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Post-Soviet Russia in Search for Identity: Foreign Policy

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POST-IMPERIAL and post-Soviet Russia has just started its quest for self-identity. This is neither good nor bad: its new state hypostasis is only twenty-five years old which makes it not an easy task to send “*urbi et orbi*” a clear and convincing message about its essence and the optimal ways of its realization.

Each U-turn of its foreign policy, however, adds urgency to the questions: What is Russia’s message to the world? What does it think about itself in the world of immediate future and its mission in this world? To which extent is this desired role compatible with the basic interests of all other important world powers and where does it obviously and dangerously contradict their interests and aims? Is it at all possible to balance out the long-term strategic interests or will the world be threatened by a ghost of redistribution of roles by force either in the “cold” or “hot” variants?

Today, foreign policy successes and failures or, to put it differently, the efficiency of foreign policy are measured by the greater/smaller possibilities of the state to, first, ensure security of its territory and its citizens at the lowest possible cost and, second, create an external climate conducive to its economic, social and cultural development. The latter directly depends on whether the state can effectively maintain peaceful (or even friendly) foreign policy environment close to its borders or at a considerable distance.

What can we say in this context about the identity of the Russian State and its quest for this identity? This meaningful foundation is indispensable for a more or less substantial and long-term foreign policy strategy.

Throughout its history, Russia’s self-identity remained fairly stable: The Third Rome of hegumen Philotheus and the Bolshevik idea of Russia as the stronghold of the worldwide proletarian revolution are separated by

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more than half a millennium. It was the details of self-perception that changed: The Orthodox image was replaced with a pan-Slavic one that, in its turn, was pushed aside by an ethnonational Russian or, sometimes, European identity.

In Soviet times, too, Russia lived through several variants of self-identity.

Lenin and Trotsky spoke of Russia as “a fuse of a worldwide proletarian revolution”; later, it was replaced with Stalin’s “Russia as the center and leader of a worldwide Communist power.” It was nothing more than

a variant of the otherwise stable self-perception in which the share of common features and distinctions changed together with all sorts of domestic and international circumstances.

During the twenty-five years of the contemporary Russian State as we know it today, the quest for the so-called national idea was regularly revived, albeit with different acuteness, as the center of nationwide debates. To my mind, this type of quest is useless. Recently, the President of Russia offered the following definition: “We don’t have and there can’t be any other unifying idea, apart from patriotism.”¹ This is true yet the term patriotism belongs to the category of values rather than meanings and concepts. We all know that values can be interpreted; we all know that they tolerate different, or even opposite, interpretations.

In Spain, the tragic events of the twentieth century were summed up by a memorial for those “Fallen for God and Spain” on both sides. This is patriotism.

So far, there is no similar memorial in Russia; we were making heroes out of “commissars in dusty helmets” and demons out of “the White Army and the Black Baron” far too long. It seems that today we try to reverse heroes and traitors while remaining absolutely one-sided and intolerant. We have not abandoned the psychological patterns of the Civil War but, rather, became their part. Everyone involved in the process act out of patriotism.

Identification and the “national idea” are two different things. The former means devotion to something unified, culturally and historically homogenous, to common time, space, individual consciousness, and col-

A quest for national identity, as one of the most important cornerstones of Russia’s foreign policy, is underway. This is not a simple process and it will not be completed soon.

lective subconscious that naturally leads (outside this homogeneity) to the “us-them” situation. There is no opposition inside the dichotomy – it speaks of distinctive features (in the huge number of shared features and parameters). This is important.

The above can be applied to individuals and collectives of different levels and scopes, including the nation-state specifics as the subject of the present article.

Identity is the foundation of any country on which a more or less consistent national strategy can be formulated and specified. Without such strategy, any foreign policy maneuvers perceived as tactical operations will be tactically inefficient and strategically mostly futile.

Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan were excellent fighters; the former brought his army from Europe to India; the latter was moving in the opposite direction. I wonder what traces they have left behind in history and culture?

