

Darina Grigorova

THE RUSSIAN NATION
BETWEEN THE SOVIET PAST AND THE EURASIAN FUTURE:
SEEKING POST-SOVIET IDENTITY

Russia has always been and will be a multinational state regardless of its format of governance – Romanov Empire, Soviet Union or pro-Soviet Russia. While in the period until 1917 religion was the determining national principle in the empire – practicing the Eastern Orthodox religion was sufficient to call someone a Russian regardless of his ethnic origin, in the period by 1991 the Soviet system chose the social principle as substitute for the national one by the concept of “Soviet citizen”.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union (1991) provoked a crisis in the national consciousness of the post-Soviet society, which the power holders tried to prevent with the formal introduction of the concept of “Rossiyanin”, entailing, however, only a civil affiliation to the Russian Federation.

Kremlin's attempt – mostly through Yeltsin and then more hesitantly under Putin – to impose the formal model of “Rossiyska” and “Eurasian” identity failed. The issue of a national idea of new Russia remains open and the fact that it was the main topic of the Valdai Discussion Club, organized by Putin in 2013, was not a mere chance.

Putting refers to 1991 as the year of the “geopolitical revolution” and “peaceful transformation of the Soviet regime” with the state slowly beginning to regain its prestige. Words with negative connotation, such as “collapse” and “disintegration” of the USSR are replaced with the more balanced

“transformation”, while Russia is formally announced as successor of the Soviet Union.

From a foreign political perspective, Putin began the Eurasian “Reconquista” or the restoration of the Russian influence in the pro-Soviet space – the „Eurasian” has replaced the “Soviet”.

Unlike the Enlightened absolutism of Catherine the Great, who declared the Russian Empire as “European”, under Putin’s *Enlightened authoritarianism*, modern Russia has been described as “unique Eurasian state”¹, which has also changed the orientation of the state. Putin’s specific steps to the Eurasian orientation of post-Soviet Russia involved the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Community (ЕврАзЭС) in 2000 and the Customs Union among Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan (effective as of 2010). According to Putin, the Customs Union will be “a real integration breakthrough, which will radically change the economic and geopolitical configuration of the Eurasian area”².

From the perspective of domestic policy, Putin sacralized the power in line with the Russian traditions, while the ideological vacuum after 1991 began to be filled with the ideology of patriotism. “People’s protection” (“сбережение народа”) – Russia’s most important public goal, set by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn – has become a part of Putin’s understanding of the national idea.

Yet, what kind of patriotism will new Russia have – Russian or Rossiyan, Slavic or Eurasian?

¹ Путин, В. В. Прямая речь. Вестник Российской нации. <http://www.rosnation.ru/index.php?D=31> (13.11.10).

² Председатель Правительства России В.В.Путин представил в Государственной Думе отчёт о деятельности Правительства Российской Федерации за 2010 год. 20.04.2010. <http://premier.gov.ru/events/news/14898/> (25.04.11)

The mechanisms of establishment of a national idea in post-Soviet Russia are: a new political language, new national holidays and controlled national memory - which, however, will combine Soviet traditions with post-Soviet/Russian realities - and new national heroes.

1. The new political language

In Putin's political dictionary patriotism is formally defined as "all-Russian patriotism", which should be "one of the major uniting factors". Unlike Medvedev, who avoids the use of the concept of "ideology", Putin speaks about an "ideology of agreement" as "the most secure method of building a sustainable immunity against any types of intolerance and separatism"³.

Putin's political language contains concepts of Russia's conservatism of the second half of the 19th century. The Balkans' Eastern Orthodox mission is replaced with "a civilizational mission in Eurasia" and Putin pronounces Russia as "guardian of the true Christian values" (which, however, entails the existence of false Christian values outside Russia).

It is not a mere chance that Putin chose Ivan Ilyin, one of the most conservative representatives of the Russian White émigrés of the 20th century, as an ideologist of the United Russia party, headed by him. The very slogan "United Russia" belongs to the White émigrés of the Civil War period. On the one hand, Russian conservatism has always protected the ideas of strong centralized power, which corresponds to the Presidential Republic and is enshrined in the 1993 Constitution. On the other hand, the concept of "conservatism" is not discredited in modern Russia unlike liberalism, which the public associates with

³ Путин, В. В. Прямая речь. Вестник Российской нации. <http://www.rosnation.ru/index.php?D=31> (13.11.10).

oligarchy, privatization and the plundering of public assets in the beginning of the 1990s.

Unlike Putin, Medvedev uses liberal wording in defining the Rossiyska nation. Medvedev associates the Russian nation with democracy, i.e. not with its uniqueness like Putin but, on the contrary, with the universal liberal values: “The main issue is to combine the national traditions with the fundamental sets of democratic values [...] What are these principles? How do they look like today? First of all, this is freedom and justice. Second, this is the civic dignity of man. Third comes his prosperity and social responsibility”⁴.

