

Democracy Derailed: Are Russian Intellectuals Responsible for the Ideological Rationale of Putinism?¹

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Published at imrussia.org, an online publication of the Institute of Modern Russia, on December 30, 2014.

¹ This research paper was originally presented at 46th ASEEES Annual Convention on November 22, 2014 at the panel titled “The World Divided: Russia’s Alternative to the Ideology of Liberal Democracy.”

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Abstract

Since the earliest forms of democracy, public intellectuals have been playing a crucial role in the state political life: constructing ideologies, advising politicians, influencing public opinion. As noted specialists in a particular field of knowledge, well-known members of academia or think tanks, the role of public intellectuals is to provide wider public with knowledge to make informed decisions on governance and to keep the authorities accountable for their activities. However, with Vladimir Putin rise in power in today's Russia, a number of prominent Russian intellectuals have become subservient to the Kremlin, providing ideological rationale for the country's rising authoritarianism; only few intellectuals voiced their criticisms and warned of the dangers of an undemocratic path. This paper will explore a diverse group of Russian public intellectuals (focusing on think tanks and popular political commentators—from conservatives to liberals), the ideas that they put forward and their role in the country's democratic rollback.

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INTRODUCTION

We are living in the postindustrial society, which is essentially a knowledge-based and ideas-based society. The second half of the 20th century was marked not only by a great economic transformation, but also by political transformation.¹ In 1989, Francis Fukuyama published his essay in *National Interest*, in which he proclaimed the end of the Cold War and “the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”²

25 years later, the debate on whether democracy is the final form of government or not still continues, as new hybrid authoritarian regimes (Russia, Syria, Turkey, et al.) rise into power. The debate is rendered by the new authoritarian leaders who aspire to justify their *modus operandi* and challenge the ideas of liberal democracy. Their claims are often supported by certain groups of intellectuals in the respective countries. While the rationale behind the politicians’ stance is more or less transparent—it’s a fight for power—it remains unclear why intellectuals would take part in undermining democratic ideas.

The fact that intellectuals played a crucial role in the history of the mankind, including in political sphere, economy, social development, international relations, art, sciences, is hardly a point for discussion. The very term “intellectual” pertains a positive connotation. However, under a close scrutiny, it becomes clear that intellectuals are not only responsible for the most brilliant breakthroughs, but also for some of the most horrible mistakes in history.

25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, which came, according to many researchers, as a result of the courageous efforts on behalf of the public intellectuals on both sides of the wall—Western and Eastern European—Russia, the largest country of the former Soviet bloc, remains just as far (if not farther) away from being a democracy as it was in 1989. Since intellectuals were the “dealers of ideas” and the spearheads of the dissident movement in the Soviet Union, who eventually brought the wall down, and with it—the whole Soviet system and the communist ideology in general,—the question is: why didn’t they push the matter through? Why has Russia lost its way in democratic transition? And why the critical voice of the Russian intellectuals is hardly ever heard in the public political discourse?

The issue of responsibility of intellectuals has been addressed and studied a lot. In his classic work titled “The Treason of Intellectual” (1927) French thinker Julien Benda argues that intellectuals abandoned their mission of speaking up for justice, liberty and the truth, becoming subservient to certain ideologies or even political classes.³ Almost

¹ Fallis, George. *Multiversities, Ideas, and Democracy*, University of Toronto Press, 2007

² Fukuyama, Francis. “The End of History and The Last Man.” *National Interest*, 1989. Accessed December 20, 2014: https://archive.org/stream/TheEndOfHistoryAndTheLastMan/FukuyamaFrancis-TheEndOfHistoryAndTheLastMantheFreePress1992_djvu.txt

³ Benda, Julien. *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, Transaction Publishes, 2006.

100 years later, many issues raised in the book are still relevant to nowadays' political realities. This paper will examine the role that intellectuals play in the political process in Western democracies and in closed regimes, such as Russia, where the democratic rollback in recent decades has been unprecedented.

1. WHO ARE INTELLECTUALS?

There are various views on what defines an intellectual. Over the history, priests, philosophers, theologians represented the intellectual community, however the term as we understand it today is the phenomenon of the New Time and it has such characteristics as ideas, critical analysis and justice.

Some writers describe intellectuals as anyone with a university degree; others, to quote Seymour Lipset, as “those who create, distribute and apply culture.”⁴ Lewis Coser argued that there few modern terms that are imprecise as “intellectuals,” noting that they are defined by their “pronounced concern for the core values of a society”; “they consider themselves special custodians of abstract ideas like reason and justice and truth, jealous guardians of moral standards that are too often ignored in the market place and the houses of power.”⁵

Coser draws the line between intellect and intelligence: “intellect presumes a capacity for detachment from immediate experiences, a moving beyond the pragmatic tasks of the moment, a commitment to comprehensive values transcending professional and occupational involvement.” He also applies Max Weber’s distinction between men who live for politics and men who live off politics to intellectuals—“intellectuals live for rather than off ideas.”⁶

According to Tom Sowell, the capacity to grasp and manipulate complex ideas is enough to define intellect but not enough to encompass intelligence, which involves combining intellect with judgment and care in selecting relevant explanatory facts and establishing empirical tests of any theory that emerges. The “dealers of ideas” is the core notion of the definition of an intellectual. “A policy wonk whose work might be analogized as social engineering will seldom personally administer the schemes he or she creates or advocates. That is left to bureaucrats, politicians, social workers, police and whoever else might be directly in charge of carrying out the ideas of the policy wonk’s work. [...] An intellectual’s work begins and ends with ideas.”⁷

Friedrich von Hayek pointed to the difference between a scientist and an intellectual.⁸ While a scientist is a specialist who possesses fundamental knowledge in a concrete,

⁴ Lipset, Seymour Martin. *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*.

⁵ Coser, Lewis. *Men of ideas*. New York: Free Press, 1997

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Sowell, Thomas. *Intellectuals and Society*. Basic Books, 2012

⁸ Hayek, Friedrich. *Road to Serfdom*, University of Chicago Press, 2007

usually narrow field, an intellectual is a social figure disseminating knowledge, and his or her views are usually superficial. Intellectuals excel in sensing new ideas and articulate them before they become a part of the popular discourse. Only few intellectuals are capable of generating their own, new ideas.

Antonio Gramsci believed that all men (and women) are potentially intellectuals in a sense that they all have an intellect, but not all are intellectuals by social function. Gramsci identified two types of intellectuals: “traditional” intellectuals, who considered themselves independent and autonomous (i.e. philosophers, professors, writers, clergy); and “organic intellectuals,” characterized by their function in formulating and directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong, representing its thinking and organizing element. The dominant social group or the ruling class will always generate its own “organic” intellectuals—the group that includes business leaders, managers, civil servants, journalists, teachers, technicians and scientists, lawyers, doctors, etc. They are the “deputies” of the dominant group, helping it maintain its hegemony over the rest of the society.⁹

Joseph Schumpeter described intellectuals as a social group that emerges at a certain moment of a country’s social development to implement an ideological revolution.¹⁰ It is a group of educated people whose occupation is usually associated with writing (“men of letters”). Intellectuals act as independent observers who produce critical analysis of the crucial public issues. Schumpeter also notes that writers and journalists define the social landscape in which intellectuals operate, but unlike other writing professionals, they do not bear practical responsibility for their work.

Analyzing the role of this group in the history of the West, Schumpeter concludes that all Ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, sophists and orators were intellectuals, as they were the producers and disseminators of ideas. In the Middle Ages, it was priests and monks who played the role. During the age of Enlightenment and emergence of the printing press, the intellectuals rose to the status of humanists, as their observations could be now addressed to the public. The Enlightenment intellectuals believed that human affairs should be guided by reason and principles of liberty, equality and justice. They were opposed to the rule of undemocratic and illegitimate monarchies and aristocracies. The Enlightenment ideas inspired French and American revolutions, with intellectuals being among the first prophets of the liberal democracy, advancing the ideas of fair and free elections, separation of powers, the rule of law, protection of human right, civil liberties and political freedoms.

Schumpeter criticized modern intellectuals for their tendencies to adapt to political regimes, cooperate with the authorities or those in power, justify or deny their mistakes. He notes that over the centuries, the reputation of intellectuals became tarnished, but since they blindly believe in their own infallibility, they became prone to committing incorrigible mistakes.

⁹ Gramsci, Antonio. *Prison Notebooks*. Columbia University Press, 2011.

¹⁰ Schumpeter, Joseph. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008.

