

ABOUT THE ROOTS OF NATIONAL MYTHS

Where are the eastern mentality boundaries of Europe, what divides and unites western Europeans with Russians, which myths do they perceive about each other? Problems of cultural identity remain on the agenda of the intellectual discussion. On February 4 the international conference *Baltic Region 20 Years After Soviet Collapse: Expectations, Realities, Prospects* was held in Finnish parliament building. It was initiated by Yuri Sizov, the president of the Russian humanitarian fund Amber Bridge, in cooperation with the Finnish Institute of International Affairs at the national parliament. The conference was attended by diplomats, military scholars, and public figures from ten countries of the Baltic region and Northern Europe. We offer to your attention an interview with Professor of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) Valery Solovei by Executive Director of the Baltic Civilization Institute Alexander Chechevishnikov.

Chechevishnikov: Mutual perceptions are an important factor in relations between peoples. Consistent perceptions of each other often exert major and also negative influence on relations between states. The Russian conscience regards western perception of Russia as full of negative connotations and even phobias. That is traditional for Russian public conscience. Will it be proper to speak about similar Russian phobias to other Europeans? I have encountered situations when people slopped out such emotions.

Solovei: Mutual perceptions are an important factor in relations between peoples. The language of sociology would call it basic axiomatics. There are certain established standards in our approach to countries and peoples. I would not say they are inherited with the mother's milk, but rather acquired in the process of socialization.

If we speak in a lapidary way, the Russian attitude to the West has been traditionally better than the western attitude to Russians. The same situation remains today, which is proved by numerous opinion polls. Russian attitude to the West is very positive. Definitely, there are fluctuations and nuances as we perceive some peoples better than others. I believe the best attitude is to Germany, which is strange as in the 20th century we had two bloody wars instead of insignificant misunderstandings. Nevertheless, the perception of Germany is stably positive. However such a stable Russian attitude is characteristic for the whole of Europe in general.



Paolo Veronese, *The Rape of Europe*. 1578. Palazzo Ducale, Venice

That means the ideological campaigns that happen, say, in relations with Poland and Baltic republics exert a short-term impact. For example, state relations with Poland deteriorated at a certain time and consequently positive attitude to it fell while negative perception grew. However after several months the situation returned to status quo ante. I can say the western readiness for constructive interaction always enjoys a positive response in Russia.

If we speak about paradoxes of mutual perception, the main one is simple: the Russians perceive themselves as a European nation, while Europe does not. Suffice it to make a simple test: ask anyone abroad beginning from an ordinary vendor to university intellectual which country is the biggest in Europe. You will hear: France, Germany. Geographic radicals can name Poland while geographic extremists – Ukraine. But nobody would say Russia is the biggest country in Europe.

It means their mentality keeps Russia outside the boundaries of Europe.

The Russians perceive themselves differently. They consider themselves Europeans, although different from exemplary Europeans of Western Europe, but still Europeans. If we speak about Russian attitude to basic European values which are currently associated with liberal democratic values, the Russians share the values. The Russians also want separation of powers, free elections, multi-party system, freedom of movement, etc. The Russians do not perceive their country either as Asian or Eurasian.

Chechevishnikov: Yes, the Eurasian chime-
ra quickly disappeared. It seemed its primitive constructions have penetrated deep into public conscience. However our educated community turned out to be more mature than it might seem at first glance. So we did not reject our cultural originality and the millennium behind us.



Solovei: If the Russians say the country has something Asian, they mean corruption, poor social sphere, and bad economy. And they say that without any regret or excitement. For the Russians that Asian aspect means what they have to get rid of. There has been an interesting poll recently

more positive than European attitude to Russians. We have never perceived Europe as an enemy. Some countries have been our enemies in certain time. If we recall the Soviet epoch, official propaganda targeted hostile NATO and branded the United States as scarecrow. However the United States was also perceived as the generalized and exemplary West which shall be followed. That concerned consumer and cultural style – jeans, music. And you will not borrow the values, style, and manners of an enemy.

