## **QI Panel:**

## **Book Talk: The Tragedy of Russian Liberalism**

October 17, 2023  
12:00-1:00 PM EDT

**Anatol Lieven 0:57**

Hello, everybody. I'm Anatol Lieven. I'm director of the Eurasia program here at the Quincy Institute for Responsible statecraft. And it is my great pleasure today to introduce Professor Paul Robinson of the University of Ottawa, to talk about Russian liberalism. Before I do so, just a couple of announcements. The first is that I hope, as many of you as possible will be able to come to another book conversation at the same time on Monday, where I will be talking to the very distinguished former US diplomat Tom Graham, about his latest book Getting Russia Right about the collapse of relations with Russia, the progressive collapse in the generation after the fall of the Soviet Union, and his recommendations for how we could perhaps partially salvage the situation. Now, today, I'm Dr. Robinson, I will be talking about his book for about half an hour. And then I will channel your questions from the audience to Paul, could you therefore put your questions in the q&a, which you will see at the bottom of your screens, and I will pass on as many of them as possible Forgive me, of course, if I can't, can't pass on all of them given the time. So with that, it is my great pleasure today to introduce Paul Robinson of Ottawa University, one of the leading students of Russian politics, and Russian political culture today. Paul is author among other works of a leading book on Russian conservatism. And his latest book is on Russian liberalism. I gave this talk the title, which is my own, not Paul's, but I feel he would probably agree with me, the tragedy of Russian liberalism. And Paul at the moment is working on yet a third strain of Russian political cultural thought, which is, has become of tremendous importance in recent years or has returned to tremendous importance, which is civilizational theory in Russian thought. So, Paul, welcome. The first question I would like to ask is, do you think your book on Russian liberalism, of course, goes all the way back to its very origins in the 18th century. But and it also looks at the problems that Russian liberalism has faced, well, really, throughout modern Russian history, but with reference to the failure, the collapse of Russian liberalism over the past 30 years. After a brief time when, you know, so many people, certainly including very briefly, I, myself, had such great hopes for liberalism in Russia. Do you see the the contemporary failure or the failure since 1991 of Russian liberalism as in some sense, foreordained by Russian reality, Soviet history, Russian history? Or could things have been different? Could different decisions have been made that would have preserved more of liberalism in Russia?

**Paul Robinson 4:44**

Yeah, this is a difficult question Anatol because, you know, so much contingency in history and when when one does one doesn't know i But But clearly, reforming Russia In the post Soviet era was always going to be much, much harder than reforming, say Poland or, or the Czech Republic or somewhere because it's just a much, much bigger place. And the Soviet experience had run much deeper than than it had in those countries which fell under communist systems after the Second World War. And it had some distinct economic structures, not just because it had such a centralized plan market, but because of the way it had, for instance, you know, this sort of system of gigantism, where you'd have like, one massive factory, which was everything, but a town had, producing, you know, all the widgets, and the entire Soviet Union. And that's all they did in that town. And when you try and reform it, well, you can either put the entire city unemployed, or if you're, you can, I don't know what else you can do. It's really severe difficulties, which I think were not experienced by other states. So there's always going to be more problematic. And I think it was also in a very problematic because of the international context, which really has made life very, very difficult for Russian liberals. And we can come on to this in perhaps in later question, because of the Association of Russian liberalism of Western ism. I think that that has created severe difficulties. That said, there were immense problems, and it's hardly surprising that the reformers of a 1990s may have made a hash of many things that was, would have been expecting too much to get it all right, that said, there are obviously certain decisions which were made, which could have been made differently. And one wonders, for instance, where the 30th anniversary of the attack on Parliament by Yeltsin you know, had perhaps he, I am one could understand at the time, and I was among those at the time, who lapped up propaganda, which, you know, department was full of fascists and communists and democracy required it been destroyed. But looking back at it, one has to wonder if that was, you know, really quite so true, or these people actually had some representing some legitimate complaints about things which are going wrong and suffering, an alternative method of dealing with this problem could have been found, suddenly, like the method which was used for privatization. Yes, it's understandable that all sorts of things went kind of pear shaped because there was no experience of how to do this on this scale. No one had done any substring still doing things such as VA loans for the shares scandal. 111 can see the logic behind them. But one has to accept that it had some very serious consequences. So certain decisions were made, which probably could have been made differently. And, of course, certain decisions were made in the West, which could have been made differently, whether that would have altered the ultimate trajectory. Of course, I can't tell.