1.1. Public intellectuals

Some researchers distinguish between the so-called “ivory tower,” or academic intellectuals and public intellectuals, who address the masses. Even though public intellectuals might have more immediate recognition, they don’t necessarily have more power or influence than the academics, because eventually, it’s the original ideas that matter and inspire others, making them “a subject of wider discourse and an influence on the making of government policies.”¹¹

Most researchers agree that the modern concept of a public intellectual appeared in the late 19th century, during the Dreyfus affair, in which Captain Alfred Dreyfus was falsely convicted of treason based upon faulty espionage accusations and anti-Semitism. Serving as the striking example of injustice, the Dreyfus affair is also a landmark case that showed how intellectuals can influence public opinion, reshape the narrative and change political realities. French writer Emile Zola is considered the first public intellectual. Outraged by the miscarriage of justice in the Dreyfus case, he published a 4,500-word essay titled “J’accuse..!” on the front page of a French newspaper *L’Aurore*, in which he reviewed the case, presented all the facts on the case and named the names of the culprits and conspirators. Zola was at the height of his literary glory and his essay caused a great stir in France’s political and public life. Eventually, Captain Dreyfus was acquitted and cleared of all charges. Zola’s initiative received the support of other France’s literary figures (Anatole France, Henri Poincare, Georges Clemenceau), who rose against the corrupt authorities to defend the truth and justice.

Another French thinker Michael Foucault dedicated a number of essays to exploration on the nature of intellectuals.¹² A “universal” (public) intellectual of the late 19th and early 20th century was a descendant of a specific political figure—a jurist, someone who contrasted despotism, violations and obtrusiveness of the wealth and power with the universality of justice and law. The main focus of the intellectual debate in the 18th and 19th century was justice, and the main means of addressing the public and discussing universal values with it was through writing. Therefore, in Foucault’s words, an intellectual could fully implement his or her mission through being a respectable writer.

However, in the postmodern era, intellectuals forfeited their claims for being the bearers of universal values. Thus, a “universal” intellectual transformed into “intellectual-specialist” (or professional intellectual). According to Foucault, this transformation took place after the World War II, and the person who reinforced that transformation was J. Robert Oppenheimer, “the father of the atomic bomb.” On one hand, as a physicist and developer of nuclear weapons, Oppenheimer was directly connected to education and scientific knowledge; on the other hand, since a nuclear threat was a universal threat to the human kind, his argument as a specialist in nuclear physics became an argument on universal values.

¹¹ Sowell, 2010.

¹² Foucault, Michel. The Intellectual's Political Function. *Politique-Hebdo*, 1977 (La fonction politique de l'intellectuel // *Politique-Hebdo*, 29 novembre, 1977). Accessed December 28, 2015: <http://libertaire.free.fr/MFoucault134.html>

As a result of this transformation, both intellectuals and the public won: intellectuals received a concrete social status, and the public (Foucault was referring to proletariat) ceased to delegate their non-reflected interests to intellectuals who, in fact, were not quite successful in putting these interests into practice, as they were naturally more interested in self-actualization.

The emergence of “intellectual-specialist” allowed to connect two subjects of the political discourse—intellectuals and politicians. Writing as what Foucault referred to as the “sacred feature of intellectual activity” faded into insignificance. Once an intellectual stopped to act of behalf of the “universality” and focused on individual work, Foucault writes, horizontal connections from political knowledge to scientific knowledge were established. As a result, there appeared opportunities to politicize intellectuals. Foucault’s “intellectual-specialist” as an active participant of the political game is in a sense similar to Gramsci’s “organic intellectual.”¹³

1.2. Intellectuals in Politics

Gramsci defined an intellectual in a political sense as someone who uses his or her knowledge, specialty and judgment for political purposes.¹⁴

Norberto Bobbio distinguishes between two types of professional intellectuals in politics: ideologists and experts¹⁵. They have different goals as producers and disseminators of knowledge, and they play different roles in the political discourse. Ideologists develop policies and guidelines, while experts provide the means of policy implementation. Ideologists have to follow the ethics of good will, and experts adhere to the ethics of responsibility. Both types collaborate closely with politicians, and in a sense, notes Bobbio, a professional intellectual is a projection of a professional politician, the difference is that intellectuals produce ideas and provide expert recommendations, develop policies, but it’s the politicians who make the decision.

Bobbio lists key motives for intellectuals to participate in the political process:

- “saving the Motherland” (or at least improving the public life);
- desire for the power;
- aspirations for the fame, glory, et al.;
- achieving personal benefits;
- self-actualization;

¹³ Gramsci, A. “The Formation of the Intellectuals” in *Prison Notes*, 2011

¹⁴ Foucault, 1977

¹⁵ Bobbio, Norberto “Intellectuals and the Authorities,” in *Voprosy Filosofii*, Issue 6, 1992 (Боббио, Норберто. Интеллектуалы и власть // «Вопросы философии», № 6, 1992).

Even if the motives seem selfless, participation in the political process is bad for intellectuals, argues Coser. “To act as an equal among those within power—either as a politician or as a political expert—one needs to sacrifice one’s intellect.”¹⁶ Coser points out that politics is art of simplification (reduction) of what is difficult, therefore people with a high level of intellect are perceived as “aliens” by other political figures.

Another argument against intellectuals in politics is that by nature, intellectuals are prone to conformism, while politicians are prone to abusing the power; therefore, under the pressure from the politicians, the quality of work that intellectuals provide decreases, as their freedom of thought would be restricted.

1.3. *Intellectuals and the Media*

The same logic applies to a public intellectual who becomes a media persona. According to Zygmunt Bauman¹⁷, one of the key functions of public intellectuals is interpretation. In a classic democracy, a citizen’s life can be divided into two spheres—*oikos* (private life) and *ecclesia* (public life). Following the Aristotle’s thought, one can point to the third sphere—*agora*, a public square in a Classical Greek city where *oikos* and *ecclesia* are brought together. *Agora* is the public space where private interests meet public interests and the dialogue takes place. Ancient philosophers, sophists and orators (intellectuals of the time) played the key role at *agora*, translating from the language of *oikos* to the language of *ecclesia*.

In modern democracies, mass media are the equivalent of *agora*, while public intellectuals are the equivalent of ancient philosophers. Bauman notes that there are two types of public intellectuals in the media—“interpreters” and “legislators”.¹⁸ The latter is the type of political intellectuals who act of behalf of the government or a political group and represent their interests. According to Bauman, true intellectuals should act as interpreters, rather than legitimizers, but in modern societies the number of true intellectuals at *agora* is decreasing, which raises a question: can the media maintain the real discussion without the interpreters?

An answer to that question can be found in Pierre Bourdieu’s *On Television and Journalism*. Bourdieu believes that the media play a crucial role in modern democracies, and intellectuals—scientists, writers, political analysts and others—strive to be seen on television and provide their commentaries. Popularity, fame and influence come through the media, and today “to be means to be perceived.”

However, argues Bourdieu, judging by the types of public intellectuals that appear on television today and the issues that they discuss, these “wise men” are incapable of deep

¹⁶ Coser, 1997.

¹⁷ Bauman, Zygmunt. *The Individualized Society*. Polity, 2001

¹⁸ Bauman, Zygmunt. *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-Modernity and Intellectuals*. Polity, 2013.

analysis. “Since they can hardly count on having their work last over time, they have no recourse but to appear on television as often as possible. This means churning out regularly and as often as possible works whose principal function, as Gilles Deleuze used to say, is to get them on television. So the television screen today becomes a sort of mirror for Narcissus, a space for narcissistic exhibitionism.”¹⁹

Bourdieu lays responsibility for the intellectual demise on the way media process information, noting that there is a negative connection between time pressure and thought. The media are under a great pressure to get the “scoop,” but as a result, “everyone copies each other in the attempt to get ahead; everyone ends up doing the same thing. The search for exclusivity, which elsewhere leads to originality and singularity, here yields uniformity and banality.”

This negative connection dates back to the Ancient times, says Bourdieu. “It's an old philosophical topic—take the opposition that Plato makes between the philosopher, who has time, and people in the *agora*, in public space, who are in a hurry and under pressure. What he says, more or less, is that you can't think when you're in a hurry... And one of the major problems posed by television is that question of the relationships between time and speed. Is it possible to think fast? By giving the floor to thinkers who are considered able to think at high speed, isn't television doomed to never have anything but *fast-thinkers*, thinkers who think faster than a speeding bullet...?”

In other words, modern format of the media (*agora*) doesn't allow for a genuine discussion, but rather an imitation of one; therefore, need for genuine intellectuals declines, while demand for *fast-thinkers* grows. Fast-thinkers are always available for a public comment, constantly recycle the same superficial and hollow narrative, and not produce ideas—instead, they produce intellectual fast-food.

In *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (2002), Richard Posner studied a correlation between media presence of the public intellectuals and the actual products (such as scholarly articles) they create. He analyzes a list of 546 public intellectuals compiled based on the number of search engine hits, media mentions and scholarly citations (for the period of 1995-2000) and draws a negative correlation between media mentions and scholarly citations for the top 100 intellectuals most mentioned in the media. In other words, the more mentions an intellectual gets in the media, the less scholarly citation he or she has. According to the study, the top 100 intellectuals (out of Posner's list of total 546 public intellectuals), get 67.5 percent of the media mentions. It is noteworthy that for the rest 446 public intellectuals, Posner finds a positive correlation between media mentions and scholarly citations.

