear of speaking one's mind due to the universal enforcement of politically correct language and thought" (Lasch, 1995, p. 91; Glazer, 1987).

Fourth, the crisis of leadership forms part of this larger picture and seriously impacts the hegemony of the West. The contemporary atmosphere pushes out inspiring intellectuals, passionate individuals, and outstanding leaders on the fringes of the political process. Figures like Henry Kissinger and the late Zbigniew Brzezinski began to represent rapidly

vanishing exceptions among the contemporary cohort of Western politicians. Instead, careerists and mediocre conformists climbed up the political ladder. This contrasts with the period of high modernity during which intellectuals of high integrity secured a tight grip over the political process and consolidated Western intellectual hegemony.

François Guizot, 17th Prime Minister of France (1847-48), Minister of Foreign Affairs (1840-48), and Minister of Public Education (1836-37), was a historian, academic, translator, orator, and published author. John Stuart Mill, one of the apostles of British intellectual heritage, was a civil servant and a member of Parliament. William Gladstone, a long serving British Prime Minister (1868-74, 1880-85, 1886, 1892-94), was a political scientist with a range of published works on theology, international relations, and public policy. His long-standing political rival Benjamin Disraeli (Prime Minister between 1874-80 and 1868) produced works of high intellectual and literary quality on political theory, political biography, and creative writing. Woodrow Wilson, 28th President of the United States, was an academic, professor of Law, and a political science author (Mezhuev, 2018).

In the contemporary world, however, intellectuals of that calibre are removed from the public echelons of political power. A brief look at European political cabinets reveals that key ministerial positions, such as education, can be occupied by business managers from accounting and catering industries. Systematic research into the problem shows that the government becomes the last place which intellectuals wishing to effect socio-political, economic, and ideational change chose as the field of their professional activity (Light, 2008, p. 126; Volker, 1989 and 2003; Fukuyama, 2015, p. 460).

Fukuyama argues that the American bureaucracy has moved away from the Weberian ideal of an energetic, motivated, talented, well-educated, and mission-driven cohort. The system no longer employs people who are motivated by the ideals of service or any other idealistic considerations. He quotes Paul Light (2008, p. 108) as saying, "federal employees appear to be more motivated by compensation than mission, ensnared in

careers that cannot compete with business and non-profits, troubled by the lack of resources to do their jobs, dissatisfied with the rewards for a job well done and the lack of consequences for a job poorly done, and unwilling to trust their organisations” (cited in Fukuyama, 2015, p. 461).

These developments have serious repercussions on the validity of the ideational doctrine that informed much of Western foreign and domestic policy as well as its discursive hegemony in the global arena. Clearly, the Western world is undergoing what Gramsci branded a ‘conjuncture’ moment, in which elites are trying to cling to their carefully constructed political order, though the public worldwide is deeply sceptical about its nature.

Such a situation has shaken Western leadership in the global discursive arena. Simultaneously, countries with non-liberal collectivist and traditionalist public doctrines began to present a challenge to Western-style technocratic government and demonstrated impressive economic growth. A number of alternative developmental patterns have emerged and the erstwhile argument on the variety of world civilisations has resurfaced. As civilisational paradigms become more subjective, the Western liberal ‘regime of truth’ exhausted its professed universality, and with it, its claim over the title of the world’s dominant discourse. A large number of non-Western countries and regions, such as Japan, Turkey, and Latin America, have begun to drift away from the Western geopolitical orbit, while Iran, Russia, and China have begun to pose as serious claimants in the discursive scene of alternatives once again.

