
Pro Rege

Volume 29 | Number 1

Article 2

September 2000

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Recommended Citation

Helleman, Wendy Elgersma (2000) "Challenges Facing Russia Today: From Communism to Chaos," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 29: No. 1, 11 - 17.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol29/iss1/2

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Challenges Facing Russia Today: From Communism to Chaos



by Wendy Elgersma
Helleman

It was November 21, 1999, and Russia was in the midst of a vigorous campaign to elect members of the Duma, the Russian parliament. That morning the front page of the *Moscow Times* featured a new move of the Central Elections Committee: "In the interests of free and fair elections, the Central Election Commission wants to temporarily suspend

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freedom of the press in Russia." Did I get that right? At first I thought it was a joke. After all, who would restrict freedom of the press at a time of national elections?

But it was no joke. This was the considered opinion of the electoral commission. It was implemented immediately, and remains in force. In fact it was recently strengthened, so that journalists and the media now not only need to be licensed, but must also be registered. Broadcast licences are quickly revoked and stations shut down if reports are judged to be in violation of the new rules.

This is the new "democratic" Russia, electing members for its parliament and presidency. If the conditions under which such elections are held surprise you, let me suggest a close correlate in the 1997 legislation on "freedom of conscience and religious association," which allowed a special role for Russian Orthodoxy. While it recognized traditional religious groups like Jews, Muslims and Buddhists, it instituted obstacles reminiscent of communist time for all kinds of "minority" faith groups. There may have been legitimate concerns about groups like the Unification church (Moonies) and the Japanese cult of Aum Shinrikyo (responsible for the 1995 subway attack in Tokyo and estimated to have about 50,000 Russian followers), but far-reaching restrictions also applied to native Russian Baptist and Pentecostal groups.

A Difficult Transition

About ten years have passed since the end of communism and the downfall of the old regime, the party, and its colorless leaders. Russian political

leadership has changed dramatically. The new president, Boris Yeltsin, jumped on tanks to stop a coup, and danced with the best of the reformers in his 1996 campaign. That was only shortly before he was felled by the stroke and heart problems that kept him out of the picture much of his last term of office. The international scandals that dogged Yeltsin's performance are well-known; let me not belabor the point. It might not have been so bad for Russians, were it not that in consolidating his position under the new constitution this president managed to amass incredible power for himself, or for his office; here we note one of the few pieces of legislation that actually does work in Russia. And Vladimir Putin inherits these powers.

Russia has many other laws on its books which are not implemented. We need to remember that Russians find it hard to appreciate law in the abstract, as something that takes priority to the person. There is a deep-seated authoritarian aspect to their culture. Russians are not comfortable with what we call an "open society." They want to know that someone with a strong arm is in charge, someone to assure them of "law and order."

Powerful leaders or not, these ten years of transition have been difficult for Russia. Yeltsin's resignation speech alluded to that: "who would ever have thought that it would be so difficult?" The list of problems is endless: unemployment and unpaid wages; alcoholism, demoralization and family violence; devaluation of currency to put prices out of reach, while diminishing the real value of earnings. Our colleagues at the University of Moscow have to manage on the equivalent of some \$40 US per month. To give you an eloquent snapshot of the situation I quote from a recent prayer letter:

Russia is in a pivotal time, and needs prayer like never before. The economic situation is still worsening. Despite promises by the government, the lack of funds has made it impossible to pay pensions. The country has been drained of capital by high-living people who took advantage of the new openness to enrich themselves at the expense of the nation. They own and control vast companies, resources, and enterprises, yet pay no taxes or launder money in many ways to avoid government taxation. Meanwhile, the tax rate is so high (56% to 90%) that no one can afford to run an honest business and still pay taxes. The result is a country stripped of finances, where the poor are now more

than 50% of the population, and many remain jobless or are working without pay. This situation is intolerable, and we must pray for someone to have the political will and strength to go after the Russian "bandits" (never mind the Chechen ones) and to pursue the economic reforms that will enable prosperity. There are robbers on both sides of the law.¹

Prayer is one of the most effective tools in the face of a situation that seems impossible. Together with prayer we look for wisdom, for positive solutions for the future of Russia. It is important not to lose our focus by dwelling on the problems. Russians do have an incredible capacity for survival. They are tough as a people; tough on themselves, and tough on one another. And Russians are only too good at seeing the darker side of things, with a deep-rooted pessimism almost bordering on something superstitious. I do not need to remind you that this can lead to self-fulfilling prophecy. Decades of enforced atheism, outright denial of the existence of God, His presence in the nation's business, and His care for his people, has left its legacy.