Posner writes: “A proclivity for taking extreme position, a taste for universals and abstraction, a desire for moral purity, a lack of worldliness, and intellectual arrogance work together to induce many academic public intellectuals selectively empathy, a selective sense of justice, an insensitivity to context, a lack of perspective, a denigration of predecessors as lacking moral insight, an impatience with prudence and sobriety, a

¹⁹ Bourdieu, Pierre. *On Television and Journalism*. Polity Press, 1998.

lack of realism, and excessive self-confidence.”²⁰ However, he concludes that despite the drawbacks, general decline of intellectual thought and prevail of the mass values, intellectuals are still the only force that is capable of producing ideas.

1.4. Responsibility of the Intellectuals

One of the key issues associated with the role of public intellectuals in politics and the media is accountability, or rather the lack of it. Posner argues that “idea consumers [the public] don’t care enough about what intellectuals say to monitor rigorously the quality of what gets said, and intellectuals, knowing that they can get away with anything, lazily spout whatever comes into their heads.” Therefore, he notes, there are no “informed consuming public or expert consumer intermediaries, legally enforceable warranties of product quality and high costs of exit for sellers detected selling products of poor quality.”

The accountability issue is discussed by a number of researcher, most notably by Noam Chomsky, who is a prominent public intellectual himself. In an essay titled “The Responsibility of the Intellectuals” Chomsky defines intellectuals as being “in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions.”²¹ It’s the responsibility of the intellectuals to insist upon the truth and “it is also [the intellectual’s] duty to see events in their historical perspective.”

According to Timothy Garton Ash, the record of intellectuals in politics in the span of the 20th century suggests that they are among the least likely to resist the insidious poison, because they are most able to rationalize, intellectualize, or philosophically justify their own submission or corruption by referring to higher goals or values. Over the last hundred years, intellectuals produced innumerable wrong predictions—from the climate change to the outcome of Cold War, but still most of the “false prophets” pertained their reputation and position in the society. Some of them “bear a heavy load of responsibility as architects or accomplices of some of the greatest political crimes of the twentieth century,”²² concludes Ash.

²⁰ Posner, Richard. *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*. Harvard University Press, 2002

²¹ Chomsky, Noam. “The responsibilities of intellectuals.” *The New York Review of Books*, February 23, 1967. Accessed December 28, 2015: <http://www.chomsky.info/articles/19670223.htm>

²² Ash, Timothy Garton, “Prague: Intellectuals and Politicians,” *The New York Review*, January 12, 1995. Accessed December 20, 2014: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1995/jan/12/prague-intellectuals-politicians/>

2. INTELLECTUALS AND POLITICAL SYSTEMS: THE CASE OF RUSSIA

In closed regimes (totalitarian and authoritarian states), there is little to none space for dialogue and the political discourse is reduced to the official narrative. When the public space is controlled by the state, there are few opportunities and outlets for intellectuals to voice their concerns, criticisms or to address the public. From a theoretical standpoint, intellectuals have a moral obligation to oppose the authorities, find a way to speak up and reach out to the masses. In practice, it is not always the case, as the history has shown that intellectuals willfully cooperate with those in the power to get personal benefits. The number of intellectuals who openly oppose the authorities and tell the truth to the public is usually scarce. A few examples of intellectuals who fought for decades against a repressive state in the countries of the Soviet bloc: Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia; Jacek Kuroń in Poland; Andrei Sakharov in Russia.

Intellectuals in closed regimes develop a set of specific national features. Russia provides an interesting insight into that matter.

2.1. *Intelligentsia*

Historically, pre-Petrine Russia had a popular church-and-state culture, but it did not produce intellectuals, as opposed to the West where they emerged from the church clergy. Russian intelligentsia, “educated critics of the Russian political and social order,”²³ was born as a result of Peter the Great’s reforms that led to “Europeanization” of society. A struggle for European values that were essentially democratic values became an important part of the history of Russian intelligentsia.

The phenomenon of Russian intelligentsia was first described in the 1860s (the term itself is derived from a French word “*intelligence*”). “In Russia the intelligent was necessarily the bearer of a certain system of ideas—radical democratic, anti-serfdom, anti-bourgeois and, later, socialist,” writes Boris Kagarlitsky.

Most researchers differentiate between the pre-revolutionary (pre-1917) intelligentsia and the Soviet intelligentsia. Most members of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia belonged to nobility, while that was not the case for the Soviet intelligentsia who were defined by their professional occupation—i.e. teachers, engineers, doctors, scientists. In literature, Soviet intelligentsia is divided into two groups—technical (people with higher education in technical and natural sciences) and humanitarian. They had a number of specific characteristics: higher level education, pre-disposition for analysis and reflection, critical view of the Soviet authorities (that was not necessarily was publicly articulated), and the admiration for an idea of a high sacrifice for the sake of a greater good. Members of intelligentsia who voiced their criticisms of the Soviet authorities are described as dissidents.

²³ Kagarlitsky, Boris. *Thinking Reed: Intellectuals and the Soviet State 1917 to the Present*. Verso, 1989.

In a broader context, “intelligentsia” also included everyone with higher education not just in the Soviet Union, but in all of the Communist Eastern Europe. “In the “abnormal” conditions which have actually been normality for much of Central Europe over much of the last two centuries, intellectuals have been called upon, or have felt themselves called upon, to take roles that they did not take in the West,” notes Ash. “The conscience of the nation. The voice of the oppressed. The writer as priest, prophet, resistance fighter, and substitute politician.”²⁴

However, according to Vladimir Shlapentokh, the history of the USSR, as well as that of other socialist countries, “exhibits cyclical oscillations in the attitudes of the elite toward the intellectuals—from harsh repressions to treatment of intellectuals as allies in the process of modernizing society.”²⁵

The Soviet political elite considered its relationship with the intellectuals highly important, understanding that the Communist Party’s economic and ideological efficiency depended on the cooperation with them. The political elite actively engaged intellectuals from the scientific sector (i.e. Sergei Korolev, Lev Landau, Alexei Tupolev). They were also favored in terms of official prestige and public recognition. At the same time, the Soviet leadership regarded the intellectuals “as a potential or actual enemy”—the only group that can oppose the existing order and undermine its absolute monopoly on power. Therefore intellectuals were excluded from participation or even consultation in the policy-making process and from the ranks of the party and the state apparatus; their political influence was very limited. Some researchers also note that after the World War II, a process of proletarianization of the intelligentsia took place, which caused its numbers to increase sharply, but its social status to decline. This enlarged group of intelligentsia is sometimes called “mass intelligentsia.”

Overall, the Soviet leadership perceived intellectuals as a threat to the regime and rightfully so, as the latter were among the principal bearers of social protest against bureaucracy in Soviet society. Kagarlitsky believes that the conflict between the Stalinist autocracy and the intellectuals was a continuation of the conflict between an Asiatic ruling power and a European intelligentsia that has been unraveling in Russia for centuries.²⁶

In his article on the development of the class struggle in the USSR Wolfgang Leonhard calls intelligentsia “the potential gravedigger of the bureaucracy.”²⁷ In the post-Stalin epoch many Russian intellectuals have indeed made heroic efforts to revive [the] tradition of independent oppositional thought²⁸ that goes back to the 19th century.

The history of authoritarian societies in general has demonstrated that conflict between the political elite and the intelligentsia is a permanent fixture in nondemocratic society.

²⁴ Ash, 1995.

²⁵ Shlapentokh, Vladimir. *Soviet Intellectuals and Political Power: The Post-Stalin Era*. 1990.

²⁶ Kagarlitsky, 1989.

²⁷ Leonhard, Wolfgang. “Are We Moving Towards A Post-Communist Era?” in *Thinking Reed*, 1989.

²⁸ Kagarlitsky, 1989.

Gorbachev's regime was the first in Soviet history to openly declare itself toward the intellectuals and to treat them as a primary ally. The new attitudes shattered the fundamentals of the Soviet system, and required its radical liberalization. *Glasnost* has provided Soviet intellectuals with an opportunity to talk directly to the world.

In authoritative states, intellectuals tend to develop their own distinct subculture, typically opposed to the existing regime. "The Soviet Unions... has a long history of despotic regimes that have alienated the most educated and creative segments of society, driving them toward a common position in opposition to the state."²⁹ In Soviet times, intelligentsia was the major ideological motor of resistance to the authorities. According to Ronald Hill, in the 1960s and 1970s it was the so-called creative intelligentsia (writers, scholars, actors and media people) who were the bearers of liberal ideas and "socialism with a human face."³⁰

In post-totalitarian societies, as they transition to democratic systems, the situation changes dramatically due to the regime's declining legitimacy and decreasing terror. A public space for critical reflection emerges, affecting the attitudes and behavior of intellectuals. According to Ash, "Not just in a dictatorship but precisely in a liberal, democratic state, independent intellectuals have a crucial role to play. [...] As soon as a crack is perceived in the system of control, or there is softening of totalitarian authority, a struggle spontaneously begins for the recovery of intellectual space."³¹

The era of intelligentsia ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. In early 1990s, the fundamental change in the country's economic and political system caused dramatic transformation in the Russian intelligentsia as a social group. Its living standards deteriorated, at the same time new opportunities to achieve individual success appeared. Thousands of Soviet intellectuals emigrated, others changed profession and occupation. Freedom and new political and economic realities changed everything. The intelligentsia has rapidly fragmented into separate professions: journalists, publishers, academics, actors, officials, lawyers, diplomats.