Meanwhile, Ancient Rome bequeathed us a lot: the great cultural identity of Europeanism and, in particular, the Third Rome layer, meaning all of us.

How Post-Soviet Russian Identity Was Formed

FROM THE VERY FIRST DAYS of post-Soviet Russia, self-identification moved to the fore as an urgent meaningful problem directly related to the Soviet Union, its immediate predecessor. In the romantic pathos of the first post-Soviet days, some hotheads wanted to identify new Russia as an independent state unrelated either to the Soviet Union or prerevolutionary czarist Russia.

These people looked at the very short period of February-November 1917 as the only “legal” predecessor of “new Russia” when Russia had been a democratic state (a republic declared by Alexander Kerensky in violation of all laws on September 1, 2017).

This idea did not capture the minds and hearts: its realization required something stronger than the benevolent intentions of several liberal and social-democratic leaders and the sad story about the fast disintegration of the country, its political and economic mechanisms, its army, and its social and moral principles.

Second, in the spring and summer of 1917, the Provisional Government was vacillating between Milyukov’s battle cry “victory and the Dardanelles” and the de facto capitulation to the Soviet-Bolshevist

slogan of “peace without annexations and indemnities.” The cynical dissolution of the Constituent Assembly by Lenin and Trotsky added another stain to the identification of the very short and very contradictory historic experience of Russia’s marriage to the Western democratic state order.

Another attempt at identification was caused by the fact that the Bolshevik October revolution of 1917 and the totalitarian Communist state established on Russia’s historical territory excluded it from the world community. According to those who supported this version, the August 1991 revolution returned Russia to the “world community” and the family of the civilized Western powers. This was interpreted as the final triumph of democracy, the end of the bipolar world, the decisive victory of the “European values all over the world.” In practical terms that meant leadership of the United States as the only great power and the more or less obedient acceptance of its leadership by the old and new democracies of Europe (and not only Europe) including Russia.

In this clear-cut global construct, Russia’s national identity looked undeveloped or even vague. It was a break from its historical (czarist imperial and Communist) past; the country was squeezed into the “democracy-dictatorship” pattern while its political institutions and social-economic structures were assessed on the basis of their similarity to Western patterns, institutes and ideas. Russia’s national interests fully merged with the coalition (read American) interests of the struggle between the democratic good and the antidemocratic evil in the absence of the “empire of evil.”

The events of the turn of the century (by this I mean disintegration of Yugoslavia) as the first serious durability test for this concept of Russia’s identity revealed its superficial and fragile nature. The “end of history” did not come and the constructs of political science, no matter how beautiful, that ignored important historical factors proved to be devoid of practical meaning. At the turn of the twenty-first century, this scheme of Russia’s self-identity proved to be untenable.

The series of “post-Yugoslavia” conflicts added vigor to the search for the “golden key” to the relevant Russia’s identity that followed two well-trodden paths.

First, much was said about Russia’s post-Soviet identity as rooted in pre-Soviet Russia in the wide sense of the term, that is, in the so-called historical Russia.

The course of the American administration and its Western allies at

handling the fairly painful problems caused by the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the anti-Serbian spirit in disregard of Russia's obvious opposition raised a wave of indignation in Russia. There was a lot of generalizations about the immanent and perpetual antagonism and animosity of the "West" toward eternal Russia. Very much like the unknown authors of the well-known (mainly by its title) book by the second President of Ukraine Leonid Kuchma *Ukraine is not Russia*, those who supported this version of Russia's identity closed ranks under the banner of "Russia is not Europe."

They revived the dusty concepts underlying this variant of Russia's self-perception: the Third Rome (even though the European roots of it are too obvious); Count Uvarov's Orthodoxy. Autocracy. National Spirit; persistent search for the Turanian or other Eurasian roots of the "genuine Russian" nature cleansed of everything contrary to Genghis Khan, and, finally, the pan-Slavic identity (even though this ideology clashed with the real relations between Russia and the Balkan peoples on the eve of and during World War I).