In Russia, of all nations, religion is not a neutral or private affair. Christians today have to fight for their place in society, every step of the way. Satan does not let go of such a splendid kingdom without a struggle. That struggle is being fought as a spiritual battle. In this essay, I want to focus on two important aspects of that struggle: hope and pride. As you can guess, the two are not unrelated.

Hope

We have already noted that in the present situation Russians are inclined to hopelessness. They need a new and sure basis for hope. But what can we base our hopes on? Do we base it on our resources, material and economic? Russia is a wealthy country when it comes to forests, minerals and oil. Can these give a basis for its future? We have only to notice the pattern of corruption among the new owners to think better than this.

What of its people, the well-educated thinkers, teachers and scholars, judges and lawyers, the intelligentsia? Surely a nation's hope for the future lies with its people. Can they not provide solutions? In Russia our work puts us among young people studying at the university. And we are thankful for a role in training the youth, the leaders of the future. Here we have found some of the brightest students we have taught anywhere. Russia is rightfully

proud of its tradition in education. In a few decades it brought literacy to the millions who had been left in ignorance before communists came on this scene. With a respect for intellectual culture hardly paralleled anywhere else (note Russia's great mathematicians; its scientists, especially chemists and geneticists; and its great chess players). Russians do not lack for analysis and theories of what must be done. But getting them to agree is a different matter! No quick recipes for a solution can be expected there.

Can we then base our hope for the future on spiritual resources, on the thousand year history of Christianity? Do not its leaders have a solution to provide new hope? Russians today feel a strong pull to this part of their history, their religious tradition. In the last few years, more than 13,000 parishes have been re-established, and 20,000 clergy trained in newly opened seminaries; between 50 and 80 percent of the population regards itself as "Orthodox," though one may quibble about what these statistics mean. But we do not quarrel with Archimandrite Pankraty, abbot of Valaam, the island monastery in Russia's far north, who was recently quoted in an Orthodox news service report as affirming that a strong church provides the key to a strong society and nation.² This option certainly demands attention, for after years of atheism we can only thank God that Christianity survived, and is now getting re-established publicly. One does not have to look far in Russian society to find the after-effects of communism, with its systematic undermining of trust, with neighbors and family members spying on one another, factors that quickly eroded any true sense of community.

But there is another side to the affirmation that Orthodoxy, "as the only thing that brought together all the diverse unruly uncivilized tribes of the past," is now the only hope for the nation. It has ominous undertones, especially when accompanied by a smug attitude of superiority to other faith expressions, and even arrogance in the face of competing religious groups. And so we turn to the issue of pride.

Pride

Proper self-respect is an important ingredient in a healthy personality, for the nation, as well as the individual. As we saw from the potential

candidates for renewed hope, Russians have much to be proud of. One thousand years of Christianity. Repulsion of the Islamic Tatars from Europe. Who knows what the religious map of Europe would have looked like had the eighth-century Spanish defeat of Islam not been coupled with the re-establishment of an Orthodox regime by fifteenth-century Moscovite Russians? And, of course, Russians can take pride, this century, in many firsts in space exploration, particularly as the first people to put a man in space, Yuri Gagarin, whose statue graces a city square not far from the university where we teach.

The struggle in Russia today is a spiritual battle.

Russians may have their problems today, but they are no second-class people. They still love to read and discuss deep issues. But they have considerable difficulty translating their views into action. While they denigrate Americans for shallow thinking, they do have to admire, if grudgingly, the American pattern of getting things done, particularly in providing the general population with affordable food, clothing, and useful consumer items.

Much of Russian pride in the past was tied up with its empire, and a great empire it was. But imperialism had its cost. Under the Soviets the percentage of the budget spent on warfare, and related military equipment and research, was so high—as much as 90 percent—that it has been very difficult to retrace the path to an economy with more normal spending on infrastructure, city streets, highways or public buildings. Has the lesson been learned? Is the imperial dream dead? Today, Russians object to former republics of the USSR taking on opposing alliances; they balk at the Ukraine—the mother of Russia—becoming a member of NATO. And steps are being taken to reestablish the "Slavic motherland" through reunification with Belarus. And there are wars to punish rebels, as in Chechnya. Of course, Chechens are not exactly paragons of virtue in their dealings with foreigners, given their record of kidnapping and executing them. So Russians have reopened the war they could not win in 1996. This time the population is

backing the war. And President Putin has staked his career on winning it. Will he pull it off? With much else hanging in the balance, there is certainly also the issue of Russian pride in themselves as a nation, asserting themselves with familiar weapons: guns, tanks, brute force.