2.2. *Russian intellectuals*

During *perestroika*, intelligentsia acted as the driving force of democratization, but after Boris Yeltsin came to power, "it lost out."³² Members of intelligentsia failed to benefit from the political and economic reforms; due to the collapse of financing for science and education and the fact that new Russian authorities no longer needed them, intellectuals once again found themselves excluded from the political process. Those few who managed to stay within politics, succumbed to play by the bureaucracy's rules.

²⁹ Shlapentokh, 1990.

³⁰ Hill, Ronald. *Putin and Putinism*. Routledge, 2013.

³¹ Ash, 1995.

³² Shevtsova, Lilia. *Russia—Lost in Transition. The Yeltsin and Putin Legacies*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007.

During the transition period, a new group of professional intellectuals (political experts, political consultants, political technologists, “spin doctors,” etc.) emerged in the niche abandoned by the Soviet intelligentsia. This group discarded the mission of bearing universal values and telling the truth about the abuse of power. Pursuing individual success, members of group re-established political connections with Russia’s new political elite. New Russian intellectuals focused on improving individual, rather than public life, cooperating with the authorities on various levels, legitimizing the post-Soviet political system. As Bauman noted, when intelligentsia abandons its mission to educate the “immature” public, when it becomes professional, when it gains the right to earn through its intellectual activities, it transforms into intellectuals. Russia's modern intellectuals is a new phenomenon that has been hardly studied, despite the role that they play in the political process.

Over the period of social transition to democracy, intellectuals tend to act as politicians, introducing dissident ideas and heading opposition movements, formulating new strategies and policies for a developing society. That raises the question of whether intellectuals should remain independent and withdraw from the political process, especially after the transition period is over and major changes in the political and social structure have taken place. “Is it possible to live in truth as a politician?” asks Ash. Issues such as membership in the party, the pressure of being re-elected or introducing unpopular measures and facing the public indignation, put limitations on the intellectuals in politics, therefore, he concludes, they should not become politicians themselves and instead maintain an independent point of view and a critical disposition. “There should be, Ash writes, a necessarily adversarial (but not necessarily hostile) relationship between the independent intellectual and the professional politician. The intellectual’s job is to seek the truth, and then to present it as fully and clearly and interestingly as possible. The politician’s job is to work in half-truth.”³³ However, he gives an example of Vaclav Havel, a prominent intellectual, leader of the dissent movement in Czechoslovakia who headed the opposition and after the fall of Communism became the president—first of Czechoslovakia and later of the Czech Republic.

Russian transition began with the privatization of property before independent political institutions were introduced. Russian liberals had a limited view of what a democracy is, mostly seeing it as an election-based system, but they refused to make compromises and accept the possibility that political rival might win. At the same time post-Soviet society was not ready to transform independently into a civil society. Thus, conditions were created for a democratic rollback. “The Kremlin’s new occupants had come to power on a wave of democratic enthusiasm, but not only had they no intention of promoting the development of civil rights and liberties, they systematically obstructed the process, turning their backs on the democratic forces that had helped their rise to power.”

³³ Ash, 1995.

2.3. Intellectuals in Putin's era

At the end of Boris Yeltsin's rule, the elites introduced a new leader—former KGB officer Vladimir Putin. “The ruling elite did not want another charismatic leader and revolutionary; it did not want a heavyweight with his own power base; it did not want an ambitious politician. Nor did it want anyone engaged in questionable dealings, as were most Russian politicians of the times. The Kremlin's principal need was for an individual close to the security forces who would be able to rely on their support to defend the regime.”³⁴

However, as soon as Vladimir Putin came to power, he took measures to secure his position, stalling further the country's democratic path. He purged the political arena of opposition and put the most powerful rival—Mikhail Khodorkovsky—in jail; overtook main TV networks, starting from the most popular channel NTV; pressed the prosecutor's office and courts into service; established control over the parliament by depriving regional leaders—members of the Federation Council—of their rights to represent regional interests and created a pro-Kremlin party (United Russia) that took majority in the State Duma.

Lilia Shevtsova describes intellectuals serving Putin's regime as a group that “emphasized the political importance of order and stability because there are only too aware of their vulnerability and fear for their future if the regime should weaken.” As a result, it was intellectuals, like Gleb Pavlovsky, Vyacheslav Nikonov and Sergei Markov, who justified and propagated the official ideological rationale behind the repressions or undemocratic moves.

Hill offers a possible explanation why so many Russian intellectuals in politics started to support the regime—the suborning. “Putin's Kremlin succeeded in doing what no Russian rulers (apart from Stalin) were able to achieve. The presidential administration not only pacified most members of the intellectual community, but also turned many of them into supporters of the regime... Big money made it possible for Putin's regime to avert the danger of opposition...”³⁵

There might be another reason. Larry Diamond noted that post-totalitarian regimes feel “unprecedented pressure to adopt or at least mimic the democratic form.” Russia's development after the collapse of the Soviet Union proves that view and at the same time confirms Francis Fukuyama's conclusion articulated *End of History* that liberal democracy won the battle against other ideological competitors and is the only “broadly legitimate regime form.” Many researchers observe that Russia's political system is hardly a democracy, but it does contain plenty of superficial democratic features, and the reason is that Russian political elite cares about legitimacy. Under Yeltsin, Russia's political system was usually described as “electoral democracy.” With Vladimir Putin in the office, the adjectives describing the system changed over time—from “hybrid” and “pseudo” to “sovereign” and “illiberal.”

³⁴ Shevtsova, 2007.

³⁵ Hill, 2013.

According to Shevtsova, “imitation” is a key word for deciphering political reality in Russia. Politics in Russia has been replaced “by a kind of virtual reality, one created by the special class of Kremlin spin doctors who are simultaneously analysts, politicians, and propagandists.” In Andrew Wilson’s terms, spin doctors “operate in a world of ‘clones’ and ‘doubles,’ of ‘administrative resources,’ ‘active measures,’ and ‘Kompromant’ (compromising information)...”³⁶

How exactly do Russian intellectuals view the country’s transformation?

According to Shevtsova, the majority of intellectuals, whom she defines as “pragmatists,”³⁷ believe that there are no shortcuts between totalitarianism and liberal democracy, the transformation should be slow and one needs to take one step at a time. According to “pragmatists,” Russia is a normal country, and its level of democratic development is proportionate to its economic development. For example, Andranik Migranyan, Vyacheslav Nikonov, Sergei Markov and a number of other “pragmatic” Russian intellectuals have written and spoken extensively on various occasions about Russia’s special democratic model—“sovereign democracy.”³⁸ The term itself, however, was introduced by Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin chief ideologist and former deputy head of the presidential administration. The centerpiece idea of the “sovereign democracy” is based on two principles: basic liberal values and the sovereign state. The latter means that political process in Russia and its development have to be protected from the external (foreign) influence, and the state cannot allow for existing government forms to be transferred to the country, since these forms are alien to Russia because they have no roots in the Russian history and are not applicable to the national context.

Pragmatism is the dominating approach to the country’s development both in the intellectual community and the political class. “What unites them all, optimists and skeptics alike, is a fantastic view of Russia, a blindness to contradictory trends within the country, a lack of faith that it be democratized, and a determination to shoe-horn the country into their favored stereotypes,” argues Shevtsova. The problem is that “pragmatists” ideas seem to seed deeply the Russian public mind, as they are shared and supported by the majority of the Russian population.

To advance its “pragmatic approach” to the intellectual community, the Kremlin reached out to the foreign political experts and analysts. The idea was to co-opt Western intellectuals and convince them that Russia is in fact an open, rapidly developing country that welcomes foreign investment and provides a platform for dialogue. To advance this agenda, the Kremlin founded Valdai International Discussion Club in 2008—when Russia desperately needed to break from international isolation following the war in

³⁶ Wilson, Andrew. *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*, Yale University Press, 2005

³⁷ Shevtsova, 2007

³⁸ Migranyan, Andranik. “On Sovereign Democracy.” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, October 3, 2010 (Мигрянян, Анранник. О суверенной демократии. Российская газета, 3 октября 2010 г.). Accessed December 20, 2014: <http://www.rg.ru/2007/10/03/demokratiya.html>

Georgia. In an interview with *Kommersant*, U.S. expert on Russian politics Andrew Kuchins said, after participating in the Valdai's meeting, that it was "one of the most effective Kremlin PR projects."³⁹ Many Western professional intellectuals came to participate in the Valdai Club's meetings, driven by various motives—curiosity, scholar interest, research purposes, direct contact with Russian policy-makers, etc. However, as Shevtsova argues, Valdai format does not provide a platform for a genuine dialogue, as the Kremlin is not interested in raising sensitive or controversial issues. And it seems that neither are the guests who are "too embarrassed to discuss problems that the Russian elite might find too uncomfortable to answer."⁴⁰

Using Bauman's categorization, pro-Kremlin "pragmatists" play the role of both "interpreters" and "legitimizers"—they explain to the public why the authorities have to act a certain way, bending the truth to suit political purpose and justifying the regime. However, they do not produce ideas per se, they just follow the course of the regime.