It should be said that at different times "historical Russia" was highly varied structurally, ethnopolitically and geographically. The same fully applies to its external context and corresponding orientation in the cultural and civilizational as well as purely political and diplomatic sense. This means that the choice of one (anti-European nationalist) line belongs to the opportunists courting the fast changing political fashions. All serious researchers or even more or less skillful ideologists could not limit themselves to one variant. The choice of identity based on "historical Russia" is uncontested but vague: this is a choice between everything and nothing.

Second, the last decades have seen the attempts to present new Russia as a direct descendant and legal successor of the Soviet Union. This variant is highly specific; there is no vagueness in it. Those who promote it proceed from the idea that post-Soviet Russia remains mainly Soviet and that the perfect and harmonious edifice of the Soviet Communist empire suddenly tumbled down because of the malicious activity of a certain swarm of evil wills, eternal external enemies and eternal "internal enemies" that frequently changed their appearances. Now there is the Russian Federation as part of the Soviet Union in which everything is on a smaller scale with the anthem that conventionally can be called Soviet and the anti-Soviet flag. This means that the maximally possible (or, better, complete) correspondence between the flag and the anthem (that, in

its turn, should be brought maximally close to the original version) should be seen as a meaning and the internal drive of the continued existence of the Russian state as we know it now.

Hence a foreign policy super-challenge: the maximally complete, albeit stage by stage, restoration of the post-World War II Stalinist world order. It should not be understood of course in the literal sense of the word, which is a dream of the exalted minds wishing to return to the mythologized past. The Soviet matrix is resurfacing more and more clearly; not infrequently, it results in serious (avoidable and, therefore, unnecessary) foreign policy problems: Russia, on its own will, takes the responsibility for the shady deals of Soviet times which are unrelated and should not be related to contemporary Russia.

Indeed, the absolutely justified pride of the Russian people in its unique historical contribution into the rout of German Nazism is frequently accompanied by the attempts to justify the criminal acts of the Stalin regime (including the World War II period) by applying to them the “seal of approval” of contemporary Russia that had nothing to do with them and, therefore, should not be associated with them. These are the Katyn massacre, massive deportations of the “guilty” peoples and certain aspects of Stalin’s interpretations of the Yalta and Potsdam agreements that triggered the Cold War among other things.

This means that the type of Russia’s identification is closely connected with the political debates inside the country and, in particular, with the obviously pragmatic attempts to court the intellectually and psychologically inert public opinion. In the context of Russia’s interests and prospects in the rapidly changing world, this matrix of its image is counterproductive or even destructive. It is clearly Masochistic since it stresses those sides of Russia’s image that can hardly be hailed by the absolute majority of those with whom Russia deals outside its borders, not only in Europe and North America.

Outside Russia this variant is readily accepted by the circles raised on bipolar ideology and the foreign policy practice of “milking two cows” – the fat American-European and the much leaner Soviet cow. These pinpointed outbursts of lavishly subsidized popularity are very dangerous for the simple reason that Soviet “aid” ended and was not revived. What is even more important is the fact that, if politically confirmed, this identification might be revived.

The matrix Russia is a “direct and unconditional continuation of the Soviet Union” pushes the political elite to the strategy of recovering

(sometime in future and by any means) the geographic parameters comparable with the postwar Soviet Union of Stalin's times. These variants stretch from the fairy-tale Warsaw Treaty space to more modest, yet equally fantastic "Russia plus the former Soviet Union republics."

Political designs rooted in this matrix reappeared from time to time throughout the entire history of post-Soviet Russia. They were most openly and actively applied at the turn of the second decade of the twenty-first century and created a serious misbalance between the major components of the political course. The first such component connected with the integration of the post-Soviet space can at best be described as a zero, its detailed analysis being a different matter. In the final count, political, diplomatic and economic collective security of the former Union republics is, at best, highly contradictory; it is centrifugal rather than centripetal. Our leaders probably want it but have no resources. The leaders of our neighbors evidently do not want it, even though there are resources that vary from country to country. In the near future, this trend will hardly change.

