

6th Annual Political Science Graduate Students' Association Conference

April 26, 2024

Carleton University

**The complex issue of Russia's compliance and defiance towards the
West**

Dmitry Khodzko, PhD student

Department of Politics

York University

dkhodzko@yorku.ca

Abstract

The debates in Russia regarding interaction with the West have spanned various fields, including foreign policy, security, culture, and economy. These debates revolve around two opposing poles: complying with the rules of the liberal international order or effectively defying them. This presentation analyzes the positions of various authors on the topic, including former Russian officials and political functionaries such as Chubais, Pavlovsky, Gaidar and Patrushev, who advocate for the liberal order approach. In contrast, current Russian security officials Narishkin and Patrushev, economist Khazin, and physicist Kovalchuk among others present opposing views. The tension and theoretical and political disagreement among these selected data sources present a puzzling conundrum. The Russian case has the potential to explore alternatives beyond the current dichotomy of conforming or defying, and this presentation will offer a possible approach to achieving this goal. Elements of realist theory, as found in John R. Mearshiemer and Stephen F. Cohen, are used to frame the situation, and Fiona Hill's observations on Russia inspire some analytical approaches to the data sources. This presentation will argue that a third approach to the debate over Russia's international standing is possible by analyzing the details of both sides' arguments for their causes.

The post-Soviet Russian pivot to the West has clearly come to a halt. This essay explains why Russian compliance with the rules of the liberal international order has disappeared. The analytical approach to this problem in this essay will be guided by the following general conceptual scheme: *in order to understand the domestic causes of Russian defiance of the liberal order, it is necessary to analyse them in relation to the perception of the West in Russia.* By the end of the 1980s, there was an agreement among the Soviet elites that some pro-Western reforms would be undertaken, although it would be too far-fetched to call it a full political consensus. The political balance in Russia since the 1990s until the 2020s had two political currents that defined themselves in something that could be called a compliance with the liberal order trend and a defiance of the liberal order trend. It should be noted that both political trends have their origin in the movement of rapprochement with the West. Both teams worked within the Soviet and later post-Soviet state apparatus, socialist and market economic structures, and had representation within the security, foreign policy, and strategic decision-making institutions and structures of the Soviet Union/Russia. In fact, both teams and trends are present in one way or another in the Russian political system today, but it is clear that the defiance trend, team of people and ideas have dominated Russian strategic thinking. The tension between these two trends and teams within Russia's pro-Western reform movement determined Russia's relations with the West. The data sources coming from Russia are simply too polarized. This presentation will examine the sources from both sides to

demonstrate how radical and extravagant opinions in Russian political discourses could be, leaving no room for constructive solutions to pressing problems. *It could be argued that a third approach to the debate over Russia's international standing is possible by analyzing the peculiarities of both sides' arguments for their causes.* The current polarized debate does not advance the theoretical or practical situation in any meaningful way.

A comparative analysis of the two trends reveals that radicalism and idealism were significant factors in both cases. It is, however, important to note that these factors frequently masked pragmatic calculations, which John Mearsheimer would categorize as security-driven concerns of national interest. It is essential to begin with the political-economic analysis monograph by first liberal Russian PM Yegor Gaidar and ex-chief of Staff of Russian presidential administration Anatoly Chubais, both members of the liberal compliance team. They posit that at the end of the 2010s, Russia was at a historical intersection, poised either for more liberal reforms or a "revolution."¹ From their analysis, it is evident that they detected a defiance trend in Russian politics, observing political teams and concerted activities that challenge the liberal order. It is intriguing how the actions undertaken by those opposing the liberal international order in Russia are referred to as "revolution." It is clear that these actions do not constitute a revolution in the conventional sense. Rather, they represent a complex and multifaceted revolt against the established order and the prevailing rules of international relations, which Russia choose to be part of in the 1990s. In 1993, the Gaidar Institute published a forecast about the social composition of the liberal reforms' supporters². The institute's analysis led to the conclusion that Russian intellectuals and intelligentsia would not benefit from the reforms. It is noteworthy that in the 2011 book mentioned above, Yegor Gaidar (posthumously) and Antoly Chubais reported that the liberal project of Russia

¹ Gaidar, Yegor Timurovich, and A. B. Chubais. 2011. Razvilki novoe istorii Rossii [Developments in Russia's modern history]. OGI., p. 151-152, 165-166.