A Look at History: the “Russian Idea”

So the contemporary sources of pride and of hope are firmly intertwined. When the present is full of roadblocks, and the future uncertain, it is only natural that a people look backward to get a sense of direction. The older generation looks back to the communist period, and while most realize there is no way that Russia can turn back the clock, we notice a nostalgia for the past, for the securities of food and employment, never mind the cost. Enormous parts of rural Russia remain virtually untouched by any constructive reforms; the *kholkhoz* or communal farm structure is still in place, as are old party bosses and communist social structures. Generations may have to pass from the scene before realistic change can take place.

The big cities, on the other hand, have witnessed great change, but they are also centers of almost unbelievable corruption, wealth concentrated in the hands of a small group of people who, when the transition to capitalism occurred, were in a position to profit, at the expense of the rest of the nation. Cities are also the centers of education and the intelligentsia. Particularly among philosophers there has been considerable effort to grapple with a new Russian identity, one in which they can take pride. In the desire to discover new directions for the future they look to the past, particularly to the 19th century, when Russians did have a distinct consciousness of nationhood and an understanding of what it means to be Russian. This quest is summed up in the concept of the “Russian Idea.”

What is the “Russian Idea”? In his well-known book, *The Russian Idea*, Nikolai Berdyaev begins by identifying it as the expression of a national type, or the individuality of a people.³ But he quickly moves on to echo the formulation of the outstanding late nineteenth century philosopher, Vladimir Solovyov, who used a Platonic twist when he said that the national idea is not what it thinks about itself in time, but what God thinks about it in

eternity. Solovyov, in turn, was a close friend of Dostoevski, whose novels also breathe a consciousness of the Russian people as a people having a special destiny that unites them and gives their history purpose. Berdyaev appreciated this transcendental or metaphysical concept of the Russian Idea, seeking thus to get beyond, or better, to embrace the empirical factors of history, so much of which he recognizes as repellant, and riddled with contradictions.

For the roots of the “Russian Idea” we have to go far back in history, to the 10th century conversion of prince Vladimir to the Orthodox faith of the Byzantines, and the Orthodox inspiration of the fifteenth century Muscovites in throwing off the Tatar yoke. After the fall of Byzantium to Islam, the Russian monk Philotheus formulated the concept of Moscow as the third Rome, for only there could a Christian Tsar be found; the Moscow Tsardom was the only existing true Orthodox realm.⁴ Thus arose the concept of Russia as a holy nation, a chosen people, and Moscow as a special “god-bearing” city (i.e. revealing God in a special way). As the vehicle of true Christianity, Russia had a special role in protecting the faith, guarding against heresy, and bringing about the kingdom of God on earth. The Tsar had a special role as God’s vice-regent, in the welfare of the souls of his people, as well as the interests of the state; this is quite clear from the letters of Ivan the Terrible.

This messianic and imperial concept was badly undermined by the seventeenth century schism in the church, and further weakened by Peter the Great’s harsh if necessary reforms of the church, moving the capital to St. Petersburg, and looking to the West for models in craftsmanship or architecture. The Russian Idea and the voice of Russian messianism was revived by nineteenth century Slavophiles like Chaadaev and Khomyakov, who were influenced by German Romanticism. They looked to three basic features of the Russian identity: an idealized Orthodoxy, a humane autocracy, and a sense of nationhood. Extremely important also was Khomyakov’s idea of *sobornost*, a religious concept which means conciliarity, or a spirit of community in a religious sense. Solovyov himself was deeply influenced by the Slavophiles, but turned away from manifestations of a strong nationalism—a type of tribalism—supported by their

views: not national faith, but faith in what is truly divine, must guide the nation. Nonetheless, it was Solovyov who gave most eloquent expression to the view of a special destiny for Russia, as a Christian mission of mediating between East and West.

