The recent protests in Russia showed the growing desire of Russia’s urban middle classes to live in a society governed by the rule of law. Their slogan ‘For honest elections’ (for the December 2011 parliamentary [Duma] and March 2012 presidential ballots) was reminiscent of the Soviet dissidents demand for the then authorities to ‘Respect your own Constitution.

In contrast to the 1980s, the current protest movement lacks any moral authority figure of Sakharov’s stature. Moreover, while most of the protestors are implicit if not declaratory liberals, many of their leaders - like left-wing firebrand Sergei Udaltsov or the popular nationalist anti-corruption blogger Aleksei Naval’nyi - are not.

The paper reflects on the crisis of liberal ideas in Russia in the 1990s, when private property was seen by many leading reformers as essential for irreversibly dismantling the command economy and the one-party state, even at times at the expense of the rule of law. Many Russians were alienated by the gross corruption that followed. The paper also draws parallels with the pre-revolutionary divide between ‘right’ and ‘left’ liberals in Russia, based on their greater emphasis on either civil or political rights.

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