**Anatol Lieven 8:11**

I mean, you're quite right, of course, about the very particular features of the post Soviet Union, Ukraine, as well as Russia. When it came to liberal economic reforms, however, you know, I was a journalist in the former Soviet Union and Russia then, and, you know, visited these, you know, mono culture, ruined industrial towns that you were talking about. And then, I came to work in America, and I traveled in the Midwest a bit. And I was so struck by the similarities, you know, also ruined Abant, huge, ruined factories, whole giant cities like Detroit dependent, basically on one industry, and left in ruins when it collapsed, and departed. And, I mean, I wonder, was it particularly disastrous, that the Western economic model and even the Western moral model one could say, that was available when Western or when Russian liberals swallowed the Western package so completely in the 1990s, that this Washington Consensus Ultra free market model was the one which was dominant in the West, and not a social democratic one, shall we say? Which the vast majority of Russians at that time? It was not that they were anti Western, I found talking to them. They just wanted a very different kind of western model. They all talked about, you know, the Scandinavian model or the German model, not the American model.

**Paul Robinson 10:02**

Yes. Well, I mean, it was a peculiar coincidence that the collapse of the Soviet Union happened at a time when a particular form of what nowadays people might call neoliberalism was ascendant in the West. So this was sort of the Thatcherism model, which which happened to be the ascendant model at that moment in time. And if Soviet Union had collapsed 10 years later, but that would have been a different model, which they would have taken up but as it was, the model of seemingly the most advanced most progressive system was was the fact that economic model, so therefore, having discarded communism, it's they sort of all happen very fast, they were really still sticking to market socialism and socialism with a human face until 1989. And then they dropped it very rapidly, and they needed something to replace it. So they just picked up what they regarded as the most progressive model available, which was fascism, basically, and then slapped it down. Applying the same sort of logic, in essence, in Bolsheviks that apply and communist supply that there was, you know, history was a predetermined progress towards a single model, and that the rules of progress applied everywhere equally. And that economic laws were economic laws wherever you stood, and plunked it down without any particular regard for whether this was suitable or not. Now that the defendants would say that actually, the real problem was they didn't go far enough that shock therapy never really happened, because part of shock therapy was meant to be a tight monetary policy in the tight monetary policy wasn't permitted by the Central Bank. And that, therefore, they never really was shock therapy. And if only they'd been allowed shock therapy, then things would have been would have been different. Now. I have no very some statistical evidence to suggest that states which reformed faster got out of the crisis faster. However, those states also tended to be the richest states in the first place, places like places like the Czech Republic and Hungary, which reformed very fast, got out fast, but they were the richest to begin. Right? Where? But could a novel model been applied to problems like countries that trend very slowly like Ukraine now ended up in even worse situation?

So the idea that no, you, you shouldn't have done what they did would be dependent on what else would you have done and I'm I, I don't know what else was available at the time. And, and we don't have good evidence that other approaches worked desperately Well, in other places. So I was part of me still kind of believes in truck fare. Because I just don't see that the company was a mess, something had to be done. But that was, how can I put this? Well, one thing I definitely found is a lack of interest in institutions. So institutional economics would tell us that things such as the rule of law, are just uncultured musings are just as important as free markets and so on. And absolutely no thought was given to the institutions. It was just like free markets, free to prices, everything will be happy. Tomorrow, very ideologically pure. But institutional changes just weren't really on the table. And I think that was probably a lot of the problems. So apparently, apparently, Milton Friedman was asked, you know, what Russia needed? And he said, privatization, privatization, privatization. And then 10 years later, someone said, Well, what do you think now? And he said, Well, I didn't understand that there wasn't any rule of law. And if I, if I had, I'd have said something different.

**Paul Robison 14:16**

I mean, something that struck me very much, and I wrote about that myself in a book in the 1990s, was that there was a certain similarity between privatization without the rule of law in Russia and Ukraine, to some extent elsewhere, as well in the 1990s, and the liberal land reforms of the mid 19th century in southern Europe and Mexico and elsewhere, which were also intended, you know, officially to galvanize commercial agriculture, of course, had a political purpose the district option of church lands, the redistribution of communal lands. But of course, an awful lot of that land ended up in the hands of the new liberal elites, who turned out to be just as, in fact, even more exploitative than the previous landowners, in part, because in the case of the church, they had absolutely no commitment to charity. And I always felt that, you know, a deeper awareness of history on the part of, you know, these people who, as you say, promoted, privatization without the rule of law might have led to a more cautious approach.