The Soviet Union did much more to bring Russia closer to the West than the Russian Empire did in three hundred years. It gave education to everyone and considerably expanded the boundaries of world perception (although state borders were closed). We were constantly aware of the West through television and newspapers. The Soviet Union paid much attention to the formation of foreign policy outlooks among its people and informed them about the international situation. As a result, the peasants who in early XX century and even in the '30s lived in their local world developed into urban and edu-

cated people who linked themselves to Europe and looked around through European eyeglasses, maybe distorted, but not Asian eyeglasses. The Russians do not perceive themselves as an Asian people. It is definitely necessary for the Europeans to recognize us as Europeans. I believe it will take time, but it is very likely. There were times when the European adherence of Spain and Portugal was in doubt. They said the Pyrenees were the end of Europe. Behind them was inadequate Europe. Moreover there was a discussion about the European adequacy of Germany which was

claimed to belong to a different Europe inferior to France and Italy. And the discussion was launched by German intellectuals. It continued yet in the first half of the XX century.

Chechevishnikov: Norwegian expert Iver Neumann pointed at utilitarian character of Russian perception. He analyzed public attitudes in the first half of the XIX century and said theoreticians of three basic western political guidelines actively borrowed perceptions about themselves from perceptions of Russia. Conservatives hoped Russia, a fragment of divided Europe, will be a mirror for Europe to acquire its own image. Liberals thought Russia was progressing along the path of European integrity. Marxists advocated Russophobia and fear of Russian in order to consolidate variegated supporters. That means mythological constructions regarding Russia had an internal political dimension.

Solovei: I will repeat that Russian attitude to Europeans is more positive than European attitude to Russians.

Solovei: European cultural and mental borders are expanding. The Russians will be perceived as Europeans with time. There is one specific: the further it is from Russia and the less common history in recent past we have, the better are relations. The Spanish and Italians have a very good attitude to Russia and the Russians. They are surprised to know that Russia is no European Union member and that Russians need a Schengen visa to visit Spain and Italy. Baltic republics, Poland, and the Czech Republic are different and more reserved. Poland often demon-

strates negative attitude because of hard feelings, which I believe are exaggerated. The Poles cherish the hard feelings. In Baltic republics it resembles a wound which they do not allow to heal. As a scientist I understand why it happens. It is the core of the national myth in the basis of state independence. A myth about sacrifice and unity in suffering. The myth distances them from Russia and brings closer to the West as European adequacy of Baltic countries was also in doubt. I believe some key European countries, which they call Old Europe, still doubt European adequacy of Baltic countries. They are perceived like distant and dubious periphery of the European Union at which many high-level European politicians look with skepticism.

Chechevishnikov: Our conference participant Per Carlsen, former Danish ambassador to Latvia and a big friend of Russia, expressed in his



which asked where the Russians would like to live besides Russia. It offered a major list of countries, but the answer was only in Europe. Nobody even named Japan or Singapore. So the Russians are oriented towards Europe. In this sense we may call Russia “another Europe.” It is “another Europe” which is the successor to the Byzantine Empire. Byzantine was also “another Europe” which was different from Roman-Catholic Europe. I will repeat that Russian attitude to Europeans is



speech in Helsinki major skepticism regarding the possibility of modernization by areas. Such an approach has been several times used in Russia with various degrees of efficiency. Which lessons do you believe we can learn from the experience of peoples in the West European North?

Solovei: The criticism of the approach is justified. The question is whether it is possible to implement the strategy and create technopolis in Russia in another way.

There should be some area. Such a way to create innovation policies is traditional for the world and we should not be ashamed of it. A discussion is possible, but it did not take place, unfortunately. Shall this area be created on the basis of the Academy of Sciences or its affiliates? Or in one of the think tanks near Moscow? The main thing is that modernization in one area should not de-modernize the rest of the country. And such de-modernization is a reality. School education reform, the situation with higher education and in the social sphere point at degradation. Low longevity, low living standards and other similar phenomena can hardly coexist with technopolis.

They can cite India as an example where technopolis is often surrounded by flagrant poverty. But India is on the rise. It has innovation areas and the rest of the country is rising at the very least. And we are building technopolis in a country that degrades. Russia is falling in all cultural,

anthropologic, and social indicators. Suffice it to compare 20-year old indicators with the current ones. In late '80s Russia was in the top ten by the level of intellectual potential and school education. Today it has backtracked by thirty, forty, fifty places, according to various estimates.

Chechevishnikov: The German social state is based on strong economy – from design to end product.

Solovei: It is absolutely true. However there are social policy aspects which can be implemented due to commonsense even without a

And we know that in Soviet times education in provincial schools did not differ much from Moscow schools.

Chechevishnikov: We are both from provincial schools. You studied in Donetsk and I in Chelyabinsk.

Solovei: And it did not bar you from successful education in Moscow.