At its latest news conference in December 2013 Putin openly stated that conservatism is Russia’s ideology as a counterbalance of the non-liberal West. At the same time, a tendency of rediscovery of the Russian culture has begun. It is not a mere chance that the impressive ceremony at the opening of the Winter Olympics in Sochi featured exclusively symbols of the Russian culture.

2. Controlled national memory – “fair history”

The symbolism of national memory can hardly be distinguished from the mythological image of the past, developed at school but then destroyed at university. The university education, however, is for a limited number of people, while the school-created idea of the national past remains as lasting memory uniting the society and the national community. Every political crisis changing the system or even more – the state borders - alters the public attitude towards history and makes it more demanding in an effort to find a new identity.

⁴ *Медведев, Д. А.* О национальной идее. Главы из книги Николая и Марины Сванидзе. <http://medvedev.kremlin.ru/book> (15.03.11). *Пак той*. Выдержки из выступлений Д.А. Медведева. Вестник Российской нации. <http://www.rosnation.ru/index.php?D=50> (13.11.10).

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union (1991), in modern Russia, the memory about the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) turned into one of the strongest signs of the past uniting and, at the same time, dividing the Russian society. On the one hand, Victory Day, 9 May, remains uniting and sacred for all Russians, regardless of the social and political affiliations. On the other, the partial and the extreme – negative or positive (almost religious) – attitude towards the historical role of Stalin divides the post-Soviet society into two irreconcilable camps – a tendency, which - rather than weakening – has been gradually strengthening in the past 20 years.

The painful attitude of both the state and the society namely towards this period of the Soviet history is due to:

- the historical trauma after 1991 having created the “phantom pain”[1] over the Soviet area: it is particularly strong regarding Ukraine – closest to the Russians but seeking independence at all costs;
- the national problem having reached the Russians for the first time (so familiar to the Balkan peoples), namely, the non-coincidence of the ethnic and political borders (over 20 million Russians live outside the territory of the Russian Federation);
- disappointment with the neoliberal reforms of Yegor Gaidar having resulted in the transformation of Stalinism into a form of social protest;
- the attempt of certain post-Soviet republics (mainly the Baltic states) to replace rather partially the past restoring the cult towards the Nazis (especially Estonia) or the cult towards the collaborationists (in Ukraine, under president Yuschenko, Stepan Bandera was declared a national hero). The post-Soviet republics condemn the Soviet Union but do not object to their Soviet borders (while a part

of the USSR, Lithuania received the capital Vilnius and the southern territories once belonging to Poland, Ukraine – Crimea, Georgia – South Ossetia, etc.)

– the European Parliament decision to proclaim 23 August an European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism incorrectly equalizing the two phenomena by a specific referral to 23 August 1939 (the Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact), quite forgetting the 1938 Munich Agreement.

Equalizing Stalinism and Nazism from an academic perspective is not an object to a dispute. Albeit close in many respects, the two phenomena are different enough so as not to be equalized. The academic circles, however, are far from influencing the public opinion, which is more dependent on political speculations or ignorance.

How has Russia responded? With the appeal for “fair history”. “The fair history is the key to the building of confidence-based relations between the peoples”⁵...

The “fair history” appeal belongs to the presidential administration chief of staff, Sergey Naryshkin, the closest aide of the Russian President and the person, who is best informed about the future steps of Dmitry Medvedev.

On 15 May 2009 the Russian President issued Decree No. 549 establishing a Commission to counter attempts to falsify history to the detriment of Russia's interests, headed by S. E. Naryshkin. The very name of the commission has become a target of public irony – what about the falsifying attempts that are not to the detriment of Russia's interests?

Such a commission does not contribute to the development of a new national idea.

⁵ *Нарышкин, С. Е.* Честная история – ключ к формированию доверительных отношений между народами, с. 1. <http://obrazovanie.viperson.ru/data/200908/naryshkin.pdf> (19.09.09)

3. Preservation of Soviet symbols:

The symbols, related to the victory in the Great Patriotic War, that are sacred for all generations in Russia up to the present day are:

a) on the one hand, 9 May, Victory Day (but having the Mausoleum fully packed during the solemn parade on the Red Square, which is a stylistic indicator about the absence of restoration ambitions with the fully pragmatically-minded power-holders);

b) on the other hand, the national anthem - Glinka's music approved as an anthem under Yeltsin, was replaced by the Soviet anthem under Putin. This third text was again written by Sergey Mikhalkov but the new melody symbolizes not so much the totalitarian past, as certain liberal authors criticized it, but rather 1943, the year of its creation. Then, the Internationale was not played any longer and the Soviet army was on the offensive largely due to the national upsurge caused by the heroes of Holy Russia revived by Stalin. The national anthem of 1943 was the music of Victory, which could not be compared even to Glinka's Patriotic Song.