² Gaidar, Yegor, and Institute of Economic Problems of Transition. "RUSSIAN ECONOMY IN 1992 TENDENCIES AND PERSPECTIVES." Moscow, 1992.

would be at a crossroads once more. It would be interesting to read another Anatoly Chubais account: *“Imagine organizing a truly fully democratic election in the country, based on the will of the workforce with equal access to the media, to money And the answer is clear, absolutely clear. The result of such elections would have been much worse, and perhaps simply catastrophic for the country.”*³ PM Yegor Gaidar: *“It seems to me a mistake to associate my name with the hopes of those who want to build a real functioning democracy in Russia.”*⁴

The leaders of the liberal project in Russia were aware that it would not be a popular electoral option, either in its economic or political incarnation in Russia. In essence, they advocated for the manipulation of democratic institutions. There were other witnesses to the era, including Professor Vladimir Pastuhov of University College London and Dr. Gudkov of the Levada Center in Moscow, who supported the liberal transformation. Nevertheless, both scholars identified authoritarian and self-defeating tendencies that emerged early in the liberal project's inception in Russia, citing the period between 1993 and 1996 (shooting of Russia parliament and Yeltsin 1996 elections)⁵. In disparate ways, Peter Reddaway and Stephen F. Cohen both described a similar phenomenon⁶. Gleb Pavlovsky, a former aide to the Yeltsin administration, expressed regret for a significant misstep made by his colleagues in the reformist team⁷. Instead of strengthening democratic state institutions, the Yeltsin administration opted to arm its weak political power with media instruments of force, namely the propaganda machine. This effectively replaced liberal

³ Streliany, Anatoly. February 14, 2008. "Anatoly Streliany: 'Chubais shows realism again'." Radio Liberty, 00:00:45Z, sec. Author's right. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/434779.html>.

⁴ Gaidar, Yegor. Rossiyskaya Gazeta. 2013. "20 Popular and Unknown Sayings of Yegor Gaidar," December 13, 2013. <https://rg.ru/2013/12/13/gaidar-site.html>.

⁵ Pastukhov. TV Rain, 2022. Pastukhov on Putin's Claims on the Whole World, Communists-Black Hundreds and the Predetermination of War. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4a3uV8zJb8>.

Lev Gudkov. 2021. "How we think: Lev Gudkov's article and discussion," February. <https://www.levada.ru/2021/02/05/kak-my-dumaem-statya-lva-gudkova-i-obsuzhdenie/>

⁶ Reddaway, Peter, and Dmitri Glinski. 2001. The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms: Market Bolshevism Against Democracy. US Institute of Peace Press.

Cohen, Stephen F. 2001. Failed Crusade: America and the Tragedy of Post-Communist Russia. W.W. Norton.

⁷ Gleb Pavlovsky. Sanctions as a global regime. 2021. // Antonyms with Anton Krasovsky. <https://podcasts.google.com/feed/aHR0cHM6Ly9jbG91ZC5tYXZlLmRpZ210YWwwMzI4MDk/episode/Ndc3NDQyMTktYjE5Yi00Y2JkLWJiMjltODJjNDA1MGIzOGEy>

democratic institutions. The liberal project in Russia has become a struggle for power that had an international dimension. The popularity of liberal politicians, parties, and individuals who could be considered assets of the West was met with negative ratings. Those who witnessed the early liberal administrations themselves admit that they had to resort to illiberal approaches to keep the project afloat in Russia. Nevertheless, this did not kill the liberal order project in Russia nor undermine Russian international commitment to the liberal international order in the short term. Instead, it gave rise to the defiant trends within the liberal project itself that gradually dominated. It has been inherently unsustainable for Russia to have a failing liberal project without seriously severing links with the West. Furthermore, the relationship with the West was deteriorating as the liberal order compliance team was giving concessions to the team defying the liberal order, particularly on the international arena. The aforementioned developments have had a profound impact on the political landscape of Russia, particularly at the federal government level and among the country's strategic elites.

The phenomenon of defiance of the liberal order in Russia was manifested in a variety of ways and had a profound impact on the rhetoric and thinking of government officials and close allies of President Putin. The following examples will demonstrate the profound impact of this influence. A close associate of Vladimir Putin, President of the Kurchatov Institute of Atomic Energy, Mikhail Kovalchuk, Ph.D., presented a report to the upper chamber of the Russian Parliament, the Federation Council ('Senate' equivalent) in 2015⁸. He presented a series of allegations against the West: *" the people whom the elite tried to turn into servants (slave) did not want to be servants (subservient) And the goal has been to create a fundamentally new subspecies of Homo sapiens - the service man. So, in fact, today there is a real technological*

⁸ Michael Kovalchuk. 2015. "M. Kovalchuk, Director of the Kurchatov Institute, spoke at the meeting of the Federation Council within the framework of "Time of the Expert"." Moscow: Federation Council. <http://council.gov.ru/events/multimedia/video/44107/>