We have come back to Solovyov, whose legacy is today being recovered in an atmosphere more hospitable for examining his deeply religious vision for Russia. It is clear that as an expression of the special role of the Russian people, the "Russian Idea" at once offers a solution for the varied questions of identity, pride, and hope for the future. A few years ago Yeltsin went so far as to turn the question of the Russian Idea into a "popular" contest, asking for submissions on a modern interpretation to be published in the newspapers. Today the discussion has died down, but the issue has not gone away. While the Orthodox church explores the concept as a means of regaining center stage, many Russians take distance from the concept, mainly because of its roots in a past that closely intertwined imperialism with a Messianic sense of a special destiny for the Russian people.⁵

Just after becoming acting president, in statements in which he tried to introduce himself to the Russian public, Putin said he favored a market economy supported by "a strong state," and called for the development of "a new Russian idea," which he described in terms of "universal humanitarian values with traditional Russian values," to distinguish Russia from the USA or Great Britain.⁶

These somewhat bland statements take on a different color when understood in terms of Putin's public association with Orthodoxy, the well-publicized blessing of the Patriarch, given when he became acting president, and the recent pronouncements of Patriarch Aleksy II on the role of the Church in a nominally democratic and pluralist society. According to the patriarch, the Church's influence is pastoral and spiritual, and it has the task of safeguarding civil peace in society. N. K. Gvosdev provided the following analysis of a crucial speech given by the patriarch last December:

The spiritual unity of the nation would be disrupted if Orthodoxy ceased to be the principal expression of the values and faith of the Russian people; the Church could no longer act as the moral

witness of the people if reduced to one church among many, as is the case in the United States. This is why the patriarch identified the "prevention of the activities of sects and cults as the most important task" facing the Church in Russia today. For the Patriarch, one's national identity as a Russian is inextricably linked to one's profession of Orthodoxy. As the late Metropolitan Ioann of St. Petersburg once said, "If Russia isn't your mother, God can't be your father."⁷

This, Gvosdev continues, is a clear statement of the Russian Idea closely linked with the Russian Orthodox faith, as it was for many centuries in

The "Russian Idea" seems to offer a solution for Russians' questions for the future.

Russia, even though no one really wants to go back to tsarist forms, nor even to a modern constitutional monarchy in the form it has taken in Holland or England. And without going so far as to endorse Orthodoxy as a state religion, the patriarch is portraying the church as the true embodiment of the Russian people and guardian of its collective soul. While politicians come and go, the Church endures and holds together the Russian people, united in Orthodoxy. From this perspective also, we note the significance of the Church's endorsement of the union treaty of Russia and Belarus as "the start of gathering together the sacred lands of the one and single fatherland." An economic and military treaty has thus been turned into a holy alliance, a reunion of two branches of the Orthodox nation separated after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Such is the religious nationalism of the Patriarch, clearly connected here with an expression of the Russian Idea. Although as Christians we may applaud the rising profile of Christianity in the public expression of Orthodoxy, it is also widely recognized that this particular turn of events is closely connected with a new atmosphere of intolerance for minority religious groups, who tend rather indiscriminately to be lumped together as sects and cults.

Without going too far into the issue of church and state, I do want to affirm that faith groups other than the Orthodox quickly sense that they are not part of the inside track, the inner circle, in line for privileges comparable with the rebuilding of Christ the Saviour Cathedral at public expense or receiving public shares in importing cigarettes and oil. Many are fearful of having to go underground once more, as they experience harassment in finding rental facilities or in attempting to buy ground for their own buildings.

So we have come back full circle to Russia's uneasy coexistence with an open society, whether from a political or religious perspective. In Russia there are no strong traditions of civil society, or professional associations that discipline themselves in a responsible manner. Restrictions on freedom of the press and of religion give only one indication of how Russians are finding their way in the chaotic, unruly, sometime downright hopeless mess they have been left with in the time of transition.

Some Positive Suggestions

So what can we Westerners offer them? What can we bring that is helpful? It is a question that is often asked, and one which we continually ask ourselves, as we search for proper models for our work in Russia. To answer this, we need to go back to our two central issues of hope and pride.

For obvious reasons, the West should not give more money. Even donations of clothing and food often just end up as negotiation chips in other people's games. Goods get stuck at the borders, and rot or disappear into the underground economy before they reach those for whom they are intended. Strong anti-Western sentiments today make it mandatory for us to re-examine our strategy for aid. Given the contemporary renewal of vocal Orthodoxy, a missionary presence in the traditional sense is often misunderstood. So what is left? Modern technology, especially consumer items, like computers, are still much appreciated. Business methods, skills and technique—something quite absent under communism—are still valued, though Russians are catching up quickly in showing initiative, developing effective business tools, or using computers and internet.