Russia’s claims to alternative hegemony

At this point I would like to focus on the nature of those alternative claims to Western hegemony. In many respects, those who wish to put forward claims to global hegemony must have a strategy. Yet, as our discussion above has shown, there could be no meaningful strategy in the absence of appropriate ideology. Therefore, any new claimants to hegemony

should propose an attractive ideology. I will select Russia and its domestic ideological arena as a potential contestant in global (or regional) hegemonic discourse. The direction in which the contemporary Western system is taking humanity is unacceptable to the vast majority of Russia's political ideologists, public opinion makers, and intellectuals. Many Russian thinkers roam broadly over various metaphysical theories of the West and seek to develop an international political order that could mitigate the effects of the global redistribution of wealth towards the rich as well as preserve some elements of traditionalist ethics that laid the foundations of modern European culture and politics. In short, they seek to combine a number of the Christian moral imperatives that created European civilisation with the left-leaning ideas of social justice, human development, and self-mastery.

More importantly, the Russian public has developed a desire for a viable developmental alternative combined with the desire for global discursive leadership that could implement such an alternative. The median ideological inclination could be summarised as the desire for a multipolar world order in the international arena and left conservative leanings at home. The All-Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion (VTsIOM) data show that as many as one quarter of Russian people demand political change. Refined questioning also indicates that these are changes of a socialist nature domestically and of a civilisational polarity lenience internationally. According to Valery Fedorov (2018), the head of VTsIOM, those wanting the change wish to see "less capitalism [at home] and less communication with the West [abroad]". Desires for domestic change are associated with nostalgia for the Soviet Union rather than with an abstract striving for Western life. More importantly, the Soviet era, as opposed to the Russian Empire or the immediate post-Soviet period, represents the idea of a golden age for most Russians.

Let me discuss domestic matters first. As mentioned above, left leaning ideas dominate the minds of those who wish to see political change. At the same time, this leftism is of a particular conservative nature. We could brand this new Russian ideational doctrine

as left conservatism. This resembles neo-Kantian theorisations developed between the end of the 19th and middle of the 20th century. Just like neo-Kantianism, left conservatism seeks to combine socialism with ideas of eternal ethics, moral justification of universal brotherhood and solidarity, and the idea of the irreducible value of every human individual. German neo-Kantians – Hermann Cohen, Natorp, Stamler, Staudinger, and Vorlander – sought to supplement Marx with Kant, whose “practical philosophy could provide the ethical justification for the pursuit of the socialist goal” (Lukes, 1985, p. 15; Kolakowski, 2005).

Russian left conservatism resembles neo-Kantianism in three important ways. First, it seeks to place the individual at the centre of socio-political debate and to recognise their eternal value. Every human has an inviolable inner soul that must be cherished and respected. This idealistic treatment of humans with the reification of human nature feeds into Russia’s left conservative doctrine. Second, it claims that there are some inviolable moral principles that individuals must follow and that the rationale of those principles might never be discovered. Third, they strive for universal solidarity and peace among humans based on the principles of mutual recognition of cultures, traditions, and civilisational differences. This doctrine attempts to marry the Christian foundations of traditional European morality with the principles of socialism, much like Soviet thinkers did in drafting the Moral Code of the Builder of Communism with its general assumption about the nature of human conduct.

in the realm of human nature, Russian left conservatives argue that Western liberalism has learnt to develop technical progress although it has not learnt how to develop a human being. Instead contemporary Western ideologues seek to harness human anthropology to the needs of the market – economic and technical progress – which will inevitably result in a diminishing population and the survival of the few. Extreme inequality, economic as well as well physical, will inevitably follow. Russian left conservatism appeals to the world with the quest for developing human beings alongside technical progress. They

rightly claim that the Soviet project attempted this task and it is clear that contemporary Russian society is longing for this anthropocentric moral focus of the Soviet period. Maxim Gorky's famous phrase "mankind that sounds proud" became an existential motto for these thinkers.

Education comes across as the most crucial aspect of Russia's left conservative critique. The Soviet educational system is praised, and it is often claimed that the Russian Imperial aristocratic education was given to the general public for free as part of the USSR public education policy. That system produced world leading scientists in the fields of natural sciences and ensured that ordinary Soviet people had an impressive breadth of knowledge. It stood in stark contrast to the current Bologna system that was implemented in contemporary Russia following the dissolution of the USSR with the view to matching the educational standards of the West. A better-quality education as a way of developing human talent is therefore considered a cardinal aspect of the new world hegemony.

