

Carl Schmitt in Moscow: Counter-Revolutionary Ideology and the Putinist State

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Abstract

Far from being a regime devoid of ideology, much of Russia's political elite shares ideas and concepts that together constitute a consistent worldview based on anti-liberal and counter-revolutionary premises. Its basic categories, interpretations and concepts share important affinities with the constitutional and political theories developed by German jurist Carl Schmitt. Russian conservative thinking on the nature of sovereignty, the definition of the nation, theories of democracy, and emerging conceptualizations of international order all show remarkable overlaps with Schmittian anti-liberalism, but Russia's recent political development also demonstrates the inevitable shortcomings of authoritarian anti-liberal ideologies in the 21st century.

Post-Soviet Russia is often viewed as a state without ideology, an unprincipled kleptocracy primarily designed to fuel the offshore bank accounts of a rapacious elite, but without any underlying political principles. But no political system can exist for long without a set of ideas and concepts that are shared by a large part of the political elite. There are many ways to interpret this 'Putinist' mode of thinking about the world, but some of the most productive insights emerge through comparisons with German conservative thought of the interwar period, notably the work of the jurist Carl Schmitt (1888–1985), who has become one of the most important influences on Russian political thinking in the early 21st century.

Schmitt was a brilliant scholar, whose critiques of political liberalism have become increasingly influential in political theory, but his reputation is forever tainted by his membership of the Nazi party, his anti-Semitism, and his role as a jurist in the Third Reich. He became an inspiration for the European New Right, and subsequently a major intellectual influence on Russian far right conservatism, through figures such as Alexander Dugin. Dugin's early geopolitical polemics, and his later neo-imperialist and authoritarian 'Fourth Political Theory', are heavily reliant on his interpretations of Schmitt. But the impact of Schmittian thinking in Russia is much broader and less explicit than its articulation by controversial figures such as Dugin. A more nuanced way to understand Schmitt's influence in Russia can be found in Russian scholarly work on Schmitt, such as the prolific output of Alexander Filippov, professor at Moscow's Higher School of Economics and editor of *Russian Sociological Review*. Filippov has translated many of Schmitt's most important works, while using his own commentaries and critical articles to hint at parallels to contemporary Russian realities. Rather than the crude polemical use of Schmitt's ideas, it is these more subtle affinities and overlaps between Schmitt's conceptual universe and the contemporary world of Russian political thinking that offer productive insights.

These affinities are multiple, but four of Schmitt's principal ideas are particularly relevant to understanding the ideological universe of contemporary Russian political thought.

Sovereignty and the Exception

No political concept was more central to Russian political discourse in the 2000s than sovereignty, but it was often understood as the need for Russia to regain its international status or to ensure a monopoly of legitimate violence throughout its territory. Schmitt defines sovereignty in a different way, however, as a monopoly of decision-making. In the pluralistic state, argues Schmitt, there are too many sovereigns—too many actors who are able to take substantive decisions, fatally undermining the state. Schmitt saw this dysfunctional pluralism in the 1920s Weimar Republic, but there were obvious parallels in 1990s Russia, when regional leaders, an unruly parliament, organized crime bosses, and a new generation of oligarchs all undermined the monopoly of the state over decision-making. Schmitt argued for an authoritarian sovereign leader who can take radical decisions, if necessary outside the constitution and the law, for the good of the people.

Putin's first term in office was characterized above all by the removal of autonomous decision-making power from other political and economic actors. The arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky in 2003 completed the removal of oligarchs from participation in political decision-making. Parliamentary elections in December 2003 marked the taming of the State Duma, with the introduction of a 'managed democracy' that has been retained in Russia ever since. Regional leaders—encouraged to 'take sovereignty' in the 1990s—lost their autonomy in a series of centralizing moves, culminating in the abolition of gubernatorial elections in late 2004.