*opportunity to (genetically) breed subspecies of a service (slave) people." "Take away national characteristics of peoples, that's what the president of the World Health Association, Rockefeller's right hand man, said first, and then the U.S. national security memorandum "The Kissinger Report", number 200, dated 1974, which says you have to do it in such a way that nations around the world don't realize it's started to happen." These quotations demonstrate that Russian intellectual thought is fundamentally at odds with the West. It has access to the source material and bases its inferences on documents such as NSSM 200-1974 and others. Rather, it represents a clear gravitation towards defiance of the liberal order. It is most likely a consequence of the traumatic experience of Russian state-building in the 1990s, with an attempt at a fresh start that did not succeed then. Russian economist Mikhail Khazin, former deputy head of the Economic Planning Department of the Yeltsin Administration in the 1990s, whose essay was included in a commemorative volume entitled "Bretton Woods: The Next 70 Years," with a foreword by former IMF head Christine Lagarde, expressed an opinion indicative of the defiance trend in Russia. In 2020, Khazin wrote⁹: *"Financial globalism is fascism. And we get a beautiful picture! There was a totalitarian, criminal, almost fascist financial globalism. It was hurting people! It took their money away from them! In real democracies it was defeated by democratic procedures (although it desperately resisted, including by organizing various criminal provocations, we will wait for the globalists to be blamed for September 11, 2001). But it retreated and gained a foothold in some EU countries, where it showed itself in full criminal measure (before that it hid its fascist essence in ideology, but it manifested itself in the impoverishment of the population). Therefore, the perpetrators must be punished, and most importantly, the liberal world order must be changed."**

⁹ Khazin. 2020. "Financial Globalism is Fascism." KHAZIN.RU, February. <https://khazin.ru/articles/153-geopolitika/76485-finansovyy-globalizm-jeto-i-est-fashizm>.

These opinions and statements are not the product of some Russian underground activists or political journalists; rather, they are the words of respected and recognized members of the intellectual, if not political, class of modern Russia.

These opinions are clearly out of alignment with the political narratives of the established political rhetoric in the West. However, it is important to note that these opinions are not genuinely Russian. Rather, they represent the reiteration of Western conservative and far-left criticisms that have existed throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century. The liberal compliance that Russia acted upon in the early 1990s lacked electoral support, yet it nevertheless received sufficient elite support to remain in place. What transpired was a pendulum swing to radical discontent with anything liberal and Western, at least in rhetoric and narrative in Russia. The initial pragmatic contradictions (over financial investments and security guarantees) between Russian elites and the West led to the emergence of a defiance trend, which in turn facilitated the de facto rejection of the conventional approach to the liberal international order in Russia both in domestic politics and foreign policy. This discontent extended beyond public intellectuals to current security officials as well.

In a recent development, Nikolai Patrushev, the head of the Security Council of Russia, has reported that Russia is currently assembling a substantial body of evidence against the United States: *"as we know from history, in order to achieve hegemony, Americans have always launched wars in other regions of the planet, in the recent past, we have seen this done in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, resulting in hundreds of thousands of people losing their lives and millions being displaced, now that America's foreign debt has exceeded 30 trillion dollars, America has begun to push humanity toward a global catastrophe ... the entire civilized world will finally see that America has become a 'worthy' heir to the traditions of the Third Reich, where inhumane*

experiments on people were practiced (referring to the United States biological warfare program)"¹⁰. This is an example of a rhetoric standard that is employed in Russian diplomatic meetings with foreign officials. The defiant trend has shaped rhetoric, approaches, and Russian policies alike. However, it should be noted that the defiant trend was born out of the liberal project itself and not as a result of external opposition to it. It could also be considered a grievance trend. Patrushev offered another intriguing interview in which he elucidated the nature of the defiance trend, which manifested in a more pronounced manner its grievance-based character: *"The West continues to act in line with the inhumane doctrine of the "golden billion", which implies a significant reduction in the population of the planet by various means. For this purpose, the West has sneakily created an empire of lies, which involves humiliation and destruction of Russia and other unwanted states. They spit in our eyes, and claim that it is God's dew. Washington and Brussels make no secret of the fact that their sanctions are aimed at both material and spiritual impoverishment of Russian people."*¹¹ In this regard, Russian intelligence service chief, Sergei Narishkin also made a remarkable statement: *"the United States and other so-called paragons of liberal democracy seem not to notice that they themselves are rapidly turning into liberal-totalitarian regimes."*¹² The failure of the liberal order in Russia also dissatisfied Russian officials. It could be inferred that Russia's failure to join the West resulted in deep cultural scars and trauma among the Russian elites, which in turn generated these criticisms. The way Russia depicts the liberal international order might surprise Western observers and be perceived as a caricature of the West. However, without an understanding of the decades-long developments from the Russian naïve hopefulness of the transition into the

¹⁰ Patrushev, Nikolai. 2022. Rossiyskaya Gazeta. "Patrushev: US is pushing humanity towards global catastrophe," sec. Power. Accessed May 2, 2022. <https://rg.ru/2022/03/28/patrushev-ssha-tolkaiut-chelovechestvo-k-globalnoj-katastrofe.html>.