There is another, much smaller group of intellectuals that Shevtsova describes as "idealists."⁴¹ They believe that development of political institutions is a crucial condition of democratization. This group includes, among others, Yevgeny Yasin, Andrei Illarionov, Alexander Auzan, Igor Klyamkin, Mark Urnov, Andrei Piontkovsky, etc. They believe that economic modernization has no future in Russia while power remains personalized. However, they have limited access to popular media platforms that are mostly controlled by the Russian government. Therefore, even if they choose to voice their criticisms, their opinions might not be heard by the general public.

Shevtsova notes that "pragmatism endorses the neo-patrimonial regime and justifies political inaction and conformism." While "pragmatists" retain public support, "idealists" have to think carefully why they are failing to win the narrative: is it because an attempt to introduce democracy in Russia failed in the 1990s? Another question for them to consider: do those who proclaimed themselves to be liberal democrats share responsibility for that failure?

3.3. *The conservative turn*

The political "thaw" associated with Dmitry Medvedev's presidency (2008-2012) was cut short after Vladimir Putin announced in September of 2011 that he would be coming back as the Russian president. The news that everything in the country is being controlled and determined by a small circle of people caused a ripple effect in all social groups. The rigging of the December 2011 parliamentary elections that followed later the same year resulted in the largest mass protests since the collapse of the Soviet Union. For many members of the emerging middle class and especially for a social stratum what was

³⁹ Shevtsova. *Lonely Power*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010

⁴⁰ Shevtsova, 2010.

⁴¹ Ibid.

described as the “creative class,” it was this startling realization that they don’t have any influence on the political process that took them to the streets.

The protests that lasted through the winter and spring of 2012 became the turning point for the regime. The state defense mechanisms were mobilized to secure the elite’s interests and to intimidate those who dared to challenge the regime. After Vladimir Putin was re-elected for the third time as the president of Russia, dozens of toughening legislations were passed to re-enforce his political power, thus accelerating the democratic rollback. Some of these legislations including laws re-criminalizing defamation, obliging NGOs receiving overseas funding to register as “foreign agents,” raising fines concerning peaceful assembly and protest, etc. Putin’s regime, fueled by the new fears from inside the country and from abroad (the Arab Spring), discarded its pseudo-democratic narrative and adopted a new, more conservative, paternalistic, authoritarian one.

One of the first signs of the change was the resignation of Vladislav Surkov in December 2011 and the appointment of Vyacheslav Volodin to the position of the deputy head of presidential administration—a symbolic shift in the Kremlin’s ideology department. Surkov is viewed by many researchers as an “intellectual in politics”—a talented political pundit and PR specialist, who not only developed the concept of the “sovereign democracy,” but also launched a number of successful political projects (i.e. Rodina, a leftist, Kremlin-backed party that took votes from the communists in 2003 parliamentary elections) to legitimize the regime. Volodin, to the contrary, is a “technical figure,” a bureaucrat appointed to the post to directly implement the president’s will. Therefore, with Surkov’s departure, many observers concluded that the place of the chief Kremlin ideologist remained vacant.

In the last two years Vladimir Putin’s rhetoric has become even more conservative. Putin has embraced the ideas the unique Russian civilization and its special place in history (inspired by the philosophical works of Nikolai Berdyaev, Ivan Ilyin and Vladimir Solovyov) and alienated the Western world whom he blamed for attempting to destroy Russia. In his 2013 address to the Federal Assembly Putin said that “there are more and more people in the world who support our position on defending traditional values that have made up the spiritual and moral foundation of civilization in every nation for thousands of years: the values of traditional families, real human life, including religious life, not just material existence but also spirituality, the values of humanism and global diversity. Of course, this is a conservative position. But speaking in the words of Nikolai Berdyaev, the point of conservatism is not that it prevents movement forward and upward, but that it prevents movement backward and downward, into chaotic darkness and a return to a primitive state.”⁴²

Putin’s new conservatism advocates for state power and see individuals as serving that state, drawing on the tradition of Russian imperial conservatism and Eurasianism. Not only does it legitimize authoritarian state, anti-Western attitudes and value religion and

⁴² Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly. 12 December 2013. Accessed December 20, 2014: <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/6402>

public submission, but in essence it is expansionist.⁴³ The Ukraine February 2014 revolution finalized Putin's transition toward the new authoritarianism that now included expansionist strategy (annexation of Crimea is the most recent example) and an openly anti-Western stance.

A number of publications and researchers have been pointing out that these ideas are similar to those of Alexander Dugin, a conservative political philosopher, advocate for the ultra-right ideology. In fact, Dugin's ideas were so in tune with Putin's new views that a *Foreign Affairs* article called him "Putin's brain."

Dugin can be described as public intellectual by default: he holds a double doctor's degree—in political science and sociology; he is a professor at the Department of Sociology of the Moscow State University and director of the Department's Center for Conservative Studies. At the same time, Dugin's political views are opposite to liberal—he is one of the founders and ideologists (with Eduard Limonov) of the National Bolshevik Party (now banned). He was expelled from the party and later launched his own International Eurasian Movement. He has oftentimes criticized Russian leadership for the lack of any ideology, arguing that his ideas would suit the Russian state the best, however, after Vladimir Putin came to power, Dugin has softened his stance.

Dugin is also known for introducing the so-called Fourth Political Theory—a new ideology that he sees as an alternative to the three main ideologies of the 20th century (communism, liberalism, fascism). The Fourth Theory rejects postindustrial society, liberalism and globalization. According to Dugin, liberal democracy won the battle for modernity, but a new battle for postmodernity is only beginning. Since at "the end of history" in the modernity era there was no place for Russia, but, argues Dugin, postmodernity opens new possibilities for Russia and it has to find its own way.

⁴³ Barbashin, Anton; Thoburn, Hanna. "Putin's Brain." *Foreign Affairs*. 31 March 2014. Accessed December 20, 2014: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141080/anton-barbashin-and-hannah-thoburn/putins-brain>

3. POLITICAL EXPERTS vs. PUBLIC POLITICIANS

3.1. "Engaged intellectuals"

One of the ways to maintain the official discourse among the political and business elites is to establish monopsony at the political expertise market. Putin's regime created the environment in which only loyal Russian think tanks and political experts gain access to the government contracts and tenders that provide for the lion's share of the money allocated for policy research and analysis. Russia has not developed an endowment system that allows Western think tanks operate in a relatively independent mode, therefore the only stable source of income in Russia's political climate is the state. Thus, Russian think tanks have been co-opted by the government and to a large extent ceased to provide objective policy research. The pressure of losing the funding makes them create the product that the government wants to receive rather than develop alternatives that can be used by competing parties.

Analysis of the activities and the clientele of the Russian think tanks with the highest media presence helps to prove this point. The results of the media monitoring conducted by Integrum in 2013 are presented in the Table below.

RUSSIAN THINK TANKS BY MEDIA MENTIONS (2013)

No.	Think Tank	Media Mentions
1	Center for Political Technologies	7844
2	Agency of Political and Economic Communications	7474
3	"St. Petersburg Politics" Foundation	6521
4	Center for Political Information	6406
5	Foundation for Civil Society Development	6112
6	International Institute for Political Expertise	5019
7	Center for Strategic Development	4172
8	Center for Political Conjuncture	4143
9	Institute of Contemporary Development (INSOR)	3501
10	Minchenko Consulting Group	2706
11	Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies	1974
12	Moscow Carnegie Foundation	1704
13	Foundation for Effective Politics	1176
14	Foundation for Information Policy Development	816
15	Institute of Civil Engineering	603

This rating was compiled the following way: the names of Russian think tanks were entered into the Integrum⁴⁴ database search system with a goal to determine the number of media mentions in the period of January 1, 2013 to December 31, 2013. The database included national, regional and international print media; national, regional and international information agencies; national, regional and international online media; national, regional and international television networks and radio stations.

In this paper, we will focus on the top-3 think tanks. The results of this media monitoring show that the Center for Political Technologies was mentioned in the media the most. Founded in 1991, it's one of the oldest and most reputable think tanks in contemporary Russia. It employs about 70 analysts and specialists in political science, public administration, political PR, GR and communication strategies. The clients list of CPT is diversified and includes the presidential administration, various ministries of the Russian government, regional governments and local authorities, corporations and banks, international companies and foreign embassies. Diversification, established reputation and a long history are perhaps the reasons for CPT to be able to provide a wide range of commentaries on the Russian political developments, including the ones that do not favor the official narrative.