It is in this light that this left conservative doctrine also resembles some aspects of constructivist rationalism, which might seem to go against their overarching neo-Kantian streak. Constructive rationalism praises human reason and sets forth the belief in the power of knowledge, self-development, human will, and evolution of human talents. Constructivist rationalists believe in the possibility of reconstructing human institutions to eradicate social evils such as poverty, violence, and ignorance (Gamble, 1996, pp. 32-3). This ideational doctrine originates in the 19th century British liberalism that lay the foundation for socialism in the 20th century. John Stuart Mill's initial assumption of man as a progressive being is responded to in subsequent socialist theorisations on human intellectual growth and self-mastery and corresponding socialist policies towards free education and the development of human talents. Constructivist rationalism might seem to contradict the idea of natural moral principles set forth in the overarching neo-Kantian streak of Russian thinkers. Yet, it

is important to underscore that Russian left conservatives deploy this doctrine mostly in relation to the development of human talents or *higher pleasures*, to use the J. S. Mill lexicon.

On the ethical plane, Russian ideologues single out faith and family as two important conservative ideals that in their mind form the cornerstone of European civilisation. They argue that these ideals must not be recast to serve the changing needs of the market. Yet, the main thrust of the left conservative argument is that political elites of the West redefine those ideas to suit the needs of the rapidly globalising market. Those elites seek to reduce the world population to match the rapid mechanisation of the production process; they also require highly effective and highly mobile labour that could quickly relocate to different parts of the world to match the movement of capital. In short, Russian left conservatives criticise the nature of contemporary neoliberalism as possessing intellectual hostility to custom, precedent, and tradition, and negligence of the inviolable moral principles that informed the development of European civilisation for many centuries.

Russian ideologues insist that, while liberalism struggled against conservatism by advancing the ideas of a small state, cosmopolitanism, individualism, and civil society, liberalism could not have dispensed with core conservative principles during the 19th century and first half of the 20th century for a plethora of reasons. One such reason was that conservatism was an important public doctrine defending the state and tradition, and along with it, the interests of the ruling elite (Khazin, 2018). Hayek partly explained this position by defending so called 'evolutionary rationalism' as a distinct branch of liberalism that proclaimed existing social arrangements as the accumulated wisdom of the previous generation not likely to be set aside for the sake of newly emerging fads (Gamble, 1996, p. 34).

Family, as the most effective disseminator of conservative values, was considered a particularly important institution that could defend the state and ensure public obedience. It is indicative that in early modernity family was often likened to the state and the idea of

family was deployed in defence of the institution of monarchy, as seen in Robert Filmer's theorisations (Pateman, 1988, pp. 77-115). Faith was another conservative value that reinforced public order. As Hayek rightly notes, only those religions that promoted *family* and *property* were able to survive into the modern European era (Gamble, 1996, pp. 30). It is also important that within the conditions of inter-state competition and class-based society, conservative values of family and faith have become the instruments of voluntary public mobilisation in defence of the ruling elites.

Russian left conservatives (see Khazin, 2018) argue that the situation began to change by the middle of the 20th century. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed some serious growth of the middle class in Europe, which needed more effective instruments to defend its private property. The liberal state came across as the most suitable candidate for implementing this task. Simultaneously, an institution of "unlimited consumption" surfaced (Khazin, 2018). This reinforced the European middle class and its private property and thereby consolidated public loyalty to the liberal state. From this point of view, erstwhile conservative values, such as family and faith, lost their importance as the instruments defending public order. Hence, they could be reconstructed to accommodate new social realities. Yet, by the 2008 economic crisis it had become clear that the middle class was to join the ranks of the new poor and the system began to falter, leading to a new set of ideological dilemmas.