As for the second component – external responses to the Soviet self-identity – here we, alas, managed to "hit the bull's eye." We can even say that our very modest (when compared with the strategic designs) nostalgic integration efforts and declarations stirred up a highly unabashed response in the rest of the world. This multisided and negative response started a worldwide (Russia being no exception) discussion about a possible second act of the Cold War that had lasted for many years and seemingly ended at the turn of the 1990s.

This is a paradox: the first Cold War was waged by two real opponents with more or less equal basic parameters of power (military and economic as well as axiological and ideological). Today, the situation is different.

Self-identification has created a somewhat Kafkaian situation: virtual bipolarity in an absence of a bipolar background. Indeed, Russia's 1.5% of the global GDP are seen by the protagonists of a new spasm of bipolarity as an adequate justification of multisided confrontation with the opponent responsible for over 40% of global GDP (combined GDP of the United States and the European Union).

This type of self-identity is nothing but a dream. In real life, these dreams can be realized as carefully measured short-term acts intended to impress the domestic audience. The attempts to achieve serious self-identification at this level are groundless: there are no adequate balance of

power in the world and no chance to achieve it in the historically foreseeable future.

We have to admit that it is very hard to identify the place of Russia in the contemporary world. There are important objective prerequisites as well. It is very hard to say good-bye to the past. It is even harder to separate itself from the glorious past. Marx was not right when he wrote "...mankind will separate itself happily from its past."² It would be much more correct to say that it is a smile through tears. In our country, many have not yet wiped their tears while trying to identify Russia's place in the world after the twentieth and preceding centuries. Tears, however, dim the eyes making it hard to discern things close at hand, let alone the perspective. We are not living in the twentieth century, and not in the seventeenth century when someone drove somebody else from the Kremlin. We are living in the twenty-first century and, what is even more important, are opening a page on which the place of Russia in the world of the third millennium will be outlined. Today, our political, national and cultural identity should be specified in the post-Einstein space and time – this is an urgent item on our agenda.

Where to Go

I DO NOT ASPIRE to exhaust the subject in several lines yet I want to enumerate and present some of its aspects, especially those that should be discussed to find out whether a consensus (or even a partial consensus) can be achieved. This will allow us to sum up the answers to arrive at a preliminary, not the final, answer.

As the first step toward this answer we should organize our ideas about the role of space and time in Russia's own perception of its identity. Throughout several centuries, consistent territorial expansion remained one of the pillars of national self-assertion while the newly acquired territories were one of the criteria of the successful or failed rule of any czar. All Russian autocrats looked at expansion into new lands and littoral areas of the Black and Baltic seas and the Pacific as their main task; new territories should be acquired and kept within the empire; development of the newly acquired territories came second.

They were developed only to the degree necessary to serve the threshold for further expansion. This explains the names of cities-fortresses or cities-outposts scattered across the territory of Russia: Novorossiysk on the Black Sea, Grozny and Vladikavkaz in the Caucasus, and Dalny and

Vladivostok in the Far East. Real development and organization of the new territories was postponed only to be forgotten: the country had to expand and keep the newly acquired lands.

By the mid-nineteenth century, excessive expansion had developed into an acute problem in the form of an obvious imbalance between the very much needed modernization of Russia's core regions and the construction of very necessary basic communication lines with the newly acquired "American" Russia. St. Petersburg managed to persuade Washington to buy Alaska, one of the rare examples when Russia preferred to win time (to develop and modernize the already acquired territories) rather than to satisfy its instinct of territorial expansion.

In the twentieth century, this conflict was very much alive, its outlines clearly seen in the secret protocols to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939. The Yalta-Potsdam post-World War II world order is a more convincing proof.

