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The Rationality of Russia and Rationality of the West

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The concept of rationality describes a variety of phenomena in scientific and intellectual life and actions. If the interpretation of rationality is understood as a system of semi-closed and self-sufficient rules, norms and standards within a certain social group; as coherence of knowledge, and especially as the possible tenets of human reason and spirit; or as the modal point of the world's comprehension, then the concept of rationality is applicable to the description of some intellectual archetypes of the society or nation. In the latter case, the "rationality of the nation" is close to the idea of mentality. It is hypothesised that this is a "closed" rationality, or a semi-closed conceptual space, shaped by the cumulative judgement of centuries. In general, this avoids reassessment and criticism and thus can be judged to be close to "weak" rationality (Jarvie and Agassi 1987).

As mentioned above, "closed" rationality is normative in its essence, being prescriptive and not sensitive to critique of its foundations. Moreover, it is prone to assess attempts of such a critique as irrational acts. The cancellation of critical appraisal impedes the development of this rationality and makes it quite sustainable.

Is it legitimate to talk of the existence of rationality as a social community in Russia, or, indeed, in the West? (The mentalities of the Western and Eastern communities differ for numerous reasons.) Is the question of rationality non-homogenous and dependent on local territorial, cultural and social factors? If the answer to these questions is in the affirmative, then what is the specific variable in Russia's rationality, especially in comparison to the Western one (assuming that Russia is in the "East")? It is possible to analyse the difference between the Russian and Western rationalities in trends rather than absolute values.

1. "The Western Syllogism is Unknown to Us..."

The founder of Russian philosophy, P. Chaadaev, stressed in the first of his "Philosophical letters" (1836) that the Russian people was one which "[could] not connect its thought with any succession of ideas that have progressively developed in society and devolved slowly from one the other; which [had] taken no part in the general progress of mankind save by blind, superficial, and often very awkward imitation of other nations, which must powerfully have influence[d] the minds of every individual within it." His conclusion was the following: "You will find that... a certain logic is lacking in us all. The Western syllogism is unknown to us" (Chaadaev, 1994: 22-23). Another prominent Russian thinker, K. Kavelin, wrote in 1870s that Russians were strong in their instincts and vague aspirations, but weak in their understanding. Many Russian philosophers have highlighted the fact that the Russian rationality is dissimilar to the Western one. Even N. Berdyaev, who was spiritually close to the West and spent several decades there, stressed while summing up the results of his life's work (1940) that in his mode of thinking "there is an inescapably Russian mentality and it is alien to the Western people and incomprehensible to them" (Berdyaev, 1991: 252). Even at the verge of the third millenium, despite globalisation and rapid technological development, it is still argued that Russia and its

rationality are absolutely unique (Panarin 1998).

At this stage it is possible to pinpoint the first defining character of Russian rationality – the awareness of its uniqueness, dissimilarity, and isolation from the rest of the world, and the belief that it is exceptional owing to God’s “die-casting”. Russians consider their souls to be righteous, good, true and God-given. Berdyaev made the assumption that this self-assessment is the byproduct of Russian humility - the feeling of subservience to state power (especially in the communist era) and inclination toward moral and ethical self-reflection (an aspiration to live “in good conscience”). Nevertheless, for Russia the sun always rises in the West; in other words, the Westernizers (not the Slavophiles) have been the dominant force in the modernization of Russia.

2. The Antinomicity of Russian rationality.

For centuries the rationality of Russia has been defined by various contradictory factors:

- (1) On the one hand, wariness (often rejection) of certain external (foreign) influences and values; on the other, a subconscious worship of these values and a desire to adopt them. In the nineteenth century and twentieth centuries, (as N. Kareev observed in the former case) the main academic celebrities for Russians were in the West; Russian scientists were acknowledged as an authority only when they were recognized by their Western counterparts.
- (2) On the one hand the state is feted, even when it suppresses the individual - evident social realism; on the other, the individual neglects state laws and regulations, manifesting noticeable social “anarchism”.
- (3) On the one hand we observe hostile feelings towards alien, non-Russian dwellers; on the other, a willingness to subjugate to them and follow their instructions (Even in 862, the appeal of North tribes to Varangians claimed “Our territory is large and abundant, but there is no order. Come and govern”).
- (4) On the one hand, we see an inclination to isolationism and separation from the rest of the world; on the other, astonishing openness to this world and an ability to absorb its novel ideas (“We are awake to everything – to an acute Gallic reason, to the dim German genius...”).
- (5) On the one hand, there is worship of the past (the heroism of Soviet people in the Great Patriotic War of 1941 – 1945 is constantly underlined, even now); on the other, short memories of the past (at the present moment communists are often considered as patriots).

In summary, the antinomicity of the Russian identity may be expressed in the following way: “weakness while being strong, poverty while being wealthy, stupidity while being clever” (V. Belinsky), “gullibility without faith, struggle without creativity, fanaticism without enthusiasm, intolerance without favor” (P. Struve).

The rationality of Russia has been alternating between these two poles for many centuries.

3. Natural factors in Russian rationality

A number of factors have had an impact on Russian rationality: the huge size of the country with sparsely populated spaces; its severe climate; the variety of ethnic groups; and a political history full of defensive wars caused some kind of geographic “vacuum”, which presupposed a fairly amorphous social space. To compensate for this amorphism, a strongly-founded state centralized

system of power had to be imposed, and there was an inclination to use violence and coercion, rather than persuasion, democratic procedures and constructions. The low population density forced Russians to group together, running businesses and farms in communities and often denouncing the individualism typical of the West. N. Danilevsky (1871) noticed that, while the English boxed one to one, Russians preferred collective fisticuffs. Moreover, victory in such previously popular games made people happy if it was gained by mutual efforts (Danilevsky, 1991: 139-140).

On the ideological level, such ideas are seen in the idea of Communalism ('Sobornost'), pervasive in Russian philosophy. This idea means that the two states of existence, "I" and "We", are merged, with the "We" strongly dominant over the "I". Communalism pushes someone towards the quest for universal being, using it for the improvement of individual life.

Thus the political rationality of Russians has constantly presupposed the primacy of the state over the individual. The fate of the state has always (and still is) much more important than the fate of the citizen. Social realism was dominant in Russia, whereas social nominalism was neglected or often condemned. As Berdyaev put it: "Russians fall victim to the vast spaces in their territory, and for their natural elements. Russians always fail to shape things" (Berdyaev, 1990: 8).

Russians have no natural inclination for power, although undoubtedly the cult of power has existed. Power is considered by Russians as the only telluric force which decides the destiny of nations. It is no accident that all reforms in Russia have always been launched from the top of the power structure, to a greater or lesser extent met with animation by the intelligentsia (which have comprised the minority), but afterwards have become bogged down at the level of conservative dwellers. The pace of reforms has always dwindled and the reforms have never had been accomplished. Moreover, the reforms have been replaced by counter-reforms. As a result the country has made two steps forward and one step back.

Hard and often brutal state power has rooted the conviction in the Russian intelligentsia that power is a dirty and undignified enterprise. It prefers to stand aside from power. The people have followed the ancient trend of isihasm, the culture of "silence". "Only silence speaks intelligibly", Russian poet V. Zhukovskiy declared at the turn of nineteenth century.

4. "Soft" and "Hard" culture and rationality

Russian culture and to a certain extent moral norms are fairly "soft"; the Western culture is "hard", since it is directed towards action, business, and the rational usage of time. Informal and heartfelt human relations in Russia are especially appreciated; merriment, lack of concern, hospitality and generosity are inherent to Russians. Nevertheless, this astonishing Russian hospitality is accompanied by with a guarded attitude toward all non-Russian, foreign, and alien influences, and the fear of losing even a piece of the country's huge territory (often densely covered by weeds). The compassionate feelings of Russians towards the humiliated and offended are set side-by-side with brutality. According to N. Lossky, this forms an extremely wide range of good and evil. The destruction of evil is automatically treated as good, although the destruction of a certain evil does not mean imposition of good; it may open the way to a new evil. Russians are fairly tolerant to people of other religious faiths who live nearby – to Lutherans, Baptists, and Muslims - but hostile to Catholics, whom they meet only occasionally.

