“I am against the restoration of an official state ideology in Russia in any form,” wrote Vladimir Putin in his well-known Millennium Manifesto in 1999. One reading of Russian politics since Putin’s accession to the presidency in 2000 would argue that he has been largely true to this aim. From this viewpoint (unsurprisingly, most often espoused by Russian officials themselves), Russian domestic and foreign policy has been largely driven by pragmatic, rational, business, security and national “interests.” Even Russia’s war against Ukraine can be (and still often is) cast as the latest installation in Russia’s opposition to NATO and West-led unipolarity. However, another view would argue that, as in many other things, Putin was being disingenuous. Rather, his regime has been marked by an increasingly overt search for a monist state doctrine, evidenced by the increasing emphasis on Russia’s unique “state-civilization” and “traditional values,” alongside increasingly brutal policies against dissenters. Such tendencies have reached their apogee in Russia’s current war, a driving narrative of which is expressions of national superiority and expansionist messianism.

Elena Chebankova’s *Political Ideologies* was written before this latest maelstrom, which unfortunately cannot help but color the reading of it, and which somewhat dates it. The book is nevertheless immensely welcome as the first and so far only English-language study of Russian political ideologies and intellectual traditions discrete from the study of political parties and movements, somewhat in the tradition of earlier *magna opera* like Andrzej Walicki’s *A History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism*. It is a work of great depth and sophistication, which intricately traces the origins of current ideologies in previous Russian and Western traditions, and explains their points of difference and intersection.

As the study notes, there are two basic meanings to ideology—one as a discourse with an evolving intellectual process, another as an explicit attempt to “legitimize political action and expose ongoing social conflicts” (p. 10). There are thus two ideal-typical ways in which to analyze ideologies. The first, chosen by many UK textbooks on political ideologies, is to concentrate on the former meaning, simplifying each ideological school to some of the core ideas and thinkers, with far less attention given to context and current political salience. The second, as best outlined by Jeremy Lester’s magisterial *Modern Tsars and Princes* (1995), combines ideology as ideas and
praxis, explicitly tracing ideological salience via analyzing different historical blocs’ contest for hegemony. However, such an effort would be enormously difficult to replicate in contemporary Russia, because, as Chebankova recognizes, the current weakness of public political parties and movements means that contemporary Russian ideologies are rarely clearly attached to public organizations or social bases, still less have clear policy outcomes, and ideological contestation is very complex and often hidden. This poses a big challenge for the author, because she attempts to combine attention to both the core ideas of the mainstream ideologies and their political salience, but the complexity of the exercise is sometimes itself reflected in an extremely complex, dense, and occasionally confusing account.

The driving arguments are that Russian society is essentially ideologically pluralist, and this “paradigmatic pluralism” (seen as the essence of Putinism on p. 262) is maintained by Putin’s role as an independent arbiter who occasionally intervenes in favor of one ideology or another but maintains an equilibrium of contestation between competing ideologies such that none is dominant. Within this competition, there are two main ideological poles—traditionalism and liberalism, equating roughly to former Slavophile/Westerner divides but having current expression between and across divergent schools of thought. Paradigmatic pluralism and ideological contestation mean that dominant portrayals of Russia and authoritarian or totalitarian miss their mark.

The volume takes each of the most influential and consolidated ideologies (liberalism, conservatism, fundamental conservatism, socialism and left-wing ideas, and nationalism) in turn, then looks at some of the more particularist ideological tendencies (multipolar world order ideas, multiculturalism, and feminism). Each chapter traces the origins and arguments of each ideology, before outlining briefly the main actors and political activity. Each is rich and nuanced, pointing out many points of congruence, contestation, and intersection with other theoretical and ideological traditions. Much light is shed on areas rarely sufficiently covered in Western literature on Russia (e.g., the whole chapter on multiculturalism, feminist approaches to representation and labor relations), although there is, perhaps surprisingly, nothing at all on environmentalism.