The ardent desire to acquire as much space as possible and the no less ardent desire to preserve the newly acquired territories forever forced the rulers of Russia to put the urgent problems of the country's development on the back burner. Finally, Russia that has found itself outside the unfolding dynamics of the scientific and technological revolution, was catastrophically straining its forces. This inevitably led to the historical changes (the European experience has clearly demonstrated that no post-war world construct lived longer than 40 to 60 years) that left new Russia truncated, and still very big – the worst of all possible scenarios for the Soviet Union.

The ambivalent feeling of being simultaneously immense and robbed served the fertile soil for bright and passiony, collective and personal emotions introduced into the discussions about Russia's contemporary identity. The space and time became a single whole once more; the space again tends to suppress time. Today, it has become clear for many that with each passing decade the level of the country's greatness was measured, to a much lesser degree, by the number of time belts on its territory. However, this understanding and the development of a national evolutionary strategy are separated by the intellectual and psychological inertia and the stereotypes inherited from the past.

In the twenty-first century, it is impossible for Russian society to gain a new, contemporary self-awareness and identity until we resolve the problem of the "main link" (to borrow Lenin's term). To my mind, the "main link" of our days can be described as deciding on the priority task:

extensive or intensive development. Indeed, which is more important for the country's survival and progress: multisided and multi-vectoral modernization, or a return to the traditional limits (and where are they?) of our limitless motherland?

It goes without saying that it is for Russia to resolve this dilemma yet it would have been wrong not to look at the closest neighbors to see how similar critically important problems were resolved by our historical and important partners and opponents. As a Eurasian country, we should pay special attention to the biggest Asian (China) and the biggest European (Germany) powers of the contemporary world.

The twentieth century for both was tempestuous, cruel and tragic in many respects. Despite their specifics and uniqueness, certain turns of their recent history were very close to what was going on in our country at different periods of its own history. The Xinhai Revolution in China deposed monarchy and established a republic; China disintegrated, lost the war with Japan; the radical Communist forces triumphed over the "centrist" Kuomintang during the bloody civil war that ended with the partial reunification of the country; Mao's "experiment" in the form of the Great Leap Forward and the "Cultural Revolution" failed. There are enough, if not analogies, but mostly coinciding periods in the history of Russia/the USSR.

The next important period in the history of China has no analogies in Russian history. I have in mind the 30-year-long period started by the historic December 1978 Plenary Meeting of the CC of the Communist Party of China that approved the structural reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping. Much has already been said about them. In this context, however, we should point out that the reforms signified a complete abandonment of the Maoist foreign policy which was a strange combination of revolutionary adventurism and great power ambitions. The new policy would have been impossible if the country did not move away from its previous habit of teaching other countries (be it the United States, Japan, South Korea, the Soviet Union or Vietnam) which had created an atmosphere of tension fraught with conflicts and exhausted the country by rash political undertakings.

On the other hand, a very clear priority of building up a real, not imitational, market economy, agrarian reform and, what was most important, a new foreign policy environment promptly attracted foreign investments. In the lifetime of one generation, the country acquired a new image, multiplied its real internal potentials to the extent that made it pos-

sible to discuss how to increase its foreign policy activity cautiously and gradually and build up its influence in those parts of the world that Beijing finds critically important.

At the turn of the third millennium, the Deng Xiaoping generation rationalized its long-term priorities through an uncompromising struggle against the fervent opponents. It overcame the Communist inertia of “five-year plans in three years” and the tendency to deal with all domestic and foreign policy problems promptly and simultaneously, in a “united drive” since “enemies are everywhere” (the enemies being mostly the product of the leaders’ dogmatic thinking).

There was another, no less important, point. While substantiating their reforms, Deng Xiaoping and his closest aides repeated from time to time that to be successful the country should abandon an old conviction that its culture was superior to all other cultures and that it should learn from others rather than teach them. The great politician insisted that his compatriots should learn modesty, tolerance of the opinions of others and respect of the achievements of other peoples in economy, culture and the quality of life.

In other words, corrected self-identification was one of the components of the successful structural reforms in China. One of the greatest world civilizations managed to survive in a grave crisis partly because it had abandoned (or, at least, pushed to the background of its collective subconscious) those elements of national self-perception that slowed down its active, but not adventurous, pursuit of the train moving away with increasing speed into the twenty-first century.

