

**Elena Chebankova, *Political Ideologies in Contemporary Russia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020). 336 pp. Cloth \$120.00, paperback \$39.95.**

Elena Chebankova's *Political Ideologies in Contemporary Russia* is at once a most valuable addition to the literature on political thought in Russia and a book that will frustrate some readers. The book's value lies in its comprehensive review of the many different strands of contemporary ideology in Russia. There has, quite simply, not been a book like this on Russian political thinking for years, and the last surveys of Russian political thought that were anywhere near as comprehensive as Chebankova's were surveys of nineteenth century thought. Even then they generally specialized in one area of thought—conservatism, Slavophilism, Marxism, populism, etc. Chebankova's review covers liberalism, conservatism, what she calls "fundamental conservatism," the left, nationalism, foreign policy ideas on multipolarism, multiculturalism, and feminism. She has done a Stakhanovite amount of reading and performs heroic feats of synthesis and precis whilst all the time developing critical thoughts on the literature she reviews. Moreover, this is not a work of sterile intellectual history. Chebankova is interested in ideas as programmes for political action in addition to her interest in them as ideas, and this serves as a very useful reminder that there are multiple political traditions that might influence Russia's future development. Nearly all of the chapters end with a short and useful summary of who are the main actors and groups pushing liberalism, conservatism, etc.

One of the most impressive feats that Chebankova manages is to avoid simple dichotomies within many of the currents of thought that she reviews. The most notable and usual of these dichotomies is the regime loyalist/regime opponent divide. This divide, she notes, is too simplistic in its pitting of liberals, the left, feminists, and some others against the regime, which is sometimes seen as solely comprising conservatives. In fact nearly all streams of political thought are pluralist and contain divergent approaches to the Putin regime, and sometimes these streams cross. A case in point is the "fundamental conservatives," the less liberal branch of conservatism in Chebankova's account, who are more concerned with the rejection of Western modernity. Many of the leading lights of "fundamental conservatism," such as Aleksandr Dugin, who have often been cited as regime ideologists and loyalists, differ quite fundamentally from the regime, Chebankova argues, in their desire for meaningful political contestation between ideas. The dichotomization of Russian thought into good liberal versus bad conservative also hides some of the stranger elements of Russian liberalism that do not fit with the idea that liberalism is the

natural antipode to Putin and “unproblematic.” Elements of Russian liberalism are critical of ideas of “Russianness” and national character contemporaneously to, as Chebankova points out, the point of nihilism and national self-loathing. Some have even gone so far as to praise Russian collaborators with the Nazis and have argued that the Nazi invasion of Russia was to some extent a liberation from Russia’s organic, and therefore bad, traditions. There are similar interesting and novel facts, and thought-provoking discussions of the other ideological positions, in the book.

Why will Chebankova’s book also frustrate many readers, given its many impressive aspects? First, there is sometimes little sense of the relative importance of the thinkers and ideas that Chebankova describes. This is a side-effect of Chebankova trying to give an overall sense of each ideology, and relate Russian to Western thinking. However, this can lead to a kind of flattening out of thinkers and ideas as they become rolled into the “whole” ideology. The summary sections on the main actors and groups pushing each position only partially restores some sense of the relative importance of ideas. Extreme positions, such as the Nazi invasion of Russia as a liberation idea, that are illustrative of some sections of an ideology get equal billing with elements of ideology that are arguably more important politically.

The second problem with the book is its treatment of Putinism. Chebankova is well aware that many readers will pick up her book looking for a discussion of Putinism as an ideology. Very quickly in the introduction and in the first endnote to the book she lets them know that they are not going to get one since “Putinism itself does not represent a particular ideology for it lacks a substantive as well as a positionist component” (267). Putinism is, Chebankova argues, a “system for balancing paradigmatically different ideological positions” (16). That statement raises more questions than it answers. Putinism, if there is an ideology of Putinism, would not be the first syncretic ideology, and other such ideologies have been analysed. The definition of Putinism as a “system for balancing” demands some discussion of which positions are balanced and how this balancing takes place. What—ideas, issues, preferences, signifiers—facilitates balancing, how do they alter the positions balanced, and to what end politically?

Chebankova’s dismissal of the ideological nature of Putinism is not, therefore, very satisfactory or convincing. This is a pity. Discussion of what Putinism is has become an increasingly important issue over the last few years and Chebankova could have made a telling contribution to that debate. The importance of the issue forces her to come back to it in her brief concluding chapter, despite having said that she would not. Unfortunately she undoes some of the good work that she did earlier in this conclusion. With little space left to her she aggregates the schools of thought into “liberalism” and “traditionalism.” In essence these are little more than the traditional binary categories of Westernism and Slavophilism, the sort of binaries that Chebankova spent so much time usefully avoiding in the bulk of the book. Putinism becomes the effort to manage the drives of these two categories, from

global capitalism on the one hand and traditional social and religious identities on the other. Chebankova thinks that Putin will continue to try to balance “liberalism” and “traditionalism.” Maybe she is right. But the balancing act creates political problems that might have been given a little more attention to round out this otherwise fine book.

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