There are two main issues with the analysis. The first is that the complexity of the reality is reflected in an unclear structure. Granted that the reality is multiple points of overlap and ideological “fuzziness,” more could be done to delineate the boundaries of each ideology on the page. Several ideological actors, such as Maxim Shevchenko, Sergei Kurginyan, and (especially) Aleksandr Dugin appear across multiple chapters. It is ultimately not entirely clear what separates some “fundamental conservatives” from the “state-imperial nationalists,” who both draw on Orthodox-messianic, imperialist, and civilizational perspectives. After all, Patriarch Kirill is cited as an example of each. The choice to outline the key actors and activity at the end, rather than the beginning, of each chapter contributes to the societal influence of each ideology being somewhat more unclear than necessary.

The second, related but more serious, point is that there is an insufficient engagement with questions of political power. The analysis really needs a fuller and more explicit engagement with the ideological apparatus and approaches of Putin and “Putinism.” These are referred to in introduction and conclusion but appear fleetingly throughout. Putin is mentioned in the chapter on “liberal” conservatism but not its section on “main actors,” throughout the chapter on multiculturalism but strangely, hardly at all in the chapter on “multipolar world order ideas,” which is explicitly acknowledged as official state doctrine. Putin’s apparent evanescence would seem to reinforce the central idea of the president as a neutral arbiter whose preferences (where stated) reflect the sup-
posedly dominant social consensus over moderate conservative ideas.

But is this the reality? Certainly, it is arguably how the president and the “curators” of the political system in the presidential administration would like to see themselves (although interestingly, the most notorious of them, Vladislav Surkov, gets barely a mention). And arguably it is a decent approximation of Putin’s first two terms (memorably characterized by Harley Balzer as “managed pluralism”). But it seems barely adequate to encompass the way in which Putin has moved from being illiberal to anti-liberal, especially since 2012, while aversion to “decadent” Western liberal cultural norms has become as dominant a part of public discourse as multipolarism, and enforced in an ever more brutal fashion in the political realm.

Indeed, there are several ways in which the analysis seems to reinforce, and insufficiently critique, regime discourse, particularly its increasingly anti-liberal content. For instance, the term “liberal conservatism” seems an utter misnomer in the Russian context—beyond some reference to individualism and the rechtsstaat, there appears little genuine concern with individual liberties and restrictions on state power that characterize Western liberalism. Indeed, one such supposed liberal conservative, Natalya Narochnitskaya, argues that “Europe is ruled by a post-modernist, almost Trotskyist, left-libertarian elite” (p. 79), an observation utterly unhinged from reality that passes without authorial comment. Whereas Chebankova makes a reasonably case for avoiding detailed treatment of Russian fascism (pp. 24-26), her account of Dugin’s fundamental conservatism makes no reference to his inspiration in fascist theories, as identified by Marlene Laruelle among others. The claim that most fundamental conservatives “seek to avoid ... illiberal politics, which they see in totalitarianism, coercion and elitism” (p. 113) seems a poor generalization to apply to someone (Dugin) who was sacked from his position at Moscow State University for calling for Ukrainians to be killed, and who has regularly publicly revelled in violent geopolitical fantasies. Conversely, nationalist ideas, of both “state-imperial” and “democratic Russian” types, are seen as having extreme logics with “devastating” political consequences for Russia and Europe (p. 175). This argument appears to echo the Russian authorities’ view of good state “patriots” and bad opposition “nationalists,” an impression reinforced by the remarkably benign view of Vladimir Zhirinovsky as someone who rejects Russian ethnocentrism and intolerance (p. 225). These seeming inconsistencies or idiosyncrasies could be addressed by much more systematic critical engagement with the nature of the regime and its (ab)use of ideologies and ideologues.

In sum, this volume’s forensic, historically grounded, and comparatively informed treatment of Russia’s main ideological trends is a valuable addition to our understanding of contemporary Russian politics. It successfully argues that Russian intellectual life is more vibrant and pluralist than is often presented, as well as far more complex. What it does not sufficiently demonstrate is its contention that the Russian regime is fundamentally “paradigmatically pluralist.” Some ideologies are clearly more equal than others, and the state’s role in policing, supporting, and manipulating them undermines the argument that both traditional and liberal options are “laid freely on the table” and “free from external and domestic pressure” (p. 266). Readers seeking the origins for Russia’s current ideological miasma, with its belligerently anti-liberal, anti-Western, and ultimately protogenocidal content, will not find many clear answers here.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58063

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.