

Putin Poses Russian ‘National Idea’

by Rachel Douglas

Sept. 22—On Sept. 19, Russian President Vladimir Putin held a discussion with participants in the Valday International Discussion Club, among them former European government officials Romano Prodi (Italy), François Fillon (France), and Volcker Rühle (Germany).¹ On the heels of decisive Russian diplomacy to defuse the crisis around Syria over the past two weeks, Putin took the opportunity to expound his conception of Russia’s role in the world today. Not surprisingly, the discussion included several references to Putin’s celebrated 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, where he made clear (while underscoring, with substantial references to President Franklin Roosevelt, that he intended no hostility toward the USA) that Russia will be nobody’s pushover in a liberal-imperial world.

In one of several joking exchanges—which in fact were serious—in this instance, with former French Prime Minister Fillon, Putin gave a clear signal that he will likely run for re-election in 2018. Thus, his remarks, as a whole, express a perspective for Russian policy over the next decade to 2024.

Most impressive to listeners were Putin’s remarks on Russia’s traditional values, his explicit dismissal of “political correctness,” and his charge that the Western world was smashing its own fundamental moral precepts: “We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious, and even sexual. Without the values embedded in Christianity and other world religions, without the standards of morality that have taken shape over millennia, people will inevitably lose their human dignity. We consider it natural and right to defend these values. One must respect every minority’s right to be differ-

ent, but the rights of the majority must not be put into question.”

Putin described Russia’s own national identity as being under assault from “objective pressures stemming from globalization,” on top of the radical collapse of the state, twice during the 20th Century (1917 and 1991). Those events dealt “a devastating blow to our nation’s cultural and spiritual codes; we were faced with the disruption of traditions and the consonance of history, with the demoralization of society, with a deficit of trust and responsibility.” After 1991, he said, “the lack of a national idea stemming from a national identity profited the quasi-colonial element of the elite—those determined to steal and remove capital, and who did not link their future to that of the country, the place where they earned their money.”

At the conclusion of the discussion, Putin replied to a question from Izborsk Club founder, *Zavtra* editor-in-chief Alexander Prokhanov, who asked if there existed a great project called “Russia.” Said Putin, “Russia is not a project, it is a destiny. You know, it is life.” He went on to discuss the enormous infrastructure deficits in Russia’s Far East and elsewhere, and how to redress them.

Putin said at the outset, that the need for “new strategies to preserve our identity in a rapidly changing world ... confronts virtually all countries and all peoples in one form or another: Russian, European, Chinese, and American—the societies of virtually all countries.” Every country, he went on, “has to have military, technological, and economic strength, but nevertheless, the main thing that will determine success is the quality of citizens, the quality of society: their intellectual, spiritual, and moral strength. After all, in the end, economic growth, prosperity, and geopolitical influence are all derived from societal conditions. They depend on whether the citizens of a given country consider themselves a nation, to what extent they identify with their own history, values, and traditions, and whether they are united by common goals and responsibilities. In this sense, the question of finding and strengthening national identity really is fundamental for Russia.”

The dialogue following Putin’s opening remarks included many important elements. He came down hard on Israel for building a nuclear weapons stockpile, reiterating his recent statements that Syria only acquired a chemical weapons arsenal in response to that. He explained the process that led to his *New York Times* op-ed on the 12th anniversary of 9/11.

1. The transcript of the discussion is being posted in English in installments on the Kremlin website at <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6007>.