4. New national holidays

Yeltsin's unfortunate choice of 12 June as Independence Day⁶ (which gives rise to the natural question: “Independence from whom?”, and the reply: “From the Soviet Union”. It is as if Great Britain starts observing 4 July) failed to unite the nation. It is perceived just as a day off even today although Putin renamed it to the Day of Russia.

⁶ 12 June 1990 is the date of proclamation of the Declaration of Independence of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic from USSR, author's note.

Putin's choice of 4 November as uniting “Rossiyan” national holiday is not successful either because, unlike the indifference with which the public treats 12 June, there is a sharp public reaction regarding 4 November and from a Day of National Unity and Reconciliation⁷ it has turned into a day of disunity – the march of the Russian nationalists.

Putin's mistake is that he would not pay attention to another proposal for a new uniting holiday marking the battle at Borodino⁸, which is a part of the cultural tradition of the Russian society. Every school children knows Lermontov's “Borodino”, Tolstoy's “War and Peace” and has listened to Tchaikovsky's overture “1812”.

If we speak about a nation – the Russian one, it was namely after the Patriotic War in 1812 that its awakening began with the participation of everyone – both the people and the aristocracy. At the same time, 1612 – the year of Kremlin's liberation from the the Polish-Lithuanian invaders – has no resonance in the Russians' national memory.

5. The United History Schoolbook: a “canonical version” of Patriotic Education or a History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)? Short Course.

⁷ In December 2004 President Putin decreed a law on celebrating 4 November as the Day of National Unity, author's note.

⁸ *Тишков, В. А.* Эхо Москвы. Передача “Мы” от 2 ноември 2010 г. <http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/we/723287-echo.phtml> (15.03.11).

“I fully agree that there should be some canonical version of our history”, Vladimir Putin’s statement at the first conference of the All-Russia People Front, on Mars 2013.⁹

The Russian President hardly has in mind the creation of a new canon. That was not achieved in Soviet times although many efforts were made to this effect (Putin would not use this vocabulary in his subsequent statements unless the question is about a Freudian slip, of course). The canon does not allow an alternative view, while history, as all humanitarian disciplines, is supposed to teach critical thinking rather than political sycophancy.

The academic community is reserved regarding the idea of an united history book even if at school and not at university level.

The disputes around the development of a Russian historical standard about high school teaching outline several dividing lines for the historical community:

– ideological approach

The fear of ideologization of the past exists among the part of the Russian community having lived within the Soviet Union although under the Constitution of the Russian Federation “no ideology may be instituted as a state-sponsored or mandatory ideology.”¹⁰.

– the assessment of Stalin

However, the approach towards the past within the very Russian society is also ideological – biased, depending on whether it adheres to liberal, conservative or Stalinist values. The Liberals cannot tolerate the balanced assessment of Stalin. Prof. Andrey Zubov (MGIMO-University) suggests to introduce a “moral criterion”

⁹ Путин поддержал идею единого "канона" преподавания истории России. – РИА Новости <http://ria.ru/society/20130329/929918860.html> (30.03.2013).

¹⁰ Конституция Российской Федерации. Глава 1. Основы конституционного строя. Чл. 13, ал. 3. <http://www.constitution.ru/10003000/10003000-3.htm> (10.01.2013).

and stigmatize the Soviet regime like the Nazis in Germany¹¹. At the same time, the historians, who approve Stalin, call him “efficient manager” in the Guide for high school teachers of A. V. Filipov (2007), provoking a public scandal with this interpretation.

– new terms and periodization

The new single history concept draft of 2013 replaced the term of “Kievan Rus” with “Ancient Rus” and “Ancient Russian State”. Curiously enough, regardless of the national passions in Ukraine, “Kievan Rus” is still a legitimate concept in the history textbooks.

The politically correct explanation of “Ancient Russian State” is that “it consists not only of Slavs but also of Nomads and people from the Turkic world”. As Acad. Aleksandr Chubaryan confesses this idea belonged to a Kazan, i.e. Tatar historian, who even insisted to introduce the term of “Eurasian state” already during that period but a compromise was reached by introduction of the new term of “steppe corridor”¹².

