

"The Inconsistency of Russian Spirit": Does it Exist Nowadays? (The Socio-cultural Aspect)

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The term "Inconsistency of Russian Spirit" belongs to famous Russian philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev. By this phrase he meant the conflict of the Western and Eastern elements in Russian history and the corresponding complexity of Russian spiritual, social, political, economic and institutional reality. On the one hand, such Western notions as rule of law, citizenship and civil society, and clear designation of private property (including private property on arable land) were only taking shape in Russian society in the XVIII to XIX centuries. On the other hand, Russia was never characterized by purely Eastern forms of social organization such as an Asian version of clan-based rural community or colonially implemented capitalism. This position "in-between" in practical terms took the form of different socio-cultural and psycho-moral splits in Russian society in the late XVIII to early XX centuries. Among them were the split between imperial establishment and ideology on the one hand and enlightenment-oriented intelligentsia on the other, between "Westernizers" and "Slavophiles" among intelligentsia, between educated and uneducated parts of society, between modern urbanism and communal life of Russian traditional village, between capitalist development-initiated to larger extent from above-and a strong feudal socio-economic and cultural basis, etc. The same kind of splits were characteristic of Russian religious life, where the Orthodox Christianity was paradoxically intertwined with pagan naturalism and the State domination over the Church was accompanied by the latter's desire to become the real and only spiritual leader of the nation.

The practical outcome of this extreme complexity was a conspicuous lack of mutual understanding and cooperation between state and society and within the society, institutional inconsistency, waves of reforms and counter-reforms from above, and constant danger of upheaval from below. Berdyaev and some other observers wrote about "totalitarian," "sectarian" elements in Russian mentality. Traditional Russia looked like a country with many different socio-cultural, ethnic, and political identities. It is important to mention that Russian nationalism was historically always closely connected with the idea of Great Empire and messianism. Moreover, in my view, imperial messianism in this combination was stronger than purely nationalistic elements. It was quite natural because society with so many different socio-cultural and ethnic identities simply could not fully develop the European style "nation-state" nationalism. What kept this society, which was unique in many ways, together were absolutist monarchy and the Orthodox Church, which was closely intertwined with the state. But, as it was

mentioned above, neither absolutism nor Church were free from "inconsistencies," being torn between the need to reform and a deep feeling that profound reforms will inevitably ruin empire, state, and the existing form

of society. . . This reality gave certain ground for some Russian and foreign scholars (A. Fursov; A. Avrech) to put forward the concept of "permanent involution" in the historic development of Russian society. According to this theory, each attempt (either from above or from below) to move Russia in the direction of a Western type of modern state, capitalism, civil society, liberalism, etc. was inevitably doomed to be followed by some counter-attempt to move the country back, in an opposite direction. Under the conditions of conspicuous socio-cultural incoherence, liberal reforms produced such contradictions in all spheres of Russian life that the whole structure began cracking, making it imperative to stop the liberal trend and introduce certain version of counter-reforms. The general historic outcome of such situation were "eternal Russian vacillations" without constructive developmental results. In the late XIX to early XX century, when the needs of industrial modernization made economic and political change imperative, state and society both eventually turned out to be practically irreformable. The state-led market modernization drive and boom of Russian capitalism at the turn of the centuries socio-politically undermined the absolutist monarchy which was at the same time structural cornerstone of the whole Russian economic and cultural edifice. The collapse of absolutism could bury the capitalist modernization itself while the imperial absolutism institutionally and ideologically was becoming more and more inappropriate for the latter. At the same time the political evolution of absolutism towards constitutional monarchy was extremely uneven, inconsistent and eventually unsuccessful. The main reasons for such outcome were the historic nature and traditions of Russian absolutism—the main holder of the imperial state and socio-culturally incoherent society. Orthodox Church turned out to be unable to play stabilizing role, being too intertwined with monarchy, state and empire. Many observers point out that by early XX century it lost its spiritual credentials for the large part of both rural and urban population of Russia. Interesting and important to mention that subsequent Bolshevik's brutal repression against the Church did not bring about massive national resistance. The widespread frustration with uneven modernization and inequalities of capitalism, especially in the rural community and among a considerable part of the urban intelligentsia, which was alien to both imperial establishments and modern capitalism, eventually took the form of searching for utopian projects to change completely the socio-political, economic and cultural order by means of revolution. The so-called eternal Russian questions of "What is going on?," "Who is to blame?," "What is to be done?" have their roots in the tremendous lack of socio-cultural and institutional coherence in late imperial Russia. In the cataclysm of the First World War traditional Russia collapsed.