The second place in the rating is occupied by the Agency of Political and Economic Communications. It was founded in 2004 and specialized in policy research, regional politics, PR and media projects. Among the clients of this think tanks are: the United Russia party and the Russian Public Chamber, state controlled news agencies (ITAR-TASS and Interfax), other Kremlin-backed think tanks (Foundation for Civil Society Development, Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies). It is also worth mentioning that the Agency is headed by Dmitry Orlov, a political consultant and strategist, who is incidentally Vladimir Putin's authorized representative.

The third place belongs to St. Petersburg Politics Foundation. It was established in 2002 and focuses on political consulting and expertise, sociological research and regional politics. The Foundation is known for its ratings of the Russian governors' "political survival" and reports on regional social and political sustainability. Partners of this think tank are the United Russia party and the Russian Public Chamber, Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, other think tanks (Agency of Political and Economic Communications and Minchenko Consulting), All-Russia Council on Local Government. Mikhail Vinogradov is the president of the Foundation since 2008, who is close to the Kremlin and Vladimir Putin's circle.

Mikhail Vinogradov also appears as number one in the 2013 rating of the Russian political experts most mentioned in the media (presented below).

⁴⁴ Integrum is the largest electronic Russian mass media database with professional research and monitoring tools.

RUSSIAN POLITICAL EXPERTS BY THE NUMBER OF MENTIONS IN THE MEDIA (2013)⁴⁵

No.	Name	Affiliation	Number of Mentions in the Media
1	Mikhail Vinogradov	"St. Petersburg Politics" Foundation	7145
2	Vyacheslav Nikonov	"Polity" Foundation (currently, a Russian MP)	7032
3	Dmitry Orlov	Agency of Political and Economic Communications	6733
4	Yevgeny Minchenko	Minchenko Consulting Group	6058
5	Aleksei Mukhin	Center for Political Information	5344
6	Sergei Markov	Center for Political Studies (currently, a Russian MP)	3904
7	Alexei Makarkin	Center for Political Technologies	3449
8	Konstantin Kalachev	Political Expert Group	3437
9	Stanislav Belkovsky	independent political commentator, formerly with the National Strategy Institute	2651
10	Dmitry Oreshkin	independent political commentator	2090
11	Pavel Danilin	Center for Political Analysis	2017
12	Dmitry Abzalov	Center for Strategic Communications	1979
13	Mikhail Remizov	National Strategy Institute	1967
14	Rostislav Turovsky	Center for Political Technologies	1922
15	Gleb Pavlovsky	Foundation for Effective Politics	1849

Mikhail Vinogradov who leads in this rating can be described as a professional intellectual and a political expert, whose name appears in a wide range of the media outlets—from Channel One and Izvestia, the pro-Kremlin media outlets, to TV Rain and Grani.ru, the liberal internet publications. He also serves as a mediator between the media and the Kremlin. For example, Vinogradov gave interviews after his meeting with Vladimir Putin, in which he tried to interpret the president's policies, intentions and motives. In a 2012 interview with Slon.ru, he spoke of the political experts, consultants, intellectuals that Putin listens to.⁴⁶

A close runner-up to Vinogradov is Vyacheslav Nikonov, president of the Polity Foundation and a current member of the Russian State Duma. Nikonov is a prominent political scientist and intellectual in politics ("pragmatist"), who was elected deputy of the Russian State Duma in 1993 and again in 2011 (he is currently chairman of the Education Committee and deputy chairman of the Committee on International Affairs).

⁴⁵ Regional commentaries. Rating of Russian political analysts by their mentions in the media in 2013. December 21, 2014. (Региональные комментарии. Рейтинг российских политологов по упоминаемости в СМИ в 2013 году. 21 января 2014 г.). Accessed December 20, 2014: <http://regcomment.ru/investigations/rejting-rossiyskikh-politologov-po-upominaemosti-v-smi-v-2013-godu/>

⁴⁶ Samsonova, Tonya. "Whom Does Putin Listen To?" *Slon.ru*, February 8, 2012 (Самсонова Тоня. Кого слушает Путин? *Slon.ru*, 8 февраля 2012 г.). Accessed December 20, 2014: http://slon.ru/russia/kogo_slushaet_putin-744504.xhtml

Nikonov has been a part of the political elite for decades (he is grandson of Vyacheslav Molotov, a renowned Soviet politician and diplomat and the signatory of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact). Nikonov gained the reputation of one of Putin's major apologists and propagandist (alongside Sergei Markov and Andranik Migranyan).

He is also a professional intellectual, a political expert ("interpreter" and "legislators" in Bauman's terms), the one who tells the public what it needs to know and think about the president and his policies, deflects the criticisms and justifies the Kremlin's course. One of Nikonov's quotes gives an idea of his approach: "In the recent months the attack not only on Russia, but on the Russian president has become unprecedented. I read American press on a daily basis since 1976 and I can say that there has never been such a pressure on Russia and its leader. But in fact Russia gets pressured only when it's strong and because it's strong."⁴⁷ In this quote Nikonov refers to the West's tough stance on Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States and members of the European Union. Nikonov's case is an example of an "engaged intellectual" who became the regime's mouthpiece, as opposed to the ideal intellectual who is supposed to keep distance from the authorities and tell them the truth.

Dmitry Orlov, director of the Agency of the Political and Economic Communications, who was mentioned earlier, comes third in the rating. He is member of the Public Chamber and the Supreme Council of the United Russia party. Orlov can also be considered a professional politician and political expert, who maintains and recycles the official narrative. He is an active supporter and apologist of Vladimir Putin personally. Over the last years, Orlov introduced the concept of Putin's "new majority" (explaining sociology behind the president's high approval ratings); he wrote a lot on the "sovereign democracy" (when this concept was propagated by the Kremlin); he launched a popular rating titled "100 most influential politicians in Russia" and regularly produces analytical reports on major political issues.

Orlov acts in the same capacity as other political experts close to the Kremlin—"an engaged intellectual" who serves the regime. In an article published after the 2012 presidential elections, Orlov wrote: "I think no one needs to "privatize" Putin. Especially the supporters of the "left turn." The president-elect relies on a wide public coalition ("Putin's majority") that has been reconfirmed during the presidential elections. As a classic of the conservative thought once said about de Gaulle: he renewed the tradition, "all of it, altogether." Putin is like this. He has always—mostly intuitively—felt the public demand and has always found a response to it."

⁴⁷ Nikonov, Vyacheslav. "The Attack on Russia And Its President Is Unprecedented." *Ruskiy Mir*, October 23, 2014. (Никонов, Вячеслав. Атака на Россию и ее президента имеет беспрецедентный характер. Русский мир, 23 октября 2014 г.). Accessed December 20, 2014: <http://ruskiymir.ru/news/153246/>

3.2. New public intellectuals

In 2009, an online media outlet Openspace.ru (now Colta.ru) conducted a poll to create a simple rating of the Russian intellectuals that its readers consider “influential.” The editorial team suggested a list of 100 people for an online vote. Readers were allowed to choose five names and, after registration, to add one more name that, in their opinion, was missing from the list (the editorial team reserved the right to delete those names that didn’t not match the criteria of a “public intellectual.”) As a result, the website readers added 232 more names to the original list. The voting on the combined list of 332 lasted for almost a month—from November 25 to December 20, 2009—during which time over 42,000 people cast their votes, while the website recorded about 850,000 page impressions.

Though the scientific value of this poll is limited, it does provide an interesting insight into who the Russian public considers to be intellectuals. In this paper we will focus only on the first 20 people that gained most of the votes.

TOP-20 MOST INFLUENTIAL INTELLECTUALS IN RUSSIA (2009)⁴⁸

No.	Name	Occupation	Votes
1	Victor Pelevin	writer	2134 (5.09%)
2	Daniil Shepvalov	journalist, blogger	1877 (4.48%)
3	Leonid Parfyonov	journalist	1296 (3.09%)
4	Mikhail Khodorkovsky	politician	1274 (3.04%)
5	Konstantin Krylov	writer	1264 (3.02%)
6	Patriarch Kirill	theologian (Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church)	1206 (2.88%)
7	Sergei Kapitsa	scientist	1048 (2.5%)
8	Alexander Gordon	journalist	1042 (2.49%)
9	Boris Strugatsky	writer	1023 (2.44%)
10	Eduard Limonov	politician, writer	917 (2.19%)
11	Dmitry Bykov	writer	910 (2.17%)
12	Dmitry Galkovsky	writer, philosopher	906 (2.16%)
13	Boris Akunin	writer	822 (1.96%)
14	Vladimir Pozner	journalist	794 (1.89%)
15	Victor Shenderovich	writer	752 (1.79%)
16	Tatiana Tolstaya	writer	748 (1.79%)

⁴⁸ Viktor Pelevin Is Recognized As the Most Influential Russian Intellectual.” *OpenSpace.ru*, December 21, 2009 (Самым влиятельным интеллектуалом России признан Виктор Пелевин. OpenSpace.ru, 21 декабря 2009 г.). Accessed December 20, 2014: <http://os.colta.ru/news/details/15143/>

17	Fr. Andrey Kuraev	theologian (Russian Orthodox Protodeacon)	743 (1.77%)
18	Yulia Latynina	journalist, author	654 (1.56%)
19	Alexei Venediktov	journalist	618 (1.47%)
20	Vladimir Sorokin	writer	602 (1.44%)

The poll results reflected the notion that Russians still view primarily writers, journalists and other men (and women) of letter as “public intellectuals.” Out of the top-20 list, half of the people are writers, with the first position occupied by a cult writer Victor Pelevin; six people are journalists; two are theologians, one is politician⁴⁹ and one is a scientist.