**Paul Robinson 15:42**

Yeah, so I think a lot of people didn't think history mattered, and very much an opinion and I have a quote in the book from Kelter Haven, who was deputy prime minister at one point, and went on to run now alpha bank, and he said, the rules of economics are the same everywhere. Argentina, Russia, doesn't matter. It we're all alike. So the idea that, you know, was was anything to learn outside pure economic theory was, I think, just dismissed, dismissed outright. And, of course, as you say, people who profited from this, many of these liberal elites themselves, and that, of course, in turn, help discredit liberals and liberalism because people would would look at the likes of say Hadokowski and Berezovsky who call themselves liberal. Whether they were or not, of course, is debatable, but they call themselves liberal. And then people would say, Well, if that's what liberals are, I don't want anything to do with them. And then they say, Well, who profited from this. And then you get Khodorkovsky some years later saying, Well, you know, liberals were got it all wrong, because we were, you know, horribly corrupt interfere, and everyone was horribly corrupt and go Well, now you say that?

**Anatol Lieven 16:53**

Yeah, so I haven't noticed him trying to give back the money he stole.

**Paul Robinson 16:57**

No, he said it was all horribly corrupted. He's not giving it back. In fact, he's trying to, you know, suing the Russian state to do to get recompense for UCAS being seized. So quite the opposite, one might say.

**Anatol Lieven 17:09**

In his dreams. And on that score, what differences and what similarities do you see between Russian liberals since the fall of the Soviet Union and their predecessors under the Russian Empire, the cadets and, and their ideological ancestors?

**Paul Robinson 17:32**

Well, ideologically the free marketeers of the 1990s were very different on 19th century liberals, who tended not to be free marketeers, but cadets, were not particularly free marketeers. I mean, they were not socialist, they didn't believe in socialist control of the means of production. But they regard themselves as new liberals, social liberals, one might say. And they regarded themselves as a bubble as constitutionalists. So so their aim was was constitutional government above all, above all else, whereas the reformers of the 1990s, were in a free market radicals and not particularly concerned about constitutional niceties. The difference with the social liberal wing, which wasn't in power should be Yablaka and Yablinski, who had a different attitude, and were very critical of Yeltsin in his reform isn't that they would perhaps be closer to Imperial Russian liberals. Perhaps what they did have in common was a rather narrow social base. In that pre pre, first of all, Russian liberalism was very restricted to professional classes, it was the cadets called a party of professors, because so many of them were and if they weren't professors, they were, they were loyal doctors, probably. And really, outside intellectual circles, it had very, liberalism had very little support, and much the same as was true. You know, and what is true today, and it was true in 1990s. But liberalism was it was a movement primarily of the intelligentsia. And what is also nowadays called the creative classes. So you know, people who work in journalism or academia or in the theater or something like something like that. And as a result, where there was then now, a huge social divide between liberals and what we'd like to call ordinary ordinary people. And an awareness of the social divide to on both sides, which which has made it very difficult for liberals to generate any form of mass support because they embody a culture, which is rather a variance to the culture of the surrounding people. So liberalism Both periods is not just a political economic thing. It's a it's a cultural phenomenon, which embodies this idea that Russia is not a normal country and are normal.

**Anatol Lieven 20:13**

Thank you. We so this regional economy Korean and also transnational challenges at the at the That phrase in the mind in the night ism, and when I when I asked people what they thought in a normal country was they would reply something like well, obviously Denmark the usual cliche or New Zealand and I told them, I thought they would have to wait quite a considerable time before Russia was like New Zealand.

**Paul Robinson 20:31**

But this is this is this is the idea of normality is Denmark, right. And Russia is not that because we have these wealth now that in the past have been peasants and now it would be just you know, Vatniki or whatever the these you know, reactionary people who are very backward and a status backward to say we have a reaction aristocracy around but also reactionary bureaucrats, and then you have a reaction backed and supported by a reactionary people. And what is needed is a fundamental cultural reform of society to turn it into normality. In other words, something Western European.

**Anatol Lieven 21:13**

But that there, of course, there are certain parallels with Western liberalism. But in a, in a harsher form, in that, that the the often I mean, absolutely avert contempt of Russian liberals, for the Russian masses has, of course, its echo, in attitudes like that of Hillary Clinton talking about the, the deplorables. But of course, with a with a harsher edge, because, no, and also, I mean, this belief, which which has deep roots in liberalism, that the masses must be improved, their culture must be transformed. One sees that very much in Western liberalism today. But of course, now, as far as I'm aware, no Western liberals recently have actually proposed firing machine guns at the masses. Whereas in that way, Russian liberals do rather more resemble Italian liberals in the 1860s, or Spanish liberals who, faced with Catholic peasant opposition, were very willing to use armed force.