But Schmittian sovereignty is not merely about a recentralization of power. The sovereign leader, claims Schmitt in his famous aphorism, is the one who 'decides on the exception', the leader who can break the rules and

act in an extra-constitutional capacity (Schmitt, 1985). This mode of exceptionality has become central to the functioning of the Putinist state. Both during and after the Second Chechen War, Chechnya became a semi-permanent space of exception, where Russian laws and constitutional norms did not apply. In the rest of Russia, however, the rule of law was also subordinate to political decisions, despite Putin's early calls for the development of a law-based state. The Schmittian sovereign cannot be constrained by the courts or legal norms. The Russian judicial system therefore became permeated by exceptionality to permit the state to circumvent due process in criminal prosecutions, whenever serious political issues were at stake.

In international affairs, the assertion of sovereignty also followed a Schmittian logic. For Schmitt, international law was simply the codification of asymmetric power relations: true sovereignty resides in the ability of a political leader to violate international norms and laws in the national interest. Russia's intervention in Georgia in 2008 and the incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation in 2014 were clear violations of Georgian and Ukrainian sovereignty under international law. In Schmittian terms, however, both acts were an assertion of Putin's own sovereignty, his capacity to create the exception, to act outside international law, and to create new legal realities through the exercise of military power and the appropriation of territory.

Friends, Enemies and the Political

Schmitt's second big idea is that real politics is not about endless discussions in parliaments or electoral competition among different parties. What Schmitt terms 'the political' is something much deeper, a process of defining the boundaries of a political community by dividing the world into 'them' and 'us', by asking the fundamental question—who is our 'enemy'? Defining the enemy does not necessarily mean going to war—although that is an ever-present possibility. Rather, the definition of the enemy shapes who we are as a political community. A nation needs to constantly remind itself of its enemies to ensure its own identity, and ultimately its survival.

Since the mid-2000s Russia officials have portrayed the US as an opponent posing an existential threat to the Russian state. The 'color revolutions' in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan were interpreted as precursors to a Western-backed revolution in Russia. New laws codified this identification of the enemy: By 2017 more than 150 organizations had been registered as 'foreign agents'; a May 2015 law banned 'undesirable' international organizations, perceived as posing a threat to Russian national interests. The government imposed new restrictions on foreign travel for over four million civil

servants, and for police, military, and emergency services (Lipman 2015). The anti-American narrative was fueled by state-sponsored documentaries and prime-time programs such as Dmitry Kiselev's weekly show, *Vesti nedeli*. Media manipulation had an impact on public opinion. In June 2016 in a Levada poll some 78 per cent of Russians identified the US as Russia's primary enemy, up from only 26 per cent in 2010.

Thinking in crude binaries about friends and enemies not only damages international relations, it also has the inevitable effect of 'discovering' internal enemies at home. In Russia, the idea of the 'fifth column' shifted from the conspiracy theories of marginal ultra-nationalist groups to being a central trope in mainstream discourse, even used by President Putin in his March 2014 'Crimea' speech. Far-right polemicists in Russia have gone on to develop the concept of a 'sixth' or even 'seventh' column, an increasingly pathological view of society as completely penetrated by aliens and traitors. Paradoxically, rather than achieving its goal of uniting the nation through a clear distinction between 'them' and 'us', Schmittian thinking only threatens a vicious spiral into greater division and polarization, symbolized by the murder in February 2015 of Boris Nemtsov, who had been repeatedly labelled a 'fifth columnist' by nationalist activists.

Illiberal Democracy

The identification of the enemy informs Schmitt's third conceptual move—the separation of democracy from liberalism. For Schmitt, liberal democracy is an oxymoron—liberal norms such as the rule of law prevent the people from truly expressing their collective will. Instead, Schmitt seeks a kind of authoritarian democracy, in which the ruling elite and a united people develop a common identity and common interests. Schmittian democracy is not a contest between different political parties, or a mechanism for managing conflicts in society, but the creation of an almost mystical connection between the leader and the masses. In Russia, elections long ago lost any element of surprise, but public opinion—and public acclamation of the leader—still remain important to the regime. Opinion poll ratings for President Putin—which have remained above 80 per cent since the Crimean events in the spring of 2014—are viewed as a leading indicator of regime stability. The authorities seek to both shape and reflect the views of an 'overwhelming majority' of Russian society, constructing a unified public consensus, while limiting political representation for minority political views and social identities. This illiberal understanding of democracy was clearly articulated in Vladislav Surkov's notion of 'Sovereign Democracy', an ideological project strongly influenced by Schmittian ideas. Although the term disappeared from public usage, the basic prin-

principles of the system have remained in place. The regime seeks to retain public support, while denying any subjectivity for the people in deciding its own political future.

