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NEW IDEOLOGICAL STRUGGLE?

The disintegration of the Soviet Union created a decade-long illusion that the era of ideologies and ideological struggle was over and the world was moving towards a single system of values based on Western liberal democracy and capitalism. Europe and America fascinated the world with their freedom and winning political system.

The perception about the final victory of Western values was backed up by America's massive military supremacy but most importantly by Western countries' affluence everyone desired to have, including Soviet and Russian people. This desire was sustained by a widely spread and cultivated view that wealth and prosperity were a result of democracy, not vice versa.

Western ideology prevailed in international relations as well.

But new realities came into view in the 2000s.

Flushed with victory, the West started to impose its political positions and values even with the use of military force (in Afghanistan, Iran, and Libya) and lost. Its support for the Arab Spring further destabilized the Middle East and made democracy less attractive.

The success of a new (actually very old) model of capitalism, which leaned in politics on authoritarian and non-liberal leader's democracy regime regimes of varying degrees, became obvious.

The economic model based on the Washington Consensus lost its appeal after the crisis of 2008-2009, while the Chinese-style model profited. It also turned out that most of the new successful countries had not followed the Washington Consensus recipes.

Europe and, to a lesser extent, the United States began to drift away from the values they had always offered to the world, at least the Christian world, and

started imposing values that were unacceptable for the majority of countries—multiculturalism, excessive tolerance, and unusual sexual and family relations.

The ages long, drift from Christianity and Christian values in Europe accelerated dramatically over the past twenty-five years and was codified when the European Union did not mention its Christian roots in the draft EU Constitution that was never adopted and in the Lisbon Treaty, which replaced it. It only left pragmatism, consumerism, democracy, human rights, and law. Essentially, these values are quite attractive but may provoke a degradation of both humans and their values if detached from person's customary devotion to some higher purpose. When the Soviet Union was criticized for godless and amoral communism, it was offending but essentially true, and many people in the country knew it. The communist practice rejected traditional moral values. Now ironically it is the other way round: Can one trust those who espouse godless democratism and liberalism? Dostoevsky's well-known question put in the assertion of Ivan Karamazov, "If there is no God, everything is permitted" still sounds relevant.

The approach towards international relations, proposed by the Europeans quite sincerely for the most part and more double-heartedly by the Americans, which rejected the use of force and spheres of influence, and appealed to the supremacy of international law, began to falter, too. It first failed when Germany and eventually the EU unlawfully recognized Croatia's and Slovenia's secession from Yugoslavia, triggering a civil war in that country, followed by barbaric bombings by NATO of its remains in 1999. Then there were acts of aggression against Iraq and Libya. Besides, the new emerging countries had no intention to follow the EU's example and give up their sovereignty.

There is yet another core value in Western Europe that becomes inadequate in a new, harsher and less predictable world—non-violence and pacifism. The Europeans, who had overstrained themselves in two horrible world wars, not only eagerly and successfully cultivated this value among themselves, but they also tried to offer it to the rest of the world. But the world chose another path to follow and, worse still, began to intrude into the European world through mass migration

of people belonging to other cultures, which started quite a few years ago. Europe will have to adapt and pursue a harsher and more right-wing policy, and give up some of its democratic freedoms for the sake of order and security. This process is extremely painful and predictably provokes a defensive ideological reaction.

What makes the issue of values even more acute for Western elites is that they have largely drifted away from majorities in their societies where traditional values are still quite strong. These values also prevail in other countries which are gaining greater independence and freedom to act. The overall impression is that elites in the old West are losing their unconditional dominance in the economy, politics, military power, and ideology, and turning into an increasingly weak minority.

The Russian alternative appeared to be particularly remarkable and challenging against this Western background.

The biggest part of the Soviet elite and people, tired of scantiness and lack of freedom during the era of real socialism, were yearning to be in Europe while being quite unaware of what democracy and capitalism were really like. Private ownership was promptly introduced without protection by law. This led to the emergence of oligarchic capitalism and large private holdings, morally illegitimate and not defended and legitimized by law, which became the main cause of systemic corruption. Democracy was introduced from above, slowing down reforms and precipitating the near disintegration of the country by the end of 1990s.

And yet, even unsuccessful economic and political reforms gave the majority of Russian people what they generally associated with “Europe”—abundance of goods in shops and personal freedom.

But things did not go any further. Deep-rooted values and habits of Russian society came into play: almost unconditional striving for independence and security, consolidated by Vladimir Putin as “patriotism,” and the aspiration for justice with disrespect for formal rules and laws; as well as the feeling of belonging to a great-power embraced after reforms and military successes of the

18th-19th centuries. Add to this the drive for centralization of power, induced by centuries of fierce struggle for survival. This fear was amplified immensely by the 1990s which became a time of losses for everyone but the new bourgeoisie and a small part of the intelligentsia. Most groups of Russia's population and elites, including the meritocratic ones - scientists, engineers, teachers, military officers - lost everything.

And yet, further movement towards European democracy and some of its values was still possible if it had not been for two major circumstances.

First, the West saw itself as a victor and started to pursue what could be called a "Weimar policy in velvet gloves", pushing Russia off the political, security and economic stage. The enlargement of the Schengen Area even reduced visa-free travel opportunities for Russians. The interests and objections of the temporarily enfeebled great power were ignored.

