

The role of "Russian idea" in contemporary Russian identity: three sources of Russian totalitarian narrative

There is probably no other nation in the world that is so much obsessed with formulating and strictly defining of what comprises its national idea or mission. From Chaadajev, through the dispute between Slavophiles and Westernizers, to this day, this issue is of top priority in the Russian thought. Although this quest might have been somewhat normal in the era of the formation of national states, today, in the postmodern era, it looks like a strange and even needless obsession. During my stay in Russia, in the period of four months I witnessed at least 4-5 different discussion forums about the "Russian idea" a propos globalization and the role of Russia in it.

Russians obviously feel great fear of globalization, which they perceive primarily as "Westernization". Even some Western theorists identify globalization with "Americanization" and "Westernization" (Spybey, Taylor and others). Indeed, globalization today is far from being a "planetary synthesis of cultures" - as it was in fact defined in the 40s of the last century (R. Oliver, B. Davies, etc.). Hence, the Russians' fear that it primarily represents the internationalization of Western values is not misplaced. So an authentic development of Russia, independent of these

trends (among other things announced in Putin's speech at Valdai - International Discussion Club¹), is more and more advocated.

The "Russian idea" is a purely Russian concept – both by its form and its content. It is a distinctive Russian type of historiosophy, a social and political theory, i.e. Russian philosophy of culture, history, and politics. On one hand, the Russian idea is actually a quest for an official state ideology, but on the other hand - as we speak of Russia - this national idea becomes a metaphysical idea. All current socio-political issues in Russia are beyond the political sphere and are transferred to the philosophical and metaphysical sphere, with which the discussion on the "Russian idea" becomes more a metaphysical and identity discussion about "God – given " mission to Russia, rather than just a merely political debate.

In some way I also became "obsessed" with the problem of "the Russian idea" - why do the Russians try to formulate **one** comprehensive, complete, total, almost overarching idea - that turns into a totalitarian one - with which they will embrace the whole socio-political reality!? There has to be something that made them embrace the Marxian thought with such religious faith!? Because in its essence, the Marxian was exactly that

¹Valdai International Discussion Club is an exclusive gathering of leading Russian and international experts in the history, politics, economics and international relations. The Club's mission is to foster a global dialogue about Russia and to provide an independent, unbiased, scholarly analysis of political, economic and social processes in Russia and the world

kind of comprehensive, total doctrine, religious faith and “theology” that had an ambition to explain everything by the principle of historic materialism.

I think that this kind of an effort in defining total, comprehensive ideas for explaining the socio-political reality that leads them to incline towards totalitarianism and authoritarianism is a result of three key factors:

- **Political - geographical:** Namely, because of the Eurocentrism, i.e. the west-centricity of actual world, the Russians had a need to get involved into that western world, but they were to some extent geographically out of it. They always defined themselves “regarding” that world i.e. always opposite the “other”. That finally led them to see themselves as “special” in the world-historical processes and from here comes the need for a “special” idea for self-understanding; they were “forced” to perceive themselves as a “third Rome”. Hence the conclusion that they’ve made: Russia is a unique civilisation.

- **Orthodoxy:** Orthodoxy, unlike Catholicism and Protestantism has a high dose of mysticism that leads to the need of “amalgamation”, fusion with God - deification. On political level, that would mean a creation of suitable political mythology about the leader, the king/tsar, and even the president; they feel “one” with the Supreme Being.

- **Philosophy/Social theories:** these religious implications evolved into a whole philosophical tradition from Solovyov to Berdyaev which crucially determined the consciousness of the Russian intellectuals, so that this mysticism entered even in the secular culture. The concepts of all-unity, Godmanhood and Sophia, of Solovyov, and then Bulgakov, Florensky and others, entered in Russian intellectual tradition and influenced generations and generations of Russians. Dostoyevsky was influenced by Solovyov's philosophy of "All-unity", and he "preached" that concept in his "Brothers Karamazov's". And almost every Russian has read this novel.

These concepts are quite different from the western philosophical concepts. In these concept lies exactly that urge of Russian intellectuals for one supreme explanatory principle for the whole reality.

All these factors are moments of Russian mentality in its nature, which in its essence, inclines towards togetherness - which is a symptom of totalitarian consciousness - no matter in what shape. These three factors as determinants of Russian culture, in our opinion, are essential to Russia's "captivity" in the "pre-modern " condition. These factors gave birth to the desire for "great narratives" and large structures and interfere with the modernization of Russia. Russia seems to suffer from a "lack of postmodernism", i.e. fragmentation, differentiation, stratification in small narratives.

Namely, because of the first factor it always sets "against" rather than "in" the West. The second factor - Orthodoxy - is even more dramatically determining. Orthodoxy, unlike Catholicism, and in particular Protestantism, never succeeded in "engaging" in the world and creating a secular culture. And finally, because of this the third factor - philosophical theories - failed to generate a capacity for micro-analysis and pluralistic and liberal approach in the understanding of socio-political phenomena.

The essential question today is to find a modern condition in creating an appropriate cultural model in Russia. What is it that idea that can form the Russian spirit and culture today? Which course should follow "Russian idea" nowadays and what are the philosophical foundations of it? Is it trying to free itself of these great narratives and which are the cultural artifacts that illustrate the new course? Is it possible for Russia to get rid of the desire for all-unity?

Because in our belief Russia does not have a clearly developed, modern concept of cultural-historical development today. Even advocates of the concept of "sovereign democracy", do not have a clear vision – even at Vladislav Surkov “manifesto” a clear ideological, cultural and ideal definition of the new course of the Russian sovereign democracy cannot be recognized. The complete purposive and dominant conception of A. Dugin is just an illustration of the "uniqueness" of the Russian position

and in that terms it is a return into the past and disconnecting from the modern world-historical flows.

Each of these three listed determinants of Russian culture and mentality needs intervention and change. Changes need to be twofold: from West to Russia and vice versa. West should have an inclusive feature "integrating Russian geography" into a single spiritual and cultural space. Orthodox Church should open on one side towards the internal processes in modern Russian society itself, and on the other side towards the ecumenical movement. And finally, through the exchange of experiences and ideas, Russian theorists should assess their own reality with particulate tools adequate to modernity.

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