Großraum-Thinking and International Order

A final area of affinity between Russian realities and Schmittian theories is in international relations. Schmitt views liberal, universal norms, such as ‘human rights’ or ‘democracy’, as mere window-dressing for the power politics of US imperialism. But Schmitt also argued that international order cannot revert to strict Westphalian conceptualisations of sovereignty. Instead, in a new multipolar order Great Powers will establish new spheres of influence, or *Großräume* [‘Great Spaces’], characterised by the presence of a ‘politically awakened nation’, a ‘political idea’, and the absence of what Schmitt terms ‘spatially alien powers’ from this space (Schmitt, 2011). Schmittian geopolitics underpins much of the neo-imperialist thinking on the Russian far right, but elements of *Großraum* thinking can also be identified in official discourse.

Moscow increasingly views the world as dividing into major political-military-economic blocs, and much of Russian foreign policy is determined by the need to ensure Russia’s centrality to one of these ‘world-regions’. Hence the ‘Eurasian turn’ in Putin’s third term in office, institutionalized in the troubled Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), but also articulated since 2015 in terms of ‘Greater Eurasia’, a term that has a varied geography, but serves the purpose of putting Russia at the heart of a region stretching from Eastern Europe and the Black Sea in the West, through the Middle East and Central Eurasia, across to China in the east.

Not only does Russia view itself as a reviving power with historical rights and duties in this ‘Great Space’ of Eurasia, but it also imbues its presence in the region with a political idea, a mix of traditional conservative norms and views of appropriate forms of political order that together constitute a kind of ‘Moscow Consensus’ among regional states. From Kyrgyzstan to Ukraine, Russian foreign policy has focused on excluding Western powers from this ‘sphere of special interests’, and views Western influence in states such as Georgia and Ukraine as an existential threat

to Russia itself. Eurasia is presented as a coherent region with its own culture and values, a civilizational space where Western liberal values are not appropriate. Russia’s centrality to the emergence of a new Eurasian space, however, leaves little room for the sovereignty of other smaller powers, but Russia’s neighbors will not easily acquiesce in the reassertion of Russian hegemony in the region.

Conclusion

Schmitt’s intellectual influence is hardly limited to Russia. The multiple failures of the post-Cold War liberal project, not only in Russia, but internationally, have provoked a counter-revolutionary wave. Anti-liberalism is in vogue globally, and Schmitt provides its most sophisticated intellectual voice. Studying Russia’s ideological twist towards illiberalism, therefore, has important implications for global politics. Schmitt’s critique of liberalism is often potent and the interest in Schmitt’s work in Russia is understandable in response to a crisis of post-Soviet Russian statehood. But Schmitt’s political alternative to liberalism is an ultra-conservative project promoting authoritarian sovereign power, illiberal democracy, sharp boundaries between communities, and an international order dominated by Great Powers. Russia’s experience already demonstrates the shortcomings of such an authoritarian political turn. An ideology of pure sovereignty offers no defense against bad political decisions and no mechanisms to check the endemic corruption and poor governance that exceptionality promotes. Defining the world solely with reference to friends and enemies polarizes society, legitimizes violence and repression, and makes minorities vulnerable. And a world characterized by spheres of influence and Great Power politics has no space for the sovereignties of small states, and a high risk of the resumption of major power war. Schmitt has little to say about economic, social and technological modernization, or about overcoming deep-rooted conflicts and tensions in society. Yet his identification of the emotional appeal of decisionist authoritarianism in times of turbulence suggests that the neo-Schmittian revival will continue to influence politics in Russia and beyond for some time to come.

About the Author

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