Most of the names represented in the top-20 list are likely known to an average Russian citizen. Writers, like Victor Pelevin, Boris Strugatsky,⁵⁰ Dmitry Bykov, Boris Akunin, Tatiana Tolstaya, Vladimir Sorokin and even Eduard Limonov, a well-known nationalist and politician, have earned their place in the literary world and in the public hall of fame long time ago. The same applies to the journalists: Leonid Parfyonov, Alexander Gordon, Vladimir Pozner are respectable TV presenters; Victor Shenderovich, Yulia Latynina and Alexei Venediktov gained their reputation through their writings and/or critical public stance. Patriarch Kirill and Father Andrey Kuraev have spoken and written extensively on religious issues that have grown to be popular among the Russian believers.

Despite the fact that Mikhail Khodorkovsky, former head of Yukos oil company, had been in prison for six years during the 2009 poll, he managed to maintain his public presence and was recognized as a public intellectual through his writings, his resilience and critical stance on the Kremlin’s policies and Russia’s democratic rollback.

It is noteworthy that the only prominent academic who made the list is Sergei Kapitsa,⁵¹ a physicist and presenter of the TV programme titled “Obvious and Incredible” (*Ochevidnoye-Neveroyatnoye*) that has been popular with the members of the Soviet intelligentsia since 1973 and remained as such after the collapse of the USSR. Academics working in the humanities are widely lacking from the list (and not just the top-20 one), which raises a question: are their voices just muffled in the media buzz or do they refrain from speaking publicly in the first place?

A few names surprisingly scored high votes in the poll: blogger and journalist Daniil Shepovalov, writer Konstantin Krylov and philosopher and writer Daniil Galkovsky. Initially, Shepovalov became popular through his articles in *Hacker*, *Hooligan* and *Bravo* magazines; he later became a famous internet personality for his sharp black humor. As for Krylov, he is also an internet celebrity representing two specific segment of the voters: on one hand, he is editor of the nationalist *Russian March* magazine and member of the Congress of Russian Communities; on the other hand, he has proved himself as a

⁴⁹ Openspace.ru describes Mikhail Khodorkovsky as a “politician.” However, it seems inaccurate, since in 2009 Khodorkovsky was in jail and primarily recognized as a “political prisoner.”

⁵⁰ Boris Strugatsky passed away in November, 2012.

⁵¹ Sergei Kapitsa passed away in August, 2012.

successful fantasy writer (under the alias of Mikhail Kharitonov). Finally, Dmitry Galkovsky is another internet celebrity, author of *The Endless Dead-end*, for which he received “Anti-Booker,” a Russian literary award. He is also a popular blogger, founder of the *Samizdat* server and author of a number of philosophical theories, including a conspiracy theory of the so-called “crypto-colonies”—countries that formally appear independent but in reality are governed from abroad.

One of the explanations for these three names getting into the top-20 list of Russia’s most influential intellectuals can be spam votes (internet “cheat hits”) cast by the members of the internet community to advance their candidate. Even though the editorial team of Openspace.ru explicitly stated that they would annul such votes, it is technically impossible to monitor all of them. Another explanation is that these three people are popular for their nationalist views and, therefore, represent the reality of the ideological preferences among the voters.

As sociologist Lyubov Borisuyk points out in her review⁵² of the poll, Victor Pelevin is the “most typical and conspicuous representative of the post-modern in Russia today.” She notes that traditional understanding of “influence” requires a “discernible ideological platform,” while “Pelevin’s very idea lies in the absence of such a platform.” The writer, who is known for his non-public if not to say anti-public stance, “rarely expresses himself directly or promotes his books and makes a point of avoiding writers’ and academic conferences. Many of his readers doubt whether he is a living person, so pure and distilled a symbol he has become.” Borisuyk concludes that in that sense Pelevin cannot be considered an “influential intellectual figure,” because in today’s Russian “those simply don’t exist.”

Openspace.ru followed up with the people who were voted as top-10 Russian intellectuals and asked them a set of questions. The answers varied dramatically. For example, Mikhail Khodorkovsky pointed out that only after spending years in prison where he was able to reflect and write, he felt the “weight of the written word” and the responsibility that it imposed on him. According to Khodorkovsky, it is Russia’s intellectual elite that can transform a crowd into a civil society; and that Russia’s problem is not “the oil curse” but the irresponsibility of the [intellectual] elite, its fragmentation and servility. “The state of the majority of “the best minds” is projecting onto the current social process.”

Eduard Limonov spoke about the poll with contempt, because he said it is impossible to calculate arithmetically who Russia’s most influential intellectual is. He also added that he considered himself an influential intellectual without the poll, but through his books and his thoughts. “Today, TV presenters are known for their witty and cheap jokes, but tomorrow no one will remember them... I don’t despise them, but being a TV presenter doesn’t mean being an intellectual.”

⁵² Borisiuk, Liubov. “Who is Russia's top intellectual?” *Opendemocracy.net*, 4 February 2010. Accessed December 20, 2014: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/lyubov-borisyak/who-is-russias-top-intellectual>

Most of other respondents said that they did not believe that they influenced public opinion, however, some of them noted that they feel responsibility for what they are saying.

In 2013 Colta.ru (formerly Openspace.ru) repeated the poll on the most influential intellectuals in Russia, following the same methodology. The poll provides interesting material for comparative analysis. The top-20 people who were voted “most influential intellectuals” in 2013 are listed below.

TOP-20 MOST INFLUENTIAL INTELLECTUALS IN RUSSIA (2009)⁵³

No.	Name	Occupation	Rating
1	Alexei Navalny	politician	4955 (5.29%)
2	Yegor Prosvirnin	journalist	4151 (4.44%)
3	Victor Pelevin	writer	2893 (3.09%)
4	Dmitry Bykov	writer, journalist	2510 (2.68%)
5	Vladimir Pozner	journalist	2485 (2.66%)
6	Boris Akunin	writer	2403 (2.57%)
7	Leonid Parfyonov	journalist	2195 (2.35%)
8	Mikhail Khodorkovsky	politician	1935 (2.07%)
9	Konstantin Krylov	writer	1926 (2.06%)
10	Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina	members of Pussy Riot	1800 (1.92%)
11	Alexander Gordon	journalist, film director	1796 (1.92%)
12	Fr. Andrey Kuraev	theologian (Russian Orthodox Protodeacon)	1634 (1.75%)
13	Patriarch Kirill	Theologian (Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church)	1497 (1.6%)
14	Sergei Kurginyan	political commentator	1471 (1.57%)
15	Eduard Limonov	politician, writer	1451 (1.55%)
16	Oleg Kashin	journalist	1349 (1.44%)
17	Yevgeny Roizman	politician	1217 (1.3%)
18	Vladimir Sorokin	writer	1196 (1.28%)
19	Yulia Latynina	journalist, writer	1157 (1.24%)
20	Andrei Fursov	writer	1142 (1.22%)

⁵³ Morev, Gleb. “Alexey Navalny: ‘There Is No Place On Internet Where the Authorities Could Have Won’.” Colta.ru, December 26, 2013. (Морев, Глеб. Алексей Навальный: «В интернете нет площадки, где могла бы победить власть». Colta.ru, 26 декабря 2013 г.). Accessed December 20, 2014: <http://www.colta.ru/articles/specials/1676>

It is worth mentioning that this time over 83,000 people participated in the poll that also lasted for almost a month during the month of December, 2013. The full list of intellectuals comprised 388 people.

The person who was voted as the most influential Russian intellectual is a prominent anti-corruption blogger and politician Alexei Navalny whose name was not even mentioned in the 2009 list. Navalny gained popularity through his extensive research and investigative articles, exposing corruption in the highest levels of power. He later founded Anti-Corruption Foundation and launched a number of online projects (RosPil, RosYama, RosUzник) promoting civil initiatives and grassroots movement. He is undeniably one of the most popular bloggers in Russia and a prominent opposition figure, who constantly criticizes the authorities.