**Paul Robinson 22:27**

I include one two quotes in the book from the period of the attack on the Parliament, the Russian liberals making it very clear that there wouldn't be just one from Naradosky famous dissident, he'd be happy to kill 20% of the Russian population. The difference between you know what you say about Hillary Clinton and with deplorables? It is the same attitude. But in Russia, it has an added twist, which is that, you know, when Hillary Clinton's according to the deplorables, she's at least recognizing all as as American, that there's not, there's no, she's not saying we should all become Danish. Right, in the Russian context. The, the there's the contempt for people for being for being Russian, basically, whereas what they ought to be as European. Okay, and so there's, there's this, one might call it anti national elements shoved on top of it, which gives it gives it a particularly problematic tinge, I think.

**Anatol Lieven 23:31**

Yes. And I mean, on that score, we have several questions, which in one way or another, ask, how far did Western foreign and security policy vis a vis Russia, especially the expansion of NATO, the bombing of Kosovo, and then everything in general sort of contempt for Russian views and interest, how far did that contribute to undermining Russian liberalism, first in the 90s, but also under, under Putin state liberalism, because it struck me you you talk quite rightly about 2012 as a turning point in Putin's attitudes, and this having so much to do, of course, with demonstrations against the rigging, alleged rigging of the 2012 elections. And Putin sphere of Western supported colored revolution. But it also struck me that the West itself had backed by what it did in Libya and by its spurning of Medvedev, who did at that stage have a very, by Russian state standards, liberal program that the West had can can Western policy contributed also to the undermining of Russian, of Russian liberalism.

**Paul Robinson 25:01**

I think very much so at all, because of the Association of liberalism with Western ism. As relations with the West have deteriorated, it has become harder and harder for liberals. In many ways. The bombing of cossar, I think was the turning point. But for many, for many Russians, it was a point at which not, not only for Russians, I would say actually, but but particularly for Russians at that time, that idea of the Western civilization was shattered, but for huge, huge numbers of people, I think, and they realize it, but actually, you know, NATO is not, you know, not not a defensive organization, it was even a quote, I've gotten the quote from Yavisky, who's, you know, as Pro European and westernizing as they come and who's saying, “Well, you know, it's no, you're saying that that tank tank coming towards your house is not a tank, because pink tank is still attacking” And I think this, this has had a very damaging effect. And not just because Casilla, which I think was the big turning point. But I think also Western sport for the fun of my down revolution was was a was an absolute killer. The border, the invasion of Iraq, and all these things, gradually built up destroying Western credibility and because of dissociation, liberalism progressivism, therefore undermine the liberalism. On top of that, though, it reinforced certain, you might say, paranoid attitudes in the Russian state, about liberals, I think that in the absence of east-west tension, the state would have been, if not, you know, welcoming of liberals, it would have been more tolerant of and let much less repressive of. But as time went on, I think more and more people in the security services and an establishment began to look on liberals as traitors, simply put, that they were in bed with foreign states, aiming for a color revolution. Now, whether this is true or not, is, in essence, neither here nor there. The this was the attitude which began to develop. And it was reinforced, of course, by the fact that foreign funding for NGOs in Russia was very politically oriented. What you might call NGOs, which were directly pressing the government on human rights and so on, they would get funding, whereas NGOs, which would just about I don't know, alleviating poverty, alleviating poverty in Kazah, would not. So whereas this reinforced the idea of foreign funding was all about being anti government and undermining the Russian state, and that liberals were in bed with the West. And as relations got worse and worse with the West, the paranoid, the paranoia increased, and the state became more or less less tolerant to liberal opposition. And gradually more and more constricted. It's room for maneuver. So my own view is that East West tensions have been very deleterious to Russian liberalism. And in fact, also, Western support for Russian liberalism has been very damaging for Russian liberals, as well.