The Bolshevik victory and construction of communist totalitarianism in Russia after October 1917 was to a great extent a result of and reaction against the above-mentioned contradictions. It is interesting to mention that some partisans of "involution theory" (A. Karneev, G. Sukharchuk) perceived the so-called "socialist revolution" in Russia in terms of a "counter-reform trend." According to them, the boom of Russian capitalism at the turn of the century, liberal reforms introduced by the tsarist government after 1905 and subsequent February 1917 "bourgeois-democratic" revolution represented the socio-cultural, economic and political drive in the "Western" direction. Bolshevism, with its radical anti-capitalism and anti-liberalism, represented the tum of the clock back-to the "traditional" state dominance and state cohesion. But to my mind, the story with Bolshevism was not that simple. The more general historic problem, which is certainly beyond the scope of this paper, is the correlation between tradition and modernity in Russian communism. N. Berdyaev, in his book "The Roots of Russian Communism," where he has written so much about "inconsistencies of Russian spirit," pointed predominantly at the traditional side of the communist phenomenon in this country. By the time the book was published in the West (1937), such an approach made certain sense in order to pour some cold water on the heads of the Western Left-wings who idealized and extolled the "achievements of the young Soviet republic." But from the contemporary point of view it must be said, I believe, that although Soviet system inherited some important features from the Russian past (messianism and expansionism, state cohesion, lack of rule of law and civil society, etc.), nevertheless the transition from traditional Russian Empire to Communist industrialism presupposed a considerable evolution of many "inconsistencies of Russian spirit." Bolshevism, with its secular anti-traditionalism, import-substitution industrialization, and party-state totalitarian structure, was by no means the "second edition" of monarchy just the way the communist federalism was not the same as traditional empire. Communists, at least formally, acknowledged the right of nations to self-determination up to complete secession.

There are profound discussions now among Russian historians about whether Communism was the step back, forward, or even to the side from the general path of the world development (L. Vasiliev). I believe that these discussions have a bit of a metaphysic and schematic character. It is important to mention, however, that by the mid-70s, the Soviet-style modernization created in the USSR's predominantly urban, industrial and secular society, with a comparatively high educational level, social mobility, and structurally consumer-based orientation. Different problems and splits in this society (between state and society, between dissidents and party-state, between "Westernizers" and "Traditionalists" among dissidents and semi-dissidents etc.) resembling to a certain extent the old-style "inconsistencies," were still put into a new socio-cultural environment. In comparison with traditional Russia, the main characteristic feature of this new environment was a much higher degree of general socio-cultural coherence. Despite profound crisis and eventual collapse of the Soviet modernization drive it undoubtedly was this

new socio-cultural reality-the product of this drive-which paved the way to neo-liberal economic reform and political democratization in Russia after the

break up of the USSR, " ..' ,

When communism collapsed, the federal empire split and the first Russian neo-liberal government of E. Gaidar began implementing "shock-therapy," the concept of "involution" was once again reinvigorated by some domestic and foreign scholars. They spoke about inevitable defeat of the liberal drive, which will be followed by "black Russian mutiny" and subsequent restoration of a pro-Communist or openly fascist regime (G. Ikle,

A. Adorn, A. Yarin, A. Amalrick). The supporters of this approach, based upon a traditional scenario, pointed at the "lamentable cultural, political, and moral heritage of communism," inability of Russian society to adopt liberalism and the market, widespread "totalitarian mentality," lack of rule of law and a civil society concept, etc. As one American social scientist told me once in November 1991, "What happened in August was a kind of February 1917 revolution. The October is still to come." But in notable contradiction to all these predictions about inevitable collapse of reforms in post-Communist Russia, none of the dramatic scenarios, known from the Russian past, was realized during the 90s. Though the change was far from consistent and rather painful, society neither exploded, nor did the political elite initiate counter-reforms. Neither fascist, populist, nor strong authoritarian perspectives came true either. To put it in other words, the awaited "involution" did not happen

this time. The electoral behavior of the Russian population (with a notable exception during parliamentary elections in December 1993, when about 20% voted for the Zhirinovskiy Liberal-Democratic party) was commonly rational, supporting the dynamic power balance between government and opposition. At the present moment, one can definitely say that elections became the main legitimate way of political expression for the majority of Russian society. The contemporary political system in Russia represents a kind of "dual democratic regime" where government leans on a strategic sector of parliamentary opposition. The three-layer structure of the Russian political system with all its flaws still fits quite well to the real process of political decision-making, which takes place between the President and the upper Chamber-the Federation Council where the leaders of the regions sit. This system comprises both new democratic elements (division of power, freedom of speech and press, etc.) and old authoritarian characteristics (strong presidential power) of the Russian political establishment. Different extremist forces-though undoubtedly in existence-are being marginalized. Despite obvious socio-economic difficulties, neither fascist perspectives, authoritarian perspectives, traditionalist anti-reform drives, nor social upheaval from below are in sight today in Russia. All of this gives certain ground to conclude that by the end of the XX century some important features of the "inconsistency of Russian spirit" have either disappeared or gone through considerable evolution. Moreover, a number of constant characteristics of the Russian historic past ceased to exist too and, as far as one can see, forever.