After the poll results were announced, Colta.ru interviewed Navalny. In one of the questions, Colta.ru's journalist Gleb Morev defined what the editorial team meant by "public intellectual," saying that it is not an "*intelligent* who reads a lots of books, or an academic, but an actor whose writings and actions change the public conscience." In his response Navalny confirmed the thought articulated by Mikhail Khodorkovsky four years earlier, that there is a lack of public intellectuals in Russia, even though there is high demand. As a result "political surrogates, like [Navalny himself] occupy this niche." Another interesting point is that, according to Navalny, public intellectuals are the people "who produce important political meanings," and it is important to compare own approaches to their opinions. "The most important compass is inside, but public intellectuals are the coordinate system."⁵⁴

In the interview both speakers mention Sergei Guriev, a prominent Russian economist and former president of the Higher School of Economics, and agree that he is a typical public intellectual, who is independent, savvy and not afraid to voice his criticisms (however, he emigrated to France in 2013 under political pressure). Guriev was voted no. 23 in the 2013 Colta.ru list and was not included in the 2009 list.

Another person who was not included in the 2009 list and still made it to the no. 2 in 2013 is Yegor Prosvirnin, editor-in-chief of *Sputnik and Pogrom*, a popular online publication with an agenda that its Facebook page defines as "intellectual Russian nationalism." Former editor of *PC Gamer* magazine, Prosvirnin launched this website in 2012 and in less than two years it gained tens of thousands subscribers and followers, proving that there is a demand for the so-called "hipster nationalism"⁵⁵ narrative among internet users in Russia.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ The term was coined by a Russian journalist Oleg Kashin: Kashin, Oleg. "Sputnik I Pogrom: Yegor of Our Time and the Main Anti-Fascist Website." *Slon.ru*, July 29, 2013. (Кашин, Олег. «Спутник и погром»: Егор нашего времени и главный антифашистский сайт. *Slon.ru*, 29 июля 2013 г.). Accessed December 20, 2014: http://slon.ru/russia/sputnik_i_pogrom_egor_nashego_vremeni_-971431.xhtml

Another new addition to the top-20 list (no. 10) are members of the *Pussy Riot* punk-band Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, who were arrested for performing an anti-Putin prayer in the Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow in March, 2012. They were sentenced to two years in prison for “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred.” The severity of this verdict and the highly publicized nature of the case caused a great stir not only in Russia, but also around the globe, which pushed Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina to stardom. They were released by amnesty at the end of 2013 and have been campaigning for political freedoms and human rights ever since.

Among other newcomers that were not included in the 2009 list are journalist Oleg Kashin and politician Yevgeny Roizman. Kashin is known for his investigative articles for *Kommersant* and other publications; in 2010, he was severely beaten—the case was highly publicized by the Russian blogosphere and the journalist community. The case, however, was never solved. After recovery, Kashin continued his work as a journalist, keeping a critical stance on the Russian authorities and the country’s political system.

As for Roizman, who currently serves as Mayor of Yekaterinburg, one of the largest cities in Russia, he gained popularity as a civil activist and a campaigner against illegal drug sales (he cofounded City Without Drugs program). His victory in 2013 mayoral elections against a United Russia candidate came as an unpleasant surprise for the authorities and a rare win for the Russian political opposition.

Finally, there are two more new names in the 2013 top-20 list that can be found in the 2009 list, but did not get as many votes. They are Sergei Kurginyan (no. 149 in 2009) and Andrei Fursov (no. 262 in 2009). Kurginyan’s popularity can be explained by the fact that in 2011 he founded *Essence of Time*, a Russian nationalist movement that had ideological elements of communism and announced restoration of the Soviet Union and geopolitical revenge as its primary goals. Ideas put forward by this movement coincide with the official rhetoric⁵⁶ of Putin’s regime. Thus, one can assume that Kurginyan shares his popularity (and influence) with the supporters of the current political course.

The hike in Andrei Fursov’s popularity is a subject for discussion. It can be associated with his excessive writing on political topics within the framework of the official narrative. Some of the recent examples of his work maintain the Kremlin’s stance on Ukraine conflict and general anti-Americanism (both notions are popular with the Russian public, according to recent surveys⁵⁷).

Analysis of these two polls allows us to make several observations on the state of the Russian intellectual elite. First, there is a distinctive change in the public perception of what a public intellectual is and what role this figure plays in the society. Many names of the 2013 list appeared there for political reasons. In 2009, the majority of the top-voted

⁵⁶ Vladimir Putin is known to have called dissolution of the Soviet Union “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.”

⁵⁷ Levada Center’s survey on Ukraine. “The conflict between Russia and the Western countries about Ukraine.” November 14-17, 2014. Accessed December 28, 2015: <http://www.levada.ru/old/21-11-2014/konflikt-rossii-i-zapadnykh-stran-vokrug-ukrainy>

Russian intellectuals were writers and journalists, while in 2013, politicians appeared in the list. One of the possible explanations of this development can be the 2011-2012 protests that pushed the so-called “creative class” to recognize and express its interests and start looking for new ways of these interests to be represented.

Second, popularity of the nationalist ideas is growing on both sides of the intellectual spectrum—political opposition and supporters of the official policies. Researchers observed that intellectuals tend to unite strongly in their hatred of the state and begin, almost unanimously, to support liberal ideology. The situation changes if the regime makes progress toward liberalization and if the dominant class breaks into factions offering different programs for coping with society’s crises. In this case, intellectuals begin to lose their unity and split into warring camps. One of the issues that cause the split in the group of Russian intellectuals is ethnical issue. The resurgence of liberals and new aggressiveness of nationalists has widened the gap between intellectuals.⁵⁸

Third, there is a lack of scientists of both backgrounds—humanities and natural science—acting in the capacity of public intellectuals, as well as a lack of the public intellectuals of the global magnitude that could be called “the nation’s public conscience” (like Alexander Solzhenitsyn or Andrei Sakharov).

⁵⁸ Shlapentokh, 1990.

CONCLUSION

Public intellectuals are one of the most influential and controversial social groups that over the history, on one hand, played a crucial role in producing ideas, mediating between politicians and the public, maintaining the public discourse and protecting moral values; and on the other hand, this group was responsible for the horrible delusions, mistakes and treasons that led to wars and deaths (some of the recent examples are Nazism and nuclear weapons).

In a broad context, public intellectuals play the role of “the public conscience,” their mission is “to tell the truth” to those in power. From a political perspective, intellectuals serve as invaluable “dealers of ideas,” and “experts” who help politician to make informed decisions; who “interpret” politics to the public and explain public issues to the politicians; who speak at the modern agoras—the media—and promote public dialogue. However, this is an ideal situation. The reality, even in countries with liberal democracies, varies a lot.

In countries that experience a long and painful transition from a totalitarian state, like Russia, the situation is much more complicated. Russian intellectuals have developed a sort of “love-hate” relationship with the authorities and over the time fall prey to the allure of the authoritarian power. They share a lot of responsibility for the democracy’s failures after the collapse of the Soviet Union and for the further rollback under Vladimir Putin’s rule. The majority of the professional Russian intellectuals openly serve the Kremlin, protect its interests and maintain the fatalist view of inevitability of such cooperation. The minority, who manage to keep distance, fail in their efforts to speak and be heard by the public. The intellectual elite is fragmented, and the rifts are running deep.

However, it seems that the decline of the intellectual community is observed in the West, too. Over 60 years ago, in his 1960 essay titled “The End of Ideology” Daniel Bell wrote: “Intellectuals in the West [...] have lost interest in converting ideas into social levers for the radical transformation of society. Now that we have achieved the pluralistic society of the Welfare State, they see no further need for a radical transformation of society; we may tinker with our way of life here and there, but it would be wrong to try to modify it in any significant way. With this consensus of intellectuals, ideology is dead.”⁵⁹

Almost 30 years later Francis Fukuyama announced the end of history and prevail of the ideology of liberal democracy. Still, the debate on the ideology and the responsibility of intellectuals continues. These issues are becoming especially acute in the light of the rise of new conservatism in Russia (i.e. Alexander Dugin’s Eurasianism) and developments of the hybrid authoritarian regimes backed up by professional political experts.

In one of his latest essays, Tony Judt wrote that “democracies corrode quite fast; they corrode linguistically, or rhetorically... They corrode because most people don’t care very much about them. ... The difficulty of sustaining voluntary interest in the business of choosing the people who will rule over you is well attested. And the reason why we

⁵⁹ Bell, Daniel. *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, Free Press, 1960

need intellectuals, as well as all the good journalists we can find, is to fill the space that grows between the two parts of democracy: the governed and the governors.”⁶⁰

However, as Noam Chomsky noted, with regards to intellectuals, “basic concern must be their role in the creation and analysis of ideology.”⁶¹ Therefore, it is important to study what intellectuals do, what they say, and who they work for. It is also important to study their activities and develop accountability mechanisms for them.

⁶⁰ Judt, Tony. “On Intellectuals and Democracy.” *New York Review of Books*, 22 March 2012. Accessed December 20, 2014: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/mar/22/intellectuals-and-democracy/>

⁶¹ Chomsky, 1967.

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