Chechevishnikov: By the way, if we look at the Scandinavian experience and Finland, in particular, we shall see there is no total higher education which Russia inherited from the Soviet Union. Hardly less than a third of schoolchildren in Finland go to study in colleges.

Solovei: Naturally, higher education is not an aim in itself. The aim is decent life and high social protection level. In modern Russia higher education does not guarantee decent life and high social protection. The Soviet Union created mass middle class of people with higher education, but modern Russia stupidly lost the potential. We lack skilled managers. I do not mean universal managers, but people keen in a concrete sphere. We lack engineers. The Soviet Union trained them in excess for generations to

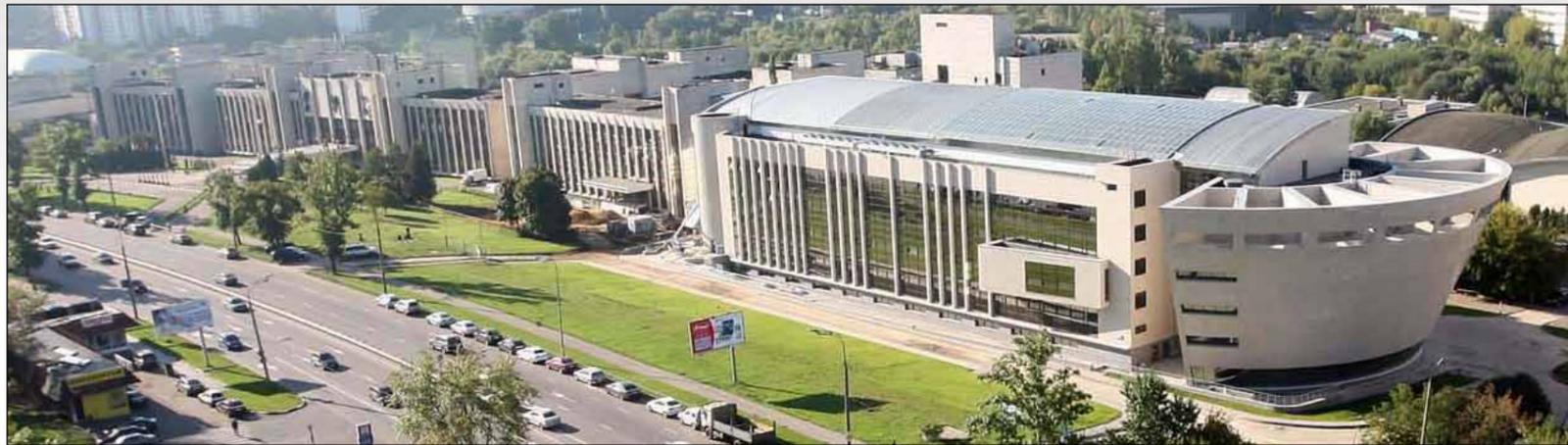
flourishing economy. We can at least avoid doing stupid things. For example, instead of providing for total computerization of schools and compiling 20-year development plans for them, we

should better arrange proper hot meals for schoolchildren. It is much more important, specifically for children from poor families. And we should give them a possibility to get higher education. In Soviet years a good schoolboy was guaranteed a place in an institute regardless of his family income. Today there is no guarantee.

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come. We lack skilled workers. Skilled worker enjoys a decent status in a healthy society. Such workers earn more than some engineers. Higher education is no aim in itself.

Chechevishnikov: In Latvia over 300 thousand non-citizens are still denied the right to participate even in municipal elections. Many of



That gives grounds for doubt. Not modernization by areas, but the possibility to accomplish it in a country that degrades and makes no attempts to stop the degradation. The experience of the European North is very fruitful for us in the implementation of the constitutional principle of a social state. In late '80s they said in the Soviet Union that socialism has won in Scandinavia. And that is absolutely true. The experience is very important and should be borrowed. We should to a certain extent go back to Soviet past, but at a higher level. Nordic countries of Europe and Germany offer the example. The Germans are specifically proud not of their culture, but of the German social state. Russia should borrow the experience.



them immigrate to other European Union countries in search of a better life. However children of non-citizens born in independent Latvia can participate in the next election to the Latvian Sejm. Their naturalization procedure has been simplified and may be dropped altogether. What do you think about EuroRussians?

