

Russia and Its Four Wests

Written by Andrei P. Tsygankov

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ANDREI P. TSYGANKOV, MAR 9 2024

Since the 16th century, many Russians associated change with the rising and increasingly global civilization of the West. At the same time, they have sought to build upon Russia's own identity and power. The common dilemma of how to borrow from the advanced West while remaining 'Russia' has been at the center of Russian political debates for centuries. In the 19th century, the dynamic group of Russian thinkers with Western leanings, known as Westernizers, proposed to resolve this dilemma. They aspired to do so with Russia in their heart, yet primarily on Western ideological and value terms. Russian Westernizers then and now include those viewing Russia's values as inferior to the West and advocating the country's integration with Western institutions. While differing in definitions of the West, Westernizers invariably support Russia-Western partnership based on shared values. They tend to view history in progressive terms and believe in a linear, rather than pluralistic, interpretation of human development. Because of their association with the mighty Western civilization, Russian Westernizers have a considerable influence at home whenever the Russian state decides to improve relations with the West.

In my forthcoming book on Russian Westernizers, I identify four broad schools of Russian Westernizers with radical and conservative leanings. I also analyze conditions of their relative influence and marginalization. Finally, I discuss contemporary challenges for Westernizers and the prospects of their development.

Russian Westernizers

Intellectually, Westernizers fall into four distinct groups – Christian Westernizers, economic liberals, political liberals or advocates of the Western-style political system of individual rights, and supporters of the social state. To a considerable degree, their differences are defined by varying images of the West. Christian Westernizers stress the unity of Russia and the West's religious roots and argue for restoring such harmony. From their perspective, the historical split between Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity should not stand in the way of such unity.

The second group of Westernizers includes admirers of the West's dynamism in economic development, commercial and technological successes, and financial institutions. Russian economic liberals tend to associate the achievements of Western civilization with the institutions of private property and free market competition rather than geography, scientific discoveries, or any other advantages. This group rose to prominence in the second half of the 19th century when Russia embarked on the path of capitalist development. The views of Russian economic liberals reflected the country's growing trade ties with European nations. Russia successfully exported grains to Britain and France, while the British-French capital was increasingly present on the Russian exchange market.

The third group favored the development of political freedoms and constitutional legitimacy in Russia. The group became active in the first half of the 19th century under the influence of the Western nations' transition from absolutist rule to popular sovereignty and defense of individual rights.

Finally, in the second half of the 19th century, Russia followed the West in becoming increasingly industrialized. As a result, Russian Westernizers grew critical of the state's lack of attention to the economic and social rights of the lower classes. Many Russian Westernizers became socialist, rather than liberal, in their orientation. Even those who were not socially radical became sensitive to what the Russian religious philosopher Vladimir Solovyev defined as "the right to a decent human existence" (*dostoinoye suchshestvovaniye*).

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In addition to different definitions of Western values, Russian Westernizers diverge in perceiving Russia's goals and methods of their achievement. While viewing integration with the West as the ultimate objective, they disagree on how far Russia should go to accomplish the objective. Radical Westernizers assess the country's rapid integration with the West as the most practical and perhaps the only way to bring Russia in line with the West. In the view of conservative or moderate Westernizers, the transition toward the West must be based on sufficiently broad support inside the country rather than imposed from the above. For these reasons, Russia's overall objective cannot be a complete integration with the West but rather a strategic partnership with Western nations based on broadly shared values.

The difference between radical and moderate Westernizers was on display during Russia's late Soviet and post-Soviet transformation. While radicals supported Boris Yeltsin's policies of rapid Westernization, moderates or conservatives cautioned against doing so at the expense of established social values and national interests. Radical and moderate trends competed within the pro-Yeltsin party, Democratic Russia. Another liberal party, Yabloko, advocated a gradual transition and development of foreign relations with both Western and non-Western countries. Yabloko-affiliated intellectuals supported pro-Western reforms at home while insisting on Russia's special interests in protecting national security interests in Eurasia, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

Conditions of Rise and Fall

Both Russia and the West are responsible for the success and failure of Russia's Westernization. The first condition is the West's relative openness to and demonstration of recognition of Russia. Such recognition can come in different forms. It can include rhetorical support for Russian reforms and reformers. It can also include financial assistance and the development of joint projects in political, economic, and cultural areas. Russian Westernizers depend on such recognition by the West in rallying domestic support for reforms. They are not likely to be successful if, instead of recognition, the West criticizes Russia's actions or policies that aim to isolate Russia from international and Western markets.

The second critical condition of Russia's Westernization is the relative openness of Russian society and its political leaders. Russia's cultural differences have often prevented its leaders from implementing pro-Western reforms. However, other leaders have done so, sometimes taking personal risks to introduce reforms and having to resign because of their commitment to Westernizing Russia.

For the success of the Russia-West rapprochement, both sides must be sufficiently open to initiate and sustain it. This is difficult because the two sides are culturally different and have historically disagreed on various issues. At times, their disagreements were even constitutive of their national self-definition: Russia's values were defined in terms of their difference from and superiority to those of the West, and vice-versa. In addition to cultural differences, the contemporary interests of Russia and Western nations diverge. The two sides cannot forge a partnership because they have different geopolitical priorities and stakes in the international system.

Challenges and Prospects

Therefore, Russian Westernizers could only be successful if they had sufficient support at home and in the West. Both conditions are missing in today's Russia. Russia's war in Ukraine and confrontation with Western nations have encouraged the rallying around the flag effect rather than liberal reforms at home. Western leaders did not hide their goals to degrade Russia's power, rather than merely support Ukraine's territorial integrity. They did little to facilitate negotiations and cease-fire. Furthermore, plagued by domestic instability and polarization, the West has also relied on presenting others, including Russia, as threatening its values. As a result, Russian Westernizers have remained weakened and marginalized.

Today, when the West's global standing is declining relative to those of rising non-Western powers, the ability of Russian Westernizers to influence national discussions will still be more limited. The global transition from the West-centered world to a pluralist international system will make the demand for defining and developing national values and interests all the more pressing. In the best scenario, this predicament may prompt Russian Westernizers to move

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away from their radicalism, becoming more sensitive to national realities and more critical of the West's international priorities.

In terms of IR theory, this suggests the need for Westernizers to learn from other intellectual traditions in Russia. Today, pro-Western policies and theories are even less able to serve as a guide to Russia than they have in the past. The post-conflict Russia is unlikely to become a pro-Western Russia. Advocating for improving relations with Europe and the United States following the end of the war in Ukraine may have an appeal in Russia if such relations enhance, not undermine, Russia's national interests. In the post-Western world, the country's main priorities include the survival and the reframing of historically built national values, political sovereignty, and strengthening relations with the global South.

About the author:

Andrei P. Tsygankov is Professor of International Relations at San Francisco State University. His is the author of (among other works) *Russia's Foreign Policy* (Rowman and Littlefield 2022, 6th ed.), *Russian Realism: Defending 'Derzhava' in International Relations* (Routledge 2022) and *The "Russian Idea" in International Relations Civilization and National Distinctiveness* (Routledge 2023). He teaches Russian/post-Soviet relations, comparative foreign policy, and IR theory. He is a graduate of Moscow State University (Candidate of Sciences, 1991) and the University of Southern California (Ph.D., 2000).