**Anatol Lieven 28:12**

I have to say, the most admirable Western NGO I met in, in Russia in the 1990s was the Salvation Army, because they were actually feeding people, poorer, and unmarried mothers and babies and so forth. And because they were preaching morality, and not ideology, not economic and political ideology, and just a sour comment of my own. One very interesting point to raise which has also very much struck me in in recent years, at the end of your book is that today, there is great disillusionment in sections of Russian liberalism, with Western liberalism, and to some extent, even Western civilization or Western liberal civilization in general. Because having elevated the West to you know, the image of just civilization, really, I mean, the civilization which we want to join, Russian liberals now find off often find themselves gravely at odds with tendencies like, well, the whole what has been dubbed, perhaps unfairly, the woke tendency, the elevation of your particular agenda, identities and ideologies and everything, Black Lives Matter everything that comes with that. So is there a is there any chance that in future you will have a coming together again, of all not again, because it's never really happened but of a conservative form of Russian liberalism with more conservative Russian traditions.

**Paul Robinson 30:06**

It is possible. Certainly, I think when many Russian liberals imagined the West, they imagined the west of the 1980s. And as you say, more modern wokeism, cancel culture, many of them are not desperately supportive or even anti, this isn't universal. I think there's quite a few differentiations on this, but there are certainly those who don't like it. And think that the Europe they believed in no longer exists, right, say and would therefore be supportive of you might say, more socially conservative liberalism, which would be politically liberal, but socially quite conservative. How much support there is for added, it's difficult to say, and we're this kind of thing to take root Russia and liberalism would have to find a way of dissociating itself from its traditional Westernism, because I think the West has gone, it has gone this way, and it's not turning back. Right. So if you're going to be more socially conservative, then then you probably going to have to dissociate yourself from Westernism, at least in cultural terms, even if not in terms of political and economic models. And that will probably be psychologically quite, quite difficult to do. And, of course, in the in the current political atmosphere in which anything with a sort of liberal label is sort of regarded almost as an enemy of the people, it's going to be very difficult to to resurrect any form of liberalism, to be honest, at least until this war in Ukraine is over. I don't, I don't see it, see it happening. But perhaps after that, that could be a gradual regeneration, of a new form of liberalism, but it's going to require new leaders, new people, and whether that's likely to happen or not, I don't want to predict to be honest.

**Anatol Lieven 32:18**

know, I mean, well, very dangerous to predict anything. There are still individuals within the elites, especially, of course, on the economic side, who could be called State liberals or patriotic liberals. They will never, from now on identify with, you know, Western, what they would call Western hegemony or, but I suppose it's possible. I mean, like, you know, some senior Tsarist officials were basically liberal in their social attitudes and in belief about what would constitute the best society and future. But they're also, of course, deeply patriotic, and they had a strong Well, a strong feeling that you needed a strong Russian state for both internal and external reasons. So I suppose that could be.

**Paul Robinson 33:14**

There's a possibility of technocratic bottom down reform. And I would suspect that, once again, we don't like to predict, but probably if you were looking for liberal reform in the future, in a post Putin era, some sort of technocratic, top down liberalism done because those in charge of the state decide that preys on data require a some liberalization of the economy and society to make the state stronger. And at that point, there may be a, a loosening of the reigns. And in that sense, it may well be much more likely to come in that direction and bottom up.

**Anatol Lieven 33:56**

We have another question. How would you describe the impact of the Russian Orthodox Church in limiting or undermining Russian liberalism?

**Paul Robinson 34:06**

Yes, it's an interesting question. It's interesting how in Russia, like a 9090 20% of Russians said they believe they were orthodox now 80% Do but 50% say we don't believe in God. So there's a lot of self professed, Orthodox people who don't believe in God and most studies of orthodoxy would suggest that it's, it's more of an identity thing when it is really a deeply religious setting in modern Russia. And the Russian church is influential, but at the same time, it's not as influential as people make it out to be, in that the church is not interested in being an established church, it wants to keep some sort of distance between itself and the state. And therefore, in viewing the state and the church as one is perhaps a mistake, but obviously, the church is, you know, socially, extremely conservative. And that's very common, you know, even by, by standards of, you know, Western or even even Protestant in gigantic evangelicals in America might consider aspects of the Russian Orthodox Church to be to be quite conservative. So clearly, this has some influence. I wouldn't call it, you know, a, the most significant influence, I think, you know, the economic crisis of the 1990s. And the general read east west tensions, probably more and more important.

**Anatol Lieven 36:00**

In Georgia too, the Orthodox Church has a very conservative cast and is playing a certain role, shall we say, and in complicating a Georgia's identification, you know, with Western culture and Western sort of reform in the broader sense. Some more questions were one question which are hard to answer, particularly since it's not easy to talk to him at the moment, but is Navalny a liberal?