Solovei: The word EuroRussians triggers a comparison. The Russians who are growing up in Latvia, Estonia and who possess citizenship and will vote resemble the situation with Jews. They are consolidated ethnic groups. They consolidate because dominating public forces reject them. I know that correspondents of Latvian publications have staged an experiment of late: they asked ethnic Latvians and Russians in Latvia which pop stars they like. The Latvians and the Russians named completely different people. They are communities which live close to each other, but do not interlace culturally. In this sense the Russians resemble the Jews. What else can consolidate them? The Russians are economically active as they have no choice and the state service is closed for them. That means they can go only to business, like Jews did in their time. If you have no choice and there is a wall or a deadend behind you, will run forward and succeed.

Can we call them Russians? Definitely, yes. They will preserve identity which is a multi-level notion. They will have the Russian identity and will also work to become citizens of the European Union, not Latvia. I do not think they will be specifically grateful to their nominal motherland. What do they have to thank it for? They received the right of free travel in the EU from the European Union. They received the right to enter universities in France and Germany also from the Euro-

pean Union. They will be loyal to the European Union and hardly loyal to the state of Latvia.

Chechevishnikov: And their Russian identity?

Solovei: It will be cultural identity, not political. I do not believe they can be considered as the fifth column of Russia as they enjoyed much more benefits from the European Union than from Russia. To protect their rights they have to be consolidated and form their own political representation. They have such a possibility: first through existing Latvian parties and then through their own influential political force.

The demographic dynamic has to be also analyzed. I do not know about Latvia, but Russians in Estonia demonstrate a higher birth rate than Estonians. So the Russians may develop into a majority there or at least a powerful minority, also politically, which cannot be ignored. And it is impossible to do anything with them as they are under the protection of the European Union law. And I believe Russia will also render support to them, moral support at the minimum. Russia should develop relations with that expanding group. We should not keep telling them we are your motherland, as the motherland does not expect them and they are not planning to come. We shall offer favorable economic cooperation terms to them. Russia has an immense market. Ethnic Russians should have preferences on it. That happens in many countries which have diasporas.

Thus we shall offer some possibilities, but not those which the governments of Latvia and Estonia fear and not those which some Russian radicals want. The disposition will gradually change. We have to understand it is a biological process. The more children you have, the stronger will be your positions with time.

Chechevishnikov: Now a question about Finland. When I visit the country I have a pinching feeling, like poet Brodsky wrote. What is your feeling of the country?

Solovei: Finland is an interesting country for me. It has charm even in winter when the sun comes out. It is a quiet and melancholic charm. It has pinching drear. May be the first impressions will cede to brighter ones if you travel in Finland, go skiing in provinces. That country suits me as I am and introvert. My job is to quietly sit and write. Finland has an excellent social infrastructure which fits for my job.

Chechevishnikov: Don't you have any connotations with our century-old past?

Finland offers an optimal model for Russian relations with the Baltic republics.

Solovei: Although I am an historian by education, I do not go that far. Architecture makes me feel I have already seen it somewhere. It has some elusive aura.

I am more interested in the growing number of compatriots in Finland. They say there are close to 50 thousand Russians. It is a big figure. And their strategy is of interest as they do not assimilate.

Chechevishnikov: But the Finns are not very disposed...

Solovei: No, the Finns are not disposed. When a minority becomes considerable its representatives do not want to assimilate as there is an alternative. It would be interesting to see what this Russian community will do? It depends on who dominates in it socially – the so-called guest workers or engineers and businessmen.

Do they want to have a political representation? I believe yes, but in a distant future. The world is changing fast. Which economic positions will they enjoy? Maybe their life in Finland will be merry. They told me in Greece the inflow of Soviet Greeks changed the cultural landscape of the country. One Greek prime minister said the Soviet Greeks made life in Greece merry.

Chechevishnikov: You are speaking about Finland of tomorrow, but there is Finland of today with which we cooperate...

Solovei: Today everything is developing properly. There are no ideological or territorial disputes. Even history does not divide us as each

party believes it had won the famous Winter War. It is like with the Borodino battle which each party said it won.

Besides, the well-known non-passionate Finnish temper plays a role. The Finns are pragmatics. They treasure interests rather than ideological myths about values. Interests dominate their relations with the big eastern neighbor. It is a very reasonable policy.

Finland offers an optimal model for Russian relations with the Baltic republics. There are things which divided us, but let us leave them for professional discussions by historians. We should not make them a subject of interstate relations. Let the interests dominate. It is clear the implementation of economic interests is beneficial for all. In this sense Finland is a model country.