1. The Soviet-style import-substitution industrialization crushed the majority of Russian traditional socio-cultural cleavages and created a much more coherent society. The collapse of such industrialization did not bring about the restoration of the traditional order. Quite the opposite occurred: under the crisis of the communist system, a predominantly urban, consumer-oriented, and comparatively well-educated society began looking in a Western direction for the solution of the problems that it faced. Traditionally oriented anti-Communist dissidents (including, for example, A.I. Solzhenitsin) were respected but ideologically obviously not accepted. This socio-cultural reality, together with the exhausted potential of state-led import-substitution, created conditions for the start of radical neo-liberal reforms in Russia after the anti-Communist revolution in August 1991.

Communist totalitarianism left behind a society lacking in the structural, institutional, and cultural factors associated with violent collective action. The lack of extreme income inequality, the smaller numbers of marginalized poor, and the absence of the recent experiences with violent coups and riots, may all have contributed to a stabilizing influence under Russian post-communism. On the other hand, factors such as the absence of a developed civil society, a crisis in trade union movements—having been too intertwined with the collapsed communist party-state, and a tradition of an "exit" social reaction, rather than a "voice" of protest against the change from above, could also partly explain a comparatively peaceful transition from totalitarianism in this country.

What is equally important, the role and place of the so-called "intelligentsia" moved closer to the Western notion of "intellectuals," especially after the systemic disintegration of communism. At the early stage of neo-liberal reforms, probably for the first time in Russian history, the majority of this social group did not feel alienated morally or politically, and supported the proclaimed drive to democracy, market, and "Western universals." During later stages of reforms, when the real socio-psychological and material cost of deep change became clear, the former Soviet intelligentsia split. The younger group continued the "intellectual" drive, while the older group became less supportive toward further reforms, though without any desire or real possibilities to stop them. In any case, the traditional Russian (and partly Soviet) notion of "intelligentsia" as a socio-politically alienated, sectarian group of society in eternal opposition and obsessed with plans to change the status quo, went through profound evolution and no longer exists.

2. The collapse of the communist federate state and obvious impossibility of its restoration (as well as the impossibility to return to the traditional empire) exhausted the spiritual and intellectual potential of Russian expansionism and messianism. Russian nationalism at the present stage becomes less intertwined with imperial state ideology and starts to resemble more "nation-state" European nationalism. Taking into account the extremely multi ethnic and multicultural character of contemporary Russian society, I do not think that radical nationalism can win the upper hand in this country.

Politicians who compete for the Presidency or other decisive political positions can play the Russian nationalist card only within very strict limits, because otherwise they may face the danger of losing a considerable part of the electorate in different regions of the country and become ostracized by the leaders of the neighboring states. Russian political elite and society must rethink and rearrange the mechanism of the country's territorial, administrative and economic integration. They must learn how to live without an empire or "imperial federalism." Bearing in mind the Russian past, this process can not be easy but it has already started, it continues, and it will definitely accelerate with the change of generations. From this angle, one of the main political problems for Russia in the years to come, at least in my view, is the political institutionalization of the new territorial, administrative, and economic division of the country. Restoration of the past structures-imperial or communist federate-as well as split of the Russian statehood, are out of the question. Federation or confederation: this is the real choice. Supporters of each perspective have a considerable variety of approaches. The problem is to be solved on the basis of consensus between different regions (some of them opt for federation, some-for confederation) and the center. The process of solution definitely will not be quick and easy. But the choice that is faced is really something brand-new in Russian history.

3. Lack of a rule of law and a weak civil society are still among the characteristic features of Russian socio-cultural life, and have deep roots in the "traditional inconsistencies of Russian spirit." One should mention, however, that with the given degree of structural fragmentation and regionalization of society and political elite in contemporary Russia, the search for power balance and consensus became imperative. In the context of this paper, it is important to explain that this fragmentation and regionalization have nothing to do with traditional socio-cultural incoherence. The roots of these contradictions by no means lie in deep cultural discrepancies between different forms of social organization as it was in pre-revolutionary Russia. Today they are mainly connected with such issues as the different levels of socio-economic development of the regions, competition for resources, an unequal degree of ability to adopt to the market transition of different regions, social strata, industry branches, and groups of regional and central political and economic elites. The same kind of fragmentation can be witnessed now practically everywhere in the East-Central European post-communist world. In contemporary Russia, none of the individual or collective participants of this competition can make claims to absolute political or economic leadership. No omnipotent figure is in sight. On the other hand, the severe macro-economic situation leaves no space for populist or strong authoritarian experiments. All major parts of this fragmented social field are interested in construction of a certain stable balance within elite and society. The institutionalized presidential republic and acting political system,

as it was already said above, basically fits this trend. "Totalitarian" elements of Russian traditional mentality must go through substantial evolution.

Altogether, the post-communist transition in Russia, being in many respects a socio-cultural product of the Bolshevik-led bloody "detraditionalization" of the country, means deep change in the "genetic code" of Russian historic development.