Berdyaev claims that the French (as well as other Western nations) are closed in their cultures. If people in the West treat the life as a problem that should be resolved, in Russia, life is a mystery;

if people in the West direct their attention towards the future, in Russia, – it is towards the past and present (although this did not prevent it from adopting huge 5-years plans!); if the West is more appreciative of the features inherent in the young, then in Russia, age and experience are more valued; if, in the West, friendship is established swiftly and is quite superficial, then in Russia friendship is constructed slowly and is deeper; if, in the West, private life and business are separate, then in Russia they are more closely bound together; if, in the West, the emphasis is upon individual autonomy, then in Russia it is upon a certain social community.

The esteem of Russians may be achieved not by virtuous deeds, but by the possession of “outstanding” human qualities. Russians are inclined to ascribe these qualities to those who have reached (very often just by chance) high positions within the power structures. Belonging to the “state servicemen (gosudarevy ludi)” meant belonging to the highest possible, most respected social group. State and governmental institutions were first of all designed to make Russian ethatism increasingly solid and stable.

Meanwhile, power does not pay respect to those who happen to be under her jurisdiction. The feature of this power is anti-intellectualism, even hostility to intellectuals (“intelligentsiya”) or at best indifference to their fate (especially during the liberal reforms attempt in 1990’s). “Very clever (shibko umnyi)”, “extremely literate (bol’no gramotnyi)”, “rotten intellectual (gniloi intelligent)”, “professorial erudition (professorskaya uchenost’)” – these are linguistic patterns of people’s attitudes which have become especially evident during the historical transitions of Russia.

The Russian character presupposes openness of the soul, extremity of desires and maximal demands (“all or nothing”). A. Karmin claims (1997: 248) that the huge spaces of Russia have led to a tradition of huge, grandiose schemes. The ideas of Peter the Great were immense, for he decided to construct a new Russian capital of European size and magnificence within just a few years on the marsh bank of the Baltic Sea. The passion of Russians in the turn of nineteenth century towards the French culture and language was so deep that many aristocrats didn’t know the Russian language. Russians were fanatical in their approval of Marxist ideas, in their pursuit of the Worldwide revolution; in the reconstruction of life on communist principles; in the scale of Stalin’s purges; in the love of the Soviet people for the “Nation’s father”. Afterwards, equally strong hatred of the Soviet bureaucracy enabled the rapid overthrow of Soviet Communist Party, which had hitherto cemented the USSR together. The love of Eltsin in the late 1980s and the opposite feelings in the 1990s are also manifestations of the phenomenon. The Russians’ frame of mind has been oscillating from one extreme to another.

5. A “Negative” type of rationality?

Russian rationality is generally based not on common existing propositions, but on their opposites. If the basis of Western rationality is the Aristotelean formula that “this is that” (“Socrates is a man”), then the Russian mind, claims G. Gachev (1994: 73), reasons according to the formula “Not this, but that”. Examples are found in Russian literature: for example, “I’m not Byron, I’m another person”; “No, I do not love you”; “No, I do not value the delight of rebellion”; “No, Nature is not what you think it is” (quotations taken from the great Russian poets M. Lermontov, A. Pushkin and F. Tutchev) etc. It is perhaps not by chance that Russia gave birth to Non-Euclidian geometry (N. Lobachevsky) and Non-Aristotelian logic (N. Vasiliev).

However, to be fair we must point out that by starting with negation, Russians often do not succeed in formulating an alternative to the subject being negated. The problem is likely to be left suspended in the form of a open question. This type of rationality may be tentatively called

“negative” rationality. Is it possible to conclude that the “affirmative” rationality of the West and “negative” rationality of Russia are complementary?

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