**Paul Robinson 36:38**

I mean, in some respects, in that he professed his support for political pluralism. And economically, he's more of a social liberal. Now, he once said he was sort of free market and overall, he's now more of a, of a social liberal. The thing reasons people haven't put him down as a liberal is due to his very illiberal attitudes on immigration. But he actually wasn't unique among those in Liberal circles, actually. I mean, there are, I was reading a book by Boris Nemtsov, and, you know, his his attitude towards Muslims who was not desperately positive, one might say. So because Muslims are seen as anti European rights and therefore anti liberal. So I'm not I, I wouldn't say that being having a hard line on immigration necessarily renders Navalny as illiberal. Though it is true that many liberals in Russia view him with deep suspicion.

**Anatol Lieven 37:53**

Many liberals, and particularly I would say, many members of the national minorities, including liberals from that background, and suddenly it has also struck me sometimes is not that they are exactly pro Putin, some of these minority intellectuals, but they do draw a quite strong line between Russian state nationalism as represented by Putin, and Russian ethnic nationalism. And they are, of course, much more scared of the latter, and therefore are more worried that, you know, what comes after Putin could be even worse, but it put it that way. They are less, I think, likely to be over optimistic, shall we say about sections of the, you know, of the Russian opposition, because of this, this this, this fear of, of Russian ethnic nationalism, of the Black Hundreds, as some of them were told.

**Paul Robinson 38:59**

Yes. And you can see in the anti Putin protests in 2012 and elsewhere about and also in the Mounties smart voting scheme, but you have, you know, liberals saying quite openly, you know, I'll vote for a vampire and a racist and, and an anti Semite and xenophobe, as long as he's against Putin. You know, and, and obviously, that does generate some, some some, some anxieties.

**Anatol Lieven 39:27**

Yeah, so I think the history of that kind of attitude was not necessarily turned out well, for liberalism, shall we say, contributed to, of course to the Bolshevik Revolution. The idea that as long as we were against the tsar's you must be a good thing. Yes. didn't quite work out that way. Another question, basically does enough, I mean apart from the Western backed ones, but does enough of Russian civil society, NGO world survive now, not necessarily explicitly liberal but independent, to provide a basis for liberal politics, in the future perhaps.

**Paul Robinson 40:18**

It's actually one of the paradoxes that civil society in Russia, which is you might say, things happening outside the state has grown enormously in terms of numbers of NGOs, under Putin, there's been an actually a huge growth. And there still are, but vast numbers of what I might call civil society institutions. It's just most of them are not political. So therefore, some people who in the West define civil society very narrowly as civil groups, mobilizing for liberal ends, you might say, supporting human rights, and so on. But if you take a more expansive view, and that kind of organization has been much compressed, but if you look at just organization like charity, charitable work, okay, or just people getting together to do whatever, as as civil society, then then that's doing quite well. And the state has been quite supportive of it, and actually provided lots of money for local newspapers and charities, and this, that and the other as long as they stay out of politics. So what you might call a political civil society is doing well. And a lot of it is quite conservative. So we're seeing in the war in Ukraine, that large numbers of groups got together to like buy drones and send them to the front and stuff like this, which is a which is not what we imagined civil society being. Okay, it's a patriotic, nationalistic, civil society. So the Russian example perhaps creates some problems for those who regard civil society as a building block of a liberal society, because actually, civil society doesn't have to be liberal. Yeah. And the Russian Orthodox Church is another example. I mean, it's a civil society, which is deeply conservative. Right. So liberal civil society doing very badly, state really does not like it and has suppressed it quite firmly. Other forms of civil society, civil society doing better.

**Anatol Lieven 42:51**

Would you agree with Marlon Lerawell, though, that this existence of maybe sympathetic but still independent civil society, still makes Russia and authority under Putin, an authoritarian state? I mean, an increasingly authoritarian state, but not a totalitarian one?

**Paul Robinson 43:13**

Yes, I'm very cautious about all these terms, because it's so badly defined, yeah. That we tend to toss them around when we want to say something negative about somebody or something. But yes, under our normal understanding of it, Russia has become much more authoritarian in the past five years. And so I think that's, that's clearly true. And especially since the start of the war, but it is it is obviously not a totalitarian state. I was a student in the Soviet Union, I'm that old. So I have some experience of a totalitarian state. It's not it's not modern day Russia, it's, it's very different in that regard. The state is not interested in infiltrating every little aspect of life in a way that the party had a cell everywhere. That doesn't exist. So I think totalitarian is not a legitimate label, but authoritarian might be.