Max Weber was probably right when he wrote that the Protestants, with their variant of Christian ethics, found it easier to adjust to the complicated and contradictory realities of the market capitalist economy.³ At the same time, the generation of the Chinese of the latter half of the twentieth century demonstrated that even the highly stable or even static Confucian ethics could offer social and psychological impulses for radical changes and self-reforming best described as *aggiornamento* (an Italian word meaning adjustment to contemporary realities without losing oneself). *Aggiornamento* Chinese style achieved by the lucky neighbor should not be envied; it should be treated as a lesson to be used in search of our own identities. We should bear in mind that time is running out.

The recent historical experience of Germany can be treated as another lesson. After humiliations, defeats and partition to which the country had been subjected since the latter half of the nineteenth century, it caught

the dangerous virus of greatness and domination in Europe the effect of which was steadily strengthening. In their imperial-monarchist and imperial-ochlocratic (Nazi) garbs the ruling elite planted in the German minds the “primordial” Teutonic spirit, contempt of other peoples and the self-perception of the chosen who had the right to establish its own “European order” by “blood and iron” (*Blut und Eisen*). Bismarck tried to suppress the ardor of the most rabid nationalists ignited by the victorious war of 1870-1871 and pointed to the dangers of the mania of territorial seizures and overexpansion. His arguments fell on deaf ears.

The results are only too well known: two lost world wars, complete destruction and partition. Germany needed these two calamities to shake off the destructive and self-destructive interpretation of its self-perception. Limited to the unprecedentedly small territory, postwar Germany managed to finally “push into subconscious” its complexes, grand in form and suicidal in essence, and opt for two priorities: well-substantiated internal development and active involvement in the unification of Europe based on economic and social cooperation. These shifts were formed in the hearts and minds of the greater part of the postwar generation: the past was condemned while the greatness of Germany should be sought along new and very different paths.

The new paths brought the results that, when you look at the clock of history, can be described as amazing. Today, Germany is united (albeit not in the traditional meaning of the term), it is economically stronger than ever and is fortifying its leadership in Europe with the help of the means it never used in the past; they proved to be very effective when it came to the realization of its national interests. The Germans needed half a century to achieve the undoubtedly great results.

Here, too, revised national identity proved to be one of the main instruments. Not limited to the elite, this revision spread to the deepest layers of mass consciousness and the subconscious.

There is nothing new under the sun: the challenges of terrorism and migration have created new trials and new challenges. Nobody have the answer to the very serious question: How will these challenges affect Germany and Europe? Here is an important comment: these are the challenges for the new, younger generation, while the postwar generation of Germans has coped successfully with its challenges and never missed its historic chance. This generation managed to create an image of itself and its own image in others that allowed it to address the national tasks without stirring up negative feelings in Europe and elsewhere in the world and

without reviving the old anti-German fears and prejudices. They managed to downplay them by bringing together or even harmonizing the German and the European in their minds. Without this, neither reunification of Germany nor progress of the European Union guided de facto by Berlin, not Brussels would have been possible.

We have seen two examples of how two countries exceptionally important for us managed, at a huge cost and through terrible trials, to move forward, keep the pace with our epoch, discover inner resources indispensable for the balance between space and time, between the national, the regional and the global. This was accomplished not at the office, bureaucratic level but at the genuinely national level, at the level of common people, the grassroots, that is, at the level of self-identification.

These lessons should be comprehended and compared with our realities, the realities of our cultural milieu in which space and time are dangerously unbalanced.

Past and future should be balanced out, which is another very serious problem related to the quest for Russian identity. We still demonize and absolutize our past and future; it is a wavelike process. In our consciousness, sometimes we are mesmerized by “the lore of ages long gone by”; we create an idealized mythological picture of the past – either the whole of it by pushing away its extremely contradictory nature or part of it: the “Russian spirit” of pre-Christian times; Prince Vladimir of Kiev (but not Svyatoslav), or one of the Moscow princes or czars, Peter I or Alexander II or Alexander III. The same fully applies to Soviet times: The Soviet Union of Stalin’s time was a la-la land because there is nothing good in our times and vice versa.