One area that is not ruled out is help in education. Russians pride themselves on strong educational

institutions, but ideological blinders have greatly restricted them in numerous areas, especially politics, religion, and philosophy. Political science and religious studies are new disciplines at Moscow State University, and they are struggling to establish themselves in a new environment. Russians are also eager to learn English as the new international language, and to take up their role in an international economy, alongside Europeans, Americans and the Chinese. So we continue to experience a warm welcome from our colleagues for teaching English in the faculty of philosophy.

Particularly because we deal, in the course of our work, with philosophy students, we have opportunities to address issues like hope and pride in our teaching. We can show Russians that although they have legitimate sources of pride, the real reason for boasting—or despair—is not in our possessions, in our immediate situation, in what our hands have made, but in our Lord, whose possession we are. He made us, and He cares for us better than any earthly Father. This is also the only constructive way to deal with hope. What other basis do we have for hope? Who of us knows what tomorrow will bring? The Orthodox liturgy affirms this: "Put not your hope in princes." It is a part of the liturgy, quoting from the psalms, that rings true Sunday by Sunday. But even if politicians cannot deliver on their promises, we have a God who can and does. The eyes of faith see what He does, and must translate for those with bad eyesight. Our strength lies in the fact that God does not give up on his people. He does not abandon them. And we see signs of that. When they cry to him in their distress and utter misery, He is there. He is not stretched beyond limit to listen and answer, to uphold them, for His glory.

Russians have had enough of promises of paradise, enough dreaming about a brighter future. Their utopias have turned to ashes or worse. Their hope for a better tomorrow can have no basis except one that is unshakable, one that is better than the earth we walk on, and whose fruits keep us alive. That is a hope based on the God who made that earth, and who keeps faith in a way no one else can. Only with such a sure hope can they end their backward look, the desire to return to the fleshpots of Egypt, where at least they had cucumbers and leeks, never mind at what price.

Like the Israelites in the desert, Russians too have a tendency for nostalgia. This is because they lost their vision for the future as soon as they came up against the obstacles by which God wanted to test and discipline them for the land of promise. Undeniably, the problems are overwhelming. Will it take another seventy years' time for this unbelieving generation to die off—for the true entrance to the land of promise on God's terms, not ours?

I have tried to describe some of the challenges of the Russian situation in the first place to help you understand better the changes taking place and the inherent dangers, particularly as they apply to basic freedoms of religion and the press. My goal is not journalistic. Rather, I would ask you to join us in prayer for the Russian people. We have been teaching in Russia for a little over four years. The work is not easy; there is no denying that. When we first went to Moscow in 1995 we had a sense of excitement, even awe, that we would have a chance to teach and to serve in that country, where educational standards have been so demanding and rigorous. As we met them, as we learned their stories, their journey of faith and suffering and deep disillusionment under successive governments, God gave us a love for the people. We are not blind to the stories of other peoples who in turn suffered at their hands. And we have been saddened by the present turn of events to patterns well-worn in Russian history: to warfare and to scape-goatism, particularly as it is combined with anti-Westernism. We know that those who live by the sword will die by it. It is our prayer that those who seek to live and work as

Christians—who reflect the face of Christ in justice and in mercy—may continue to be salt and light in that society.

END NOTES

1. From the January 2000 "House of Prayer - Russia," distributed by e-mail by Lena Volkova and Aimee Hennen <upgrade@nursat.kz>.
2. Quoted from John Mahoney, "The New Believers: Russia's war on God is over," *The Guardian* (UK), January 22, 2000.
3. "The attempt to define a national type and the individuality of a people is a matter of great difficulty." These are the opening words of Berdyaev's *The Russian Idea* (New York: Macmillan Co, 1948), 1.
4. Cf. Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 125.
5. See also the recent warning given by a former Yeltsin aide, Anatoly Krasikov, in a speech on religious liberties. He reminded his listeners that a close association of church and state has historically contributed to political tyranny and religious intolerance. See "Former Yeltsin Aide Comments on Religious Liberty in Russia" in *Christian Daily News*, April 11, 2000. Available online at <http://www.christiannews.org>.
6. Analysis and quotations are based on Paul Starobin, "Vladimir Putin: More Questions Than Answers So Far," *Business Week Online*, January 2, 2000. Available at <http://www.businessweek.com>.
7. Taken from Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "The Patriarch's political strategy: The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics," *Orthodox Christian News Service* (online) 20 December 1999. Available at <http://www.orthodoxnews.com>.