**Anatol Lieven 44:22**

Now, on the score of central state control, we have a question, how much federalism survives in Russia? And are there any opportunities left for at least veiled liberal experimentation or policies at the oblast level in Russia still?

**Paul Robinson 44:49**

While there isn't a lot of, there never was a lot of federalism, to be honest, and under Yeltsin, this sort of was because the state had just lost control over the over the provinces but but not by design. You know, truly autonomous states exist probably only in Chechnya. That's not, that's not going to be a liberal autonomy. And that said an argument could be made, but if liberal reform is to happen in Russia, it might be better to go back to the sort of 19th century small deeds model of the Zemstvo, where you work on doing little things at the local level. And that might be much less threatening to the Russian state than something else. And this is what this newish party called the New People sort of claims to be doing is that it's you know, about getting new people in the local level and making changes at the local level, without really challenging the Russian state. And as a result, the Russian state is sort of let it letting it be. So there may be some some prospects there. But since the governors of provinces largely selected from Moscow, even if there are elections, there are limits to how far that can go. I suspect. Yeah.

**Anatol Lieven 46:24**

Two linked question, so often asked in the West, the first is, I mean, what are the chances of Putin being overthrown? in some form, if, for example, the economic situation greatly worsens, or, which looks less likely now, Russia suffers another major defeat in Ukraine? And then, of course, connected to that, What are the chances of serious separatist movements emerging and the Russian Federation breaking up in your view?

**Paul Robinson 46:58**

I tend to the view that absence a catastrophic collapse at the front, Putin is is safe. And as things stand as things seem fairly stalemated in Ukraine and look likely to stay that way for perhaps forever, so I reckon the odds of Putin falling relatively low. Consequently, that kind of answers the second question, but absent state collapse, that sort of strife is probably unlikely. If, however, there is state collapse, well, then prospects of civil war can't be I wouldn't say they're high, but they can't be ruled out. And there will certainly be you have a dangerous situation in a sort of post war environment where you have a lot of people with weapons and lots of probably embittered veterans running around. Which could be a very, you know, could be very nasty. Now, I don't think it will come to that. But you can't you can't rule it out 100%, either.

**Anatol Lieven 48:18**

Yes, I mean, the issue of returned veterans, particularly after, if the war is seen to have ended up in either defeat, or even a sort of victory, but disappointment, looking at what happened in Italy after the First World War, is, I think, a very important one, but also very much in Ukraine, I was struck talking to, you know, wounded military veterans there by the intense resentment of the corruption of the Kiev elites. So something I didn't find it to be traveling in the Ukrainian provinces, but certainly in Kyiv, it's, you get the smell of that very much. And one can well imagine the anger of the soldiers as they return home having, you know, buried so many of their comrades. Another question, please forgive me, by the way, audience, there are so many questions that I can only pass on some of them since we're rapidly running out of time. How stark is the urban rural divide in Russia today? And how well do educated metropolitan Russians understand their rural brethren. Somebody is saying that he was shocked, as I was by the way, in the 90s, and 2000s, by the the indifference of the ignorance and the indifference of the Moscow and Petersburg elites, to the countryside and the smaller towns, how deep is this gulf?

**Paul Robinson 49:52**

And probably not the right person to answer that because like, most Westerners, when I go to Russia, I go to the big cities, so I don't have a lot of experience, of of small town Russia or rural Russia, one gets the sense that the divide is quite large. I mean, there was an interesting article in on the Russia Post website recently, which Marlina helps run on some Russian liberal talking about his street in some, I think, dirt poor small town and how everyone was doing really well out of the war, because they were getting vast sums of money, because the wages shot up. And that kind of article does highlight that, you know, different perceptions of different parts of the population. And when one doesn't, one doesn't get the sense that they have an awful lot in common. Okay, but as I say, because I don't have a lot of experience in the Russian countryside myself, I'm not maybe the best person to write about that. But there are some interesting people who do, there's a woman, I forgot her name, who writes about her time, who lives in Siberia and has some double barreled name, writes regular articles about how people think in Siberia, and certainly gives the impression that they think kinds of different things.

**Anatol Lieven 51:27**

We have an interesting question from someone who worked closely with Russian NGOs and said that, you know, been woke in the Western sense in the years before 2022, there was, you know, a move towards just, you know, greater humanity, shall we say, in in social and personal and cultural attitudes and sections of society and in the NGO world when it came to, you know, treatment of women, sexual minorities, just to sort of a greater a greater care for people, has that been destroyed by the war and the state's tremendous turn against what it has dubbed, you know, Western decadence and so forth? Or, or is this something that could continue?