To a certain extent, the super-task formulated by Alexander Prokhanov, a very special type of writer, can and should be seriously discussed.⁴ In a nutshell, he says that the nation cannot be mobilized for vibrant existence, collective daring and youthful inspiration without a super-task. This is worth a serious discussion: from this point of view, indeed, to remain alive, the nation should be striving and seeking to attain something impossible or even fantastic. Napoleon used to say: “The word Impossible is not in my dictionary.”

The problem is that many of our contemporaries believe that impossible and fantastic mean the old and shopworn ideas of new territorial acquisitions seen in the hues of romanticized myths of distant past. This romanticism emphasizes “yesterday,” not only because Napoleon who

wanted the impossible was routed and ended his lonely days on a faraway island in the Atlantic Ocean. The ideologues of Prokhanov's ilk are hardly delighted by how the dreams of the past days of the great empire are realized today.

In his time, the poet said: "Everything will drop back into its rut, yet the rut will be different."⁵ The world has changed: it cannot go back into "yesterday" – it is moving toward "tomorrow." Nobody knows how it will look yet in the context of national interests there is a danger that the country that failed to adequately orientate its collective conscience at keeping pace with others in search of tomorrow will end in a nowhere. Somebody said: "I don't know where America will finally arrive but I know that it will be the first."

I hate to think that this forecast may prove to be true. I want all of us to work hard today to achieve "tomorrow" together with others, at the very least. This should be done since tomorrow offers nothing attractive: it is packed with problems and can be even described as a frightening perspective. The construct of the traditional world order and, what is even more important, the basic elements of future life on our planet are vague. I am not talking about distant future but about the present that is taking shape before our eyes.

This provides the background for the useless deliberations in our consciousness not infrequently concentrated on debating the eternal question: where the ideal (ideally fair) border between Thebes and Athens should run and what the gloomy and laconic Spartans think about this.

Very soon, these acute and highly urgent problems of Classical Antiquity were moved to the meaningless page of ancient mainly mythical history that was turned and forgotten. Macro-history has preserved not these ridiculous squabbles, but the call of an Athenian who was pestering his compatriots as well as mankind in general with "Know thyself" (*Gnothi seauton*). So far, the call has remained ignored.

The fact that our world vision includes the problem of the place of new Russia in the future life of mankind is related, among other things, to the deliberations about our vast territory. In the first place, however, it is related to our intellectual human potential. Indeed, how big will be Russia's share in the European contribution to the common potential of mankind? How can we harmonize the Russian, the European and the global in the realities of the latter half of the twenty-first century (to say nothing about the more distant future)? How can the vast territory of our country, its ethnic and regional specifics and its population strength be

harmonized with the best possible governance that should guarantee the country's integrity and unity? Can the universal human rights consistently coexist with the unity of the multinational country and its openness and non-isolation from Europe? (After all, we are part of Europe, at least historically; most our citizens look at themselves as Europeans.) The answers to these questions are extremely important for the formation of our collective self-perception orientated at the realities of tomorrow rather than at the myths of yesterday.

The correlation between the ethnic and the civilian components of Russia's self-identification can be described as another challenging problem. In fact, it is (or was) as urgent in many big multinational, multiethnic and multiracial states – from the Roman Empire to the United States.