Indeed, apart from the Slavs, the Turkic people are also representatives of medieval Russia. “Kievan Rus” was introduced as a political term already in the 19th century. On the other hand, the direct relation between Ancient-Kievan Rus is Christianity, which is a part of the European culture, has nothing to do with the Turkic people within Russian territory. Undoubtedly, there is a Tataric-Mongolian element in the Russian culture and language at domestic level but they are not leading. The abandoning of the concept of “Kievan Rus” is a political and

¹¹ Нужен ли единый учебник по истории — дискуссия в «Воскресном вечере» В. Соловьева. – В: Православие и мир, 4 март 2013. <http://www.pravmir.ru/nuzhen-li-edinyj-uchebnik-po-istorii-diskussiya-v-voskresnom-vechere-v-soloveva/>

¹² Альбац, Е., Цуканова, Л. Единый учебник для разорванного общества. Нужна ли нам единая история? Александр Чубарян vs Андрей Зубов... Ibid.

ideological decision but it will neither improve relations with the Ukrainians nor satisfy the ambitions of the Tatar historians.

Another revoked term is “Tatar-Mongol yoke”. It has been replaced with “dependence of the Russian lands on the Golden Horde”. The purpose is not only to give up the concept of “yoke” but also the ethnic characteristic of its bearers – the Tatar-Mongol people, so as to avoid troubles in the interpretation given by Tatarstan, which is in itself - even if not ideological - a purely political approach to history and would hardly produce the desired result.

The new concept introduces the definition of “Eurasian context”. While, until recently, the Eurasian terminology tended to be mostly a part of the geopolitical vocabulary of the Russian foreign policy towards the East, as of 2013 this concept is officially included in the periodization of the Russian history which implies its mass use.

Until the establishment of the cultural and historical standard, the Eurasian concept had existed only within the range of concepts of the followers of neo-Eurasianism and in particular, Aleksandr Dugin, who is not popular outside the conservative circles. Different conclusions can be drawn from the failure of his party, Eurasia (2001–2003). Yet, its reinstatement in 2012 as well as the plans to run in the 2016 parliamentary elections – which they would hardly do independently but most probably as part of the All-Russia People Front – also speaks for itself.

The Eurasian trace in the new historical and cultural standard that would be the navigator of the authors of the united schoolbook is also confirmed by the absence of classical definitions of the rule of Peter the Great: “Westernisation” and “Europeanization” are replaced with “modernization”, which is already ideological auto-censorship (I would not call it censorship because there are no

such instructions. Obviously the question is about a Soviet-styled supererogation/reflex).

The neglecting of the “Europeanization” can even be called academic incorrectness because it was namely under Peter that Russia became secularly Europeanized creating a modern state along with the empire. In religious terms Russia underwent Europeanization for the first time under Vladimir with the adoption of Christianity.

Conclusion

The “canonic” history is a part of the programming of patriotism as a new ideology of post-Soviet Russia and is a symptom of the Russians’ most important problem after 1991 – the national one. In the 20th century and not only then (also in 1812), Russia showed that no country or a group of countries can conquer it from the outside but it can provoke self-destruction, if it wishes. This happened in 1917 and 1991 as in both cases the national factor was particularly strong.

However, ideology always stifles patriotism regardless of its aspects – left, right, centrists, etc. It is not a mere chance that the modern ideology established after the end of the Cold War – globalization – is against patriotism and sovereignty of the national memory. The neoliberal universalism of the market opposes the social functions of statehood.

High culture is prestigious and only the state can make it generally accessible. The market adapts itself to the mass taste, which is far away from classics in all respects. The state encourages the theoretical and the fundamental science (strategy of the future), which is considered losing by the market, oriented towards the applied science (the tactics of the present day).

Against the backdrop of this new fight of the 21st century – the fight between the market and the state having replaced the one about the separation of powers and democracy (from 1789 to 1991), Russia chose for itself the definition of “social state” (under the Constitution of 1993), on the one hand, and, on the other, oriented itself towards patriotism as protective mechanism against globalization following the Western model. Russia itself prefers its model of globalization – the Eurasian one, which is pragmatic but also conservative as an ideology and a counterbalance of neoliberalism.

Yet, Eurasianism can be successful only in foreign political terms as the Russian version of globalization. Besides, it should be pragmatic, as it has been so far, and not ideological, while on the domestic plain the focus should be on restoring the concept of “Russian” and not “Rossiyska” culture and, thence, the rehabilitation of the concept of “Russian”, along with “Rossiyanin”. The first should imply national affiliation – Russian is a person, who is a part of the Russian culture regardless of his ethnic roots, while Rossiyanin should signify civil/political affiliation.

The national idea of post-Soviet Russia that would neutralize the national factor for destabilization of the state cannot be either “Eurasian” or “Rossiyska” but only “Russian”, as part of the Russian culture, which is European!

If a definition of the political system of post-Soviet Russia of Putin is to be given, it involves *Enlightened authoritarianism* with Eurasian democracy. It should not be forgotten, however, that it has been inherited from Yeltsin.

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