

## **Grano Series – Europe and its Discontents**

*The 3<sup>rd</sup> annual speakers series, held in Toronto at Grano Restaurant, explores the future of Europe the implications of a fast changing European Community for North America.*

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### **Russia's latest export: 'managed democracy'**

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*The following is an edited transcript Anne Applebaum 's talk at the third installment of 2006-2007 Grano Speakers Series.*

One of the things that one learns travelling around Eastern Europe, in particular, is that the past continues to matter in contemporary politics and lives on in all kinds of ways.

Something that happened to me in Moscow a few years ago brought this home to me very explicitly. I was there for a few weeks, and a friend of mine at the American embassy said, "You know, we have this speaker's program. And I know you're here doing other things. You're doing research. Would you mind, as a favour to the embassy, coming and giving a speech to something called the Institute for Democracy?"

Fine, the Institute for Democracy. And, "You'll be speaking to schoolteachers who are in Moscow from the provinces, and they're coming to take courses on how to teach democracy in school." I thought, wonderful, what could be a better cause?

And so I went off and I made a speech. I can't even remember what I said, some vaguely uplifting things about the future and the past and so on. At the end of speech, people raised their hands and starting asking questions. And the first question was: "Why is your government supporting Chechen terrorism?" Then, "Why does The Washington Post lie about the support that the American government gives to Chechnya and the terrorist cause? Why are you trying to bring down the Russian government?"

The whole tone of the audience and the questions began to make me wonder what kind of democracy they were learning at this school, and what was it they were learning about the Western world and Western liberal culture. And I started asking, "So what is this school?" And

somebody explained to me that it used to be called the Institute for Peace. And as the Institute for Peace, it used to bring schoolteachers from all over Russia, or then the Soviet Union, as it was, and they would come to this institute and they would study ways to bring peace to the world, in the communist definition of peace.

I realized that the director of this institute was the same person who had been the director of the institute back in the Soviet era, and the schoolteachers were probably the same schoolteachers who used to come there. And what had happened was, the language had changed but the institution itself was exactly the same. Since I'm in Canada, I can use the French, "plus ca change... "

I would like to use this as an illustration of something I think is important about modern Russia: communist ideology is definitely gone. Nobody pays lip service to it anymore. Nobody takes it seriously. It's not part of the debate at all. But it has the system, the institutions remain, and they have transmogrified themselves into something new and rather interesting, which unoriginally I'm going to call Putinism.

It's best described in Russian as something called "managed democracy." So you have many of the institutions of democracy. You have political parties. You have, in some cases, non-government organizations. You have what appears to be a relatively diverse press. You have different kinds of newspapers.

But in very subtle ways, they remain controlled by the government, and sometimes actually not even that subtle. So you have, for example, phony political parties. The first one of these was founded by [Vladimir] Zhirinovsky some years ago, if you remember him. He had a great career in the West, briefly, as a kind of neo-Nazi, and then it turned out that he was Jewish and so on. But it's a very interesting party because, although it talks big talk and he makes a fuss and he calls the West evil and so on, he actually always votes with the Kremlin. He does what they want. And it turns out that it's a political party that was created for the purpose of drawing away nationalists and giving them somebody to vote for, and nevertheless keep them all within the crowd.

Sometimes they don't even need to do that. There is a lot of evidence that, if the elections aren't going quite the way they want, they simply fake them.

Famously, in the Russian press, the general rule is, you're allowed to have an opposition newspaper, you're allowed to have an opposition magazine,

as long as not too many people read it and it doesn't have too many subscribers. So you can, up to a certain point, say what you want. But when it becomes too popular, they shut it down. With television, they now control all of it because television, they think, it's too powerful. They one by one took over the private television stations that developed in the '90s.

I said that it's not a communist ideology anymore. There is a kind of theory to it, though. Putinism is an odd blend of nationalism. Putin himself has sought, for example, to bring back some old Soviet symbols, not necessarily communist symbols, but he tries to remind the Russians of great moments in Russian and Soviet history. So he speaks of the great triumph of the Second World War. He talks about the invasion of the Baltic States as something that was militarily necessary and we needed to do at the time. He brings up moments of the past as a way of reminding everybody that Russia was once a great imperial power, and at the same time, increasingly, he and the rest of the Russian political leadership have become very clearly - and I don't want to use the word "bitterly," because they are enjoying it - but very anti-American and anti-Western. They're setting themselves up as a kind of alternative to the West and an alternative power centre to the United States.

Why do Russians put up with it? There are many reasons. I think probably the most important one is very high oil prices, which have made the Russian states solvent again. It has allowed Putin to pay people's pensions, which [Boris] Yeltsin was never able to do. Russia is genuinely growing again. It went through a very rough period in the '90s. And he gives the impression of stability and, at the moment, people like that. If oil prices were to go down, we might begin to see another story.

Now, does it matter? Okay, Russia is not such a nice place. In an era of Islamic fundamentalism, war in Iraq, don't we have bigger problems to deal with than a slightly nasty government in Russia? And actually, up until now, the policy of the American administration and most Western countries has been, yes, we do have bigger problems to deal with. We'll leave Russia alone.

But I think there are two reasons to pay attention to the problems that are developing there, other than the unpleasant fact that they shoot the occasional journalist or trail bits of nuclear material around London.

One of the interesting things about Putinism is that it's becoming a model for other countries. I mean, it's actually a form of government, this kind of managed democracy - the use of democratic rhetoric and fake parties and fake institutions has been adopted by Venezuela. The Iranians are very

interested in it. [Consider] the recent Holocaust conference in Iran. The Iranian leader called, from all over the world, all kinds of Holocaust deniers and gave them a platform in Iran. And what he said afterwards was, "Look, here in Iran we have freedom. Here we have academic freedom. We can denounce the Holocaust and say that it didn't exist because this is our way of freedom."

And it's this similar mix of nationalism and anti-Americanism - in an attempt to compete with American democratic rhetoric - that Putin has set the standard for and other people, I think, are beginning to imitate.

The other reason to pay attention to Russia is that Russia is also interested in exporting this system to the countries that surround it. We saw that initially, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the immediate inner circle of Soviet Ukraine and Belarussia and Central Asia. Immediately after the fall of communism, many of those countries were simply taken over by former communists, and the same people stayed in charge. And that suited the Russians very well, because those people were well connected in Moscow and they were controllable.

Not wanting to end on a completely bleak note, the current system is not a Stalinist system. It's not a totalitarian system. And it therefore does contain within itself, as in all these countries, the possibility of change.

Almost every year, I go to a seminar which is run by a friend of mine. And it is conducted for young Russian politicians, not the ones who were at the Institute of Peace, but generally interesting, young people who have been elected to office, mostly from the regions. Almost every year, they get more interesting. They get better read. They are better traveled. They have been to the West. They have a wider perspective than the same kind of people did five years earlier.

Which leads me to an ancient Slavic proverb that was taught to me by my Polish mother-in-law, which is: "Where there is death, there is hope." So, generational change is coming there, as elsewhere, and that's the main source of hope for right now. '[In Russia] you're allowed to have an opposition newspaper... as long as not too many people read it'

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