Finally, Russian left conservatism adopts the idea of civilisational difference. It claims, much in the Huntington fashion, that the world is composed of different civilisations whose institutions, customs, and habits have been formed over generations. Hence, existing social arrangements within those civilisations reflect the experience of multiple individuals, whose cumulative wisdom is higher than that of any particular individual proposing to radically reform one or another society to suit the experience of more economically developed

communities. Human particularities and traditions must be cherished, and people must be left in peace to pursue their distinct forms of socio-cultural development.

These ideas originate from Russia's 19th century Slavophile conservatism, namely in the writings of Nikolay Danilevsky and Nikolay Strakhov with their notion of socio-cultural *types* (or civilisations). Russia's left conservatives believe that the notion of civilisational difference, translated into the multi-polar world order doctrine, would give Russia a chance to become a new moral authority in the international arena. As opposed to the Western realm that demands countries follow its ideological doctrines in order to forge positive economic and political relations, Russia offers to keep economics, politics, and culture separate and allow countries to have freedom in choosing their cultural and ideational path.

In this light, left conservatives are critical of the United States, which often assumes that the world must be built around its political, economic, and cultural patterns. They criticise the US State Department for branding Russia and China as revisionist countries. Russian left conservatives (Kurginyan, 2018) insist that by 'revisionism' the United States assumes any action by a political force aimed at redistributing power in the international arena away from the United States. There is also an argument that a number of countries are considering leaving the Western geopolitical realm to align themselves closer to Russia, China, India, and Iran as alternative centres of geopolitical influence. Of particular importance are regional giants such as Turkey and Japan, both of which are looking to diversify their political risks and affiliations.

In application to Russia, many analysts argue that it must stop pretending to be a 'normal' European country and embrace its civilisational difference instead. Identical logic could and should be applied to many different cultural and civilisational areas of the world. In this light, some thinkers suggest that Russia should become an 'island' with distinct metaphysics that could attract limitrophous (border) regions wishing to join its civilisational realm (Tsymbursky, 1998; Mezhuev, 2017; Spassky, 2018). Eurasianists such as Alexander

Dugin (2014, pp. 496-9) argue that Russia ought to abandon the role of a so-called 'corporation Russia', which accepts global politico-economic rules uncritically and competes with other countries in order to occupy an 'honourable' place in the 'developed' club of states. Instead, it must strive to become a 'Civilisation Russia' that has to divorce from the West metaphysically and pursue its own way of socio-economic development. Left conservatives, such as Sergey Kurginyan (2018), Mikhail Khazin (2018) and others, uphold this view by arguing that only the collectivist socialist doctrine can guarantee Russia's prosperity and that the demonisation of the Soviet Union and the 'normalisation' of Russia to match the social arrangements of the West will lead to dire results.

They argue that contemporary Russia has three choices: total Westernisation; manoeuvring between partial Westernisation and partial particularity; or reaffirming its distinctness and becoming an alternative centre of development. Given the current crisis of Western hegemony, they claim, Russia is coming to the end of its strategic 'joining the West' project launched at the end of the 1980s (Kurginyan, 2018). Merging with the West would be tantamount to Russia's imminent and inevitable self-destruction, rejection of its own socio-cultural mission, and a refusal of its uniqueness. Only from the springboard of self-mastery, those thinkers continue, can Russia pursue its development unimpeded. Only through becoming a civilisational alternative can Russia become a new centre of world hegemony and unite societies that are willing to join it in the quest for new hegemonic ideals.

Conclusion

This discussion has shown that hegemonies in the international arena are created mainly via ideational factors. International actors become hegemonic by claiming authorship over a dominant discourse that appeals to a large number of people, satisfying their existential questions, curiosities, and doubts. The paper has shown that the Western geopolitical realm managed to secure its grip over the world's discursive arena at the end of the Middle Ages.