**Paul Robinson 52:24**

Well, I think there are still large numbers of people out there trying to trying to do good as it were, right. There are, you know, egal groups who defend people who claim their human rights have been abused and and fight it in court, and surprisingly often when there are various charitable organizations, and so on. So I think that a basic sense of humanity can exist, regardless of the presence or not of liberalism. Right. So I suspect that is still there. But of course, it may have greater problems manifesting itself right now, because of, you know, state pressure to be to be honest.

**Anatol Lieven 53:18**

I was struck by this film, I can't remember its title now. But the couple who are divorcing and the son who went missing, I mean, a deeply in some ways, culturally pessimistic film, but on the other hand, it did have this spontaneously formed group of volunteers who went looking for the boy, you know, it was a hopeful sign of some, some humane dynamism, shall we say, in society? It was interesting. The guy was the guy was organizing, it was pretty clearly a foreign officer.

**Paul Robinson 53:50**

Yeah, so I mean, Russia is often said to be a low trust society. And so citizens don't spontaneously come together because they don't trust each other very much. And there is certainly, you know, until recently, sometimes some signs of progress in that regard. I was I strapped onto a photograph I saw about a bike rack in a hole in a staircase in St. Petersburg. And I thought, wow, like the fact that you would actually leave your bike in the staircase step stairway in Russia is like, sign something has changed. Right. But how deep that's gone, I don't know.

**Anatol Lieven 54:38**

Yeah, so to quote from Casablanca, there are parts of New York, I wouldn't exactly advise you to leave your bicycle interested in question that about a Russian SVR officer, using the expression, “little people”, in talking about average or Typical Russians. How is this basically an ingrained attitude of the state? Oh, by the way, I mean that that is a phrase that I have heard, quoted by police officers in America too, if you ain't a cop, your little people? Is that is that is that? Is that just an inescapable feature of authority in Russia, you know contempt for the masses?

**Paul Robinson 55:32**

Wel, don't think it's necessarily something restricted to people that have a liberal, you know, inclination. I think, you know, I wouldn't say that. That's not so I think, you know, Russian state authorities, policemen and so on do not have a, I might say, a sterling reputation for respects of rights of individuals. So very, there are certain there are certain, you know, I think the liberal critique of Russia has some some validity errors, that there are some in, you know, deeply embedded cultural problems, you might might might say. Bcause, I mean, I go back to some, some, some thinking on this to do like, late Imperial emigre, thinking on say, the, you know, legal consciousness, so that the essence of a true legal consciousness is not, there's not the letter of the law or even a obedience of the law. It's an understanding of the law, in one's you know, in one song and acceptance of it as right and necessary, because it is inherent in the natural law or whatever. Right. And the complaint has often been that, going back to what we were saying about privatization without the rule of law, that Russell's problem has never been a lack of laws, it has been a lack of legal consciousness.

**Anatol Lieven 57:02**

So, last question, going all the way back, was Gorbachev the best liberal ruler that actually anyone could have hoped for in Russia? And also, of course, the old old question, did he get it wrong by attempting political and openness before economic reform? or had he no choice in the matter?

**Paul Robinson 57:34**

Well, Perestroika was the most radical period of liberalisation in Russian history. Never have had so many people been free to such a large extent, in such a short time. But yes, he got it wrong, because that was not his intent was never to destroy communism, it was to strengthen communism. And I don't think h,e he'd never really understood economic issues. That's, that's obvious. And he never really understood why things were going wrong with his economic reform and, and blamed it all on opposition within the party, and therefore set about dismantling the party and once you've dismantled the party, the whole edifice came came crumbling down. Um, so I mean, yes, he was a great man in the sense of massive liberalisation. But it was also a disaster in terms of destroying the state he was trying trying to strengthen. And he clearly got something very badly wrong.

**Anatol Lieven 58:44**

Yeah, so, perhaps one of the liberal things about him in a Russian context was that he understood his own country so very badly, you know, from multiple points of view. Well, Paul, thank you so much. This has been a really fascinating conversation. I urge everyone to buy Paul's book on Russian liberalism, which is an absolutely indispensable guide to that tradition. So thank you so much. And I hope that you will all join me on Monday to talk with Tom Graham about his book, Getting Russia Right. So Paul, thank you once again, and thanks to the audience for coming. Thank you.