
“Russian identity at the crossroad: toward the past or back to the future”

MIREES' Open Lecture

On 27th of April Forlì hosted a roundtable whose main topic was Russian identity. The issue was analyzed from a double perspective; e.g. external perspective with a focus on the Ukrainian crisis, and internal perspective with a focus on religious identity. The conference was organized by MIREES in cooperation with OPI-Osservatorio di Politica Internazionale. The two guest-lecturer were Carolina de Stefano, PhD candidate at Istituto Sant'anna in Pisa and Oleksiy Bondarenko, OPI Fellow Research and Head Russia Programm. They presented their own research projects while the MIREES coordinator, Professor Francesco Privitera, moderated the discussion.

Although the sub-topics of the researches are slightly different, the main underlying theme is the post-soviet struggle for political and ideological identity. After a brief introduction of Professor Privitera who remembers how significant is the identity discourse in Russia, Oleksiy Bondarenko opens the roundtable. His work "Colored Revolutions and Putin's Russia. The domestic impact of uprisings abroad" is an accurated analysis on the domestic impacts of Putin's interventionist foreign politics. In particular, his in-depth analysis focuses on the Ukrainian crisis as case study. Bondarenko identifies three key points which perfectly summarizes the impacts of an aggressive foreign policy into domestic affairs: the ideological doctrine; the anti-regime tactics; and the Kremlin's changing attitudes.

More specifically, his analysis shows that since 2005 Putin's doctrine became more coherent. The lecturer interpreted this changing attitude as a response toward the spreading of the "colored revolution" in the post-Soviet space. Thereafter, the lecturer points out that Putin monopolized the patriotic rhetoric in relation to domestic affairs. Moreover, Bondarenko emphasizes how Putin's strong leadership helps in centralizing in his sole figure Russia's identity. Indeed, he defined Putin "the embodiment of the juncture between state and society". The attempt to physically creating the ring which unifies the two spheres is exemplified by the youth movement *Nashi*, a *de facto* governmental organization which openly supported Putin and served as a channel for pro-government propaganda.

The second lecturer was Carolina De Stefano who presented her research entitled "The return of the Orthodox Church in post-soviet Russia: a genuine social value or an identity political tool?". She problematizes the question of Russian identity nowadays, asking whether it is moving backwards or forward. She argues that Russian identity discourse has always been characterized by a paradoxical

alternation of continuity and discontinuity. Specifically, it deals with the Orthodox credo. Her research stresses the role of the Orthodox religion in Russian cultural and political life; accordingly, the Orthodox religion is not just a legacy of the traditional life interrupted by the Soviet parenthesis, but it is mainly a symbol of Russianness.

Moreover, coherently with Bondarenko's analysis, Carolina De Stefano emphasizes how domestic discussions about Russian identity are in many ways monopolized by the government; for instance: fundamental is that Russia lacks a political culture and public debates which are not state-driven and/or greatly influenced by the government. Accordingly, some of the reasons behind Putin's authoritarian attitudes have roots in the very contemporary globalization-hysteria. Furthermore, under this perspective it seems clearer why nationalism plays a big role in the formation of Russian identity.

However, Carolina ends her presentation stressing that Russian identity is not moving towards nationalist deviations. Indeed, she concludes that there is not a clear-cut answer to her initial question. Her research shows that Russian identity discourse is not following a clear path: it does not either move forward or backward. More precisely, she grounds her final statement upon three points: the path of Russian identity is not yet clear; Russian identity discourse shows opposite and paradoxical trends, for instance: it should not be neglected that Putin's authoritarianism cannot be automatically defined as anti-modern; Putin's neo-conservative trend cannot be simply framed as nationalist.

The insightful and detailed presentations of the two scholars were followed by a stimulating debate. Since the roundtable was not restricted to MIREES students, the discussion after the presentations was enriched by contributions of students coming from different backgrounds. For instance, several students from the School of Language and Literature, Translation and Interpretation (SLLTI) attended the conference. They actively participated into the discussion and enriched the following debate.

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