While many different ideas contributed to the consolidation of Western hegemony and the formation of its civilisation, liberalism, with its individualist doctrine, informed much of the policy and rhetoric of the West. It has also been argued that recent decades revealed the crisis of liberalism as the core ideology ensuring the West's victory over the world's hegemonic discourse. Economic factors raised a range of existential ideological dilemmas. Customising erstwhile 'inviolable', 'civilisational' values to fit the needs of the market and the political goals of globalising elites fuelled further scepticism.

In this environment, alternative centres of power have begun to emerge. These actors have proposed a number of left conservative doctrines that claim to mitigate the dilemmas of contemporary liberalism and assert new claims to discursive hegemony. At the same time, the extent to which the Russian ideational doctrines could become a new hegemonic alternative is questionable. As it was shown, Russia's theorising resembles a number of Western 20th century doctrines. From that point of view, Russia is proposing mainly to return to Western ideational positions that were relevant during the mid-20th century. The nature of the subsequent trajectory of this return remains open, as does the practical success of such hegemonic claims.

Elena Chebankova

Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at the University of Lincoln

References

- Berlin, I. (2006). *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dugin, A. (2014). *Geopolitika Rossii*. Moskva: Akademicheskii Proekt.
- Fedorov, V. (2018, January 8). Lyudi Trebuyt Peremen- *Business Online*.
- Frankopan, P. (2013). *The First Crusade. The Call from the East*. London: Vintage Books.
- Fukuyama, F. (2015). *Political Order and Political Decay*. London: Profile Books.
- Gamble, A. (1996). *Hayek. The Iron Cage of Liberty*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens, A. (1979). *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Giddens, A. (1998). *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Glazer, N. (1987). *Affirmative Discrimination. Ethnic Inequality and Public Policy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Harkin, M. (2009). Levi-Strauss and History. In B. Wiseman (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Levi-Strauss* (pp. 39–59). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Herrin, J. (2007). *Byzantium. The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire*. London: Penguin Books.
- Khazin, M. (2018, January 2). V Mire Proizoshel Radikalnyi Slom Ideinoi Bazovoi Modeli. *Radonezh*. Retrieved from <http://radonezh.ru/recommend/mikhail-khazin-v-mire-proizosh-l-radikalny-slom-ideynoy-bazovoy-modeli-177885.html>.
- Kolakowski, L. (2005). *Main Currents of Marxism*. London: W. W. Norton and Company.
- Kurginyan, S. (2018, April 16). Bolshoe Interview. *Vecher s Vladimirom Soloveyovym*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZYz0e340l8w>.
- Lasch, C. (1995). *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*. London: W. W. Norton and Company.
- Light, P. (2008). *A Government Ill Executed: The Decline of the Federal Service and How to Reverse It*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.
- Lukes, S. (1985). *Marxism and Morality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1848). *Manifesto of the Communist Party* MECW 6.
- McCormick, J. (1997). *Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism. Against Politics as Technology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Meier, H. (1995). *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss. The Hidden Dialogue*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

- Meyendorff, J. (1989). *Byzantium and the Rise of Russia*. New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.
- Mezhuev, B. (2017, June 6). Island Russia and Russia's Identity Politics. Unlearned Lessons from Vadim Tsymbursky. *Russia in Global Affairs*.
- Mezhuev, B. (2018, May 31). Idiotizatsiya Mirovoi Politiki Razbudit Zverinuyu Nenavist Intellektualov. *ForPost. Novosti Sevastopolya*.
- Parekh, B. (2006). *Rethinking Multiculturalism*. London: Palgrave.
- Pateman, C. (1988). *The Sexual Contract*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Pinkard, T. (2002). *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Runciman, D. (2006). *The Politics of Good Intentions. History, Fear and Hypocrisy in the New World Order*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Spassky, N. (2018, March 19). Can Russia Become a Superpower Again – and Does It Really Need It? *Russia in Global Affairs*.
- Volker, P. (1989). *Rebuilding the Public Service*. National Commission on the Public Service: Washington DC.
- Volker, P. (2003). *Revitalising the Federal Government for the 21st Century* (National Commission on the Public Service: Washington DC).