NATO's expansion was a symbol of that policy. But eventually it became clear that the European Union's enlargement did not benefit Russia either as it was not accompanied, as had been promised and expected, by efforts to create a common and equal human and economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok. Western geopolitical expansion reduced possible gains for Russian people from relations with Europe and weakened pro-European feelings in the political class. The logic that eventually prevailed was that the West was using Russia's weakness to take away its centuries-old gains and make it even weaker.

Defense reflex prevailed.

The second circumstance was even more unexpected. Russians were eager to join the Europe of nation states, Christianity and traditional values, from which they had been separated for seventy years, the Europe of Churchill and De Gaulle, Adenauer, knights, and great persons and ideas. Russian people were arduously regaining religious values and faith that had been eradicated for decades. But Europe had changed. Most importantly, since the 1980s-1990s it had taken one more giant leap from old to new values and imposed them stubbornly.

The majority of Russian society and elite and a considerable part of European elites simply diverged in their cultural development and until recently did not even want to discuss their differences. And began to trade recriminations when these differences came to the surface.

In addition, unsuccessful reforms in Russia required an external enemy. From the start of the multi-dimensional crisis of the European project in the early 2010s, European elites, too, began to look for an enemy in a bid to consolidate member countries and turn their energy within.

Judging from the intensity of anti-Russian propaganda, truly unprecedented since the 1950s, it seems that Europe needs an enemy even more than Russia does. Before long, it went further and nearly demonized Putin. At first, Russia's ruling elite did not retaliate geopolitically and responded with counterpropaganda against Western values being imposed, but then used its muscles.

What makes the Russian challenge so strong for European elites is probably that Russia, currently seeking its identity and desiring to regain its own self, might be offering an attractive model of behavior and set of values to the rest of the world.

In international relations, this means all-round support for state sovereignty, cultural identity and political pluralism, which objectively comes into conflict with the policy of Western universalism and single ideology that has been imposed over the last couple of decades.

Russia puts emphasis on such notions as national dignity and courage. To many Europeans these values seem obsolete, as they are perceived as part of their dangerous past - from the wars they unleashed and lost. But Russia won them at an enormous cost and is ready to protect its sovereignty and values by force. In "the Putin world" it would be unthinkable for most men not to defend women as was the case in Cologne during migrants' assaults. But Europeans are apparently afraid of this new harsh world, which is largely represented by today's Russia.

Russia's second ideological message to the world, which is at odds with many of Russian realities but which becomes increasingly obvious, is that

consumption is not a goal in itself. Human and national dignity and commitment to fulfilling some higher than one's own purposes are more important. Internal, not external, success matters. Hence the broad support for religions and especially Orthodoxy, and readiness to defend Christians.

The third message is readiness to follow traditional foreign-policy principles, including protection of national interests by force, especially if it is morally justified.

This set of messages and values provides Russia with potentially strong “soft power” even though the country is relatively poor and unfree.

The current ideological clash may become even fiercer. It involves the West, which has won at first but is now beginning to lose, and Russia, which has taken on the burden of being the symbol of non-Western policy and which appeals to the majority of people, including perhaps those in the West. This fight is going on not only between countries, but inside them as well. Russia also has a minority that shares new European values.

The intensity of this confrontation is implicitly but strongly amplified by the mounting feeling that the current model of development based on growing consumption, inequality and declining morals is pernicious for the planet. There is a moral vacuum and it is expanding. The purpose of the fight is to fill this vacuum or prevent others from doing that.

The conspicuous “non-Western” Russian policy and ideology may be temporary, necessitated by the need to stop the West’s geopolitical expansion and its attempt to export “democratism” in such an aggressive manner. (Remarkably, such policy was practiced by the Soviet Union which exported its model to the controlled and subsidized socialist camp, countries of "socialist orientation" and other states through communist parties.)

Russia does not seem to be making plans for purposeful export of its ideology. But it is happening de facto. Meanwhile, messianism is strong in some Western countries and they feel defeated after their victory and want to take revenge.

Russia's alternative I have outlined is not final. It clearly comes out of the past, out of modernity, and the Westphalian or Vienna interstate systems. Yet it appeals to the majority, while the European and Western post-modernity, although looking more humane and progressive, is losing. This is probably because its model leads nowhere or because the majority of countries are not prepared to accept it.

Following Russia's forceful actions against Western expansion in Ukraine, German Chancellor Angela Merkel was said to have accused the Russian leader of living in an unreal world. It seems, however, that it was the German chancellor who was living in such a world and has now received a harsh wakeup call. It would probably be better for everyone to live in a world of post-modernist, humane, non-violent and tolerant unreality, but it seems it has failed to materialize.

History does not go along linear paths but makes turns and spirals. At any rate, it will keep going if no thermonuclear catastrophe occurs. Values evolve and change and there are many more turns ahead.

As regards relations between Russia and Europe, this means that we have unfortunately but predictably missed each other. We have missed the chance to create a common space from Vladivostok to Lisbon. Mutual resentment is quite strong right now, but we'd better keep it at bay and build good-neighborly relations while understanding that we are different. And we should certainly try hard to avoid a new systemic military-political confrontation that is desired by many forces possessed by demons of the past or by old geopolitical fears of seeing the emergence of a truly united and peaceful Europe or Eurasia.

Our societies may change again a decade from now, with Europeans becoming more nationalist and realistic, and Russians more tolerant. And if we try to learn more about each other in a respectful way, we may get a chance for a new rapprochement.

*//This article was originally published in Russian in Izvestia newspaper
21.04.2016.*