¹¹ Patrushev, Nikolai. 2022. "Patrushev: The West has created an empire of lies that presupposes the destruction of Russia." Rossiyskaya Gazeta, April 26, 2022, sec. Vlast. <https://rg.ru/2022/04/26/patrushev-zapad-sozdal-imperiiu-lzhi-predpolagaiushchuiu-unichtozhenie-rossii.html>

¹² Sergey Naryshkin. 2021. "Naryshkin Declared the US Turning into a Liberal-Totalitarian Regime." *Zvezda TV Channel*, June 24, 2021. <https://tvzvezda.ru/news>.

liberal Western state to the current impasse with the West, it is difficult to comprehend the nuances of this complex issue.

However, there is no simple return to “the lets old good liberals run the Kremlin again” as in solution. Note that Anatoly Chubais was once a loyal confidant of Bill Clinton's administration in Russia and that did not help, and his reputation was forever ruined among the Russian public. Since the evidence presented in the earlier parts of this essay of what has been called "liberal reforms" could hardly be used as a popular and sustainable model for future reforms, there is simply nothing to return to from the trend of defiance that currently dominates Russian politics. Vladimir Putin and his shifting team of officials were never in opposition to first Russian president Yeltsin and his team. In fact, they constituted a continuity team. Therefore, Yegor Gaidar, Anatoly Chubais, Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin, and Nikolai Patrushev are successive administrations and officials who have gradually circulated and belong to the same political project of Russia's westernization attempt that failed. The post-failure contingency measures in Russia represent a point of contention between the two teams. Both trends and teams do not look into the causes of failure and the project of liberalization and westernization of Russia, but simply seek to compensate for failure without addressing the underlying issues.

The current defiance of the liberal order mode of Russian politics cannot be reversed under the influence and sponsorship of the West or Russian opposition. In a way, the compliance with the liberal international order mode of Russian politics has failed so miserably that it has gradually and irreversibly turned into the defiance of the liberal order mode. *In order to escape this dichotomous, polarized model, an honest, non-ideological sorting of the errors committed by both trends of Russian politics should follow.* It cannot be emphasized enough that the defiance of the liberal order was born within the same movement for rapprochement with the West from which the compliance with the liberal order emerged. Moving from compliance to defiance of the liberal order, Russia

began to interpret its relationship with the West in security terms, as Mearsheimer describes in his version of realism¹³. Former US National Security Advisor Fiona Hill has been known to describe Vladimir Putin as a "wild card" in global affairs¹⁴. However, it could be argued that Russia itself, in its current state of defiance, is a similarly "wild card" in the international system. One temptation in approaching Russia is to somehow persuade it to comply with the liberal international order. However, this presentation demonstrated that the current actively defiant mode of Russian behavior towards the liberal international order was a natural evolution of a previously attempted compliance with the liberal order that failed. Understanding the causes of this failure, as addressed by scholars such as Gudkov and Pastukhov, as self-inflicted but not due to opposition to the liberal project in Russia, is paramount to the prognosis and analysis of further developments around Russia. A key analytic frame for any further analysis of Russia is the early abandonment of liberal principles by its advocates in Russia. It is also important to note that the criticism of the liberal international order expressed by Russian authorities bears a striking resemblance to the non-mainstream, underground opposition narratives to the liberal order that is prevalent in Western political discourse. Russia exhibits a notable dichotomy between the embrace of liberal values by select former officials, such as Chubais, and the intense criticism leveled at the United States by current Russian security officials. While Chubais espouses liberal ideals, he simultaneously displays hypocritical attitudes. *The third approach synthesizes lessons from both narratives to illustrate that the failure of the liberal project in Russia was predominantly caused by the hypocrisy of those who advocate for it. This ultimately led to the gradual concessions made by political forces in the early stages of Russian post-Soviet history, who initially complied with the rules of the liberal order but subsequently lost political points and electoral support in Russia.* The increasingly evident tensions between Russia and the West, coupled with the mounting problems that Russia was experiencing, gave rise to a

¹³ Mearsheimer, John J. 2018. *Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. Yale University Press.

¹⁴ Council on Foreign Relations, dir. 2021. *Transition 2021 Series: How to Deal With Russia*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4xP8kk_jC4.

growing tendency *to defy the West and the liberal international order*. This culminated in the open diplomatic conflict that erupted in December 2021, with the issuance of the Ryabkov security guarantee memorandum to the US State Department, which constituted an ultimatum.