In new Russia, this problem is further aggravated by the fact that as the heir to the biggest continental colonial empire, on the one hand, and the Soviet ideological empire, on the other, it included into its ethnic variety a territorial-geographical aspect with certain elements of the statehood (in some cases, the ethnic and national factors become component parts of certain structural parts of the federation). In different regions, people differently identify themselves as citizens of Russia. There are considerable specifics of such identification among those who live in the core Russian regions, those who live in some of the Caucasian subjects of the Russian Federation (Chechnya and Ingushetia with their mononational population) and in Dagestan, Tatarstan and Bashkortostan (with the multinational population and very specific problems created by the inner-regional national and ethnic relations). This far from simple conceptual and emotional situation is further complicated by the religious factor: the common religion or confession stirs up centripetal impulses while the national and ethnic differences, centrifugal.

There are situations in which a strong pan-Slavic self-identification gives rise to pan-Turkic or other sentiments among other categories of the citizens of Russia. The concept of “eternal historical holy Rus” promoted by certain top figures of the Russian Orthodox Church further complicates the already complicated task of forming Russia's civil state identity. On the one hand, this concept is intended to form spiritual ties among “all tribes and peoples” that have today or had in the past any historical connections with any Russian Orthodox state units that existed long ago. On the other, this concept raises certain doubts. Indeed, to which extent these spiritual religious contacts harmonize with the contemporary requirements to create and consolidate collective self-perception of

belonging to the contemporary secular and democratic Russian State and its civil society? To which extent and in which way are these two axiological conceptual spheres compatible and to which extent and in which way do they oppose one another? There is another question: To which extent one of them is oriented at the past while the other is rooted in the less enticing yet more practical present and future realities?

Obviously, to consolidate Russia's positions in the world for many years to come, we need a solid internal foundation that should rest on serious structural changes in economy, social and cultural spheres and in the scientific and educational sector. They, however, might end up in limbo if the system of individual and micro-collective motivations remains diluted. To avoid this, it should be elevated to a higher and wider level up to the motivational level of the "citizen of Russia." It is to be seen whether this happens or not: civilian self-identification cannot be assumed on an order from the powers that be.

There is no clear answer to the question that still bothers many in this country, namely, whether there was the concept "the Soviet people" in the twentieth century. I prefer a cautious answer: there was and there was not. "Not" because the vast state quickly disintegrated and the population of its now independent parts have assumed new and separate identification models. "Yes" because the invisible cultural and psychological ties (not necessarily gratifying and positive) survived nearly everywhere (including the Baltic states). They tie us together and create mutually attractive psychological intensity. In the last quarter of a century, this feeling did not disappear to the amazement of some and irritation of others.

One cannot but wonder whether strong horizontal identification structures are emerging at a new level – the level of contemporary Russian statehood. I would like to give a cautiously optimistic answer. At the peaks of the worldwide political cataclysms of the turn of the twenty-first century, the Russian ruling elite invariably managed to unite the country and its public opinion around their methods of dealing with far from unambiguous questions. The meandering or even distortions of Russian patriotism (patriotism of the contemporary Russian state) apart, it demonstrated tenacity and vitality. Here I mean patriotism, not its marginal and extreme deviations.

It is too early to offer the final conclusions about the Russian nation-state consensus. First, the trials to which this phenomenon was subjected and which it overcame (the wars in the Caucasus, the Ukrainian conflict and economic crises) no matter how acute were not seen as fateful and

momentous. Second, after a period of confusion of the 1990s, the present political elite managed to skillfully use the available traditional and new resources of influencing mass psychology in its own short-term interests. Today, it is hard to say whether the elements of nation-state identity are being put in place or whether they are a temporal response of the “great silent majority” to a specific situation. The latter differs from the former: it is short-lived and merely adjusts to the changing social, economic and political context.

This means that the quest for national identity, as one of the most important cornerstones of Russia’s foreign policy, is underway. This is not a simple process and it will not be completed soon. It is complicated, among other things, by a very natural egoism of a large part of our new national elite (this can be said about all elites of the world). In Russia, however, this is intensified by the youthful zeal and conceited ignorance of the recent “new Russians” and their crafty companions from among the ranks of old bureaucracy. Their road abounds in dead ends and is complicated by their persistent desire to find “new” meanings in the past. They look very much like a crawfish moving backwards into what looks like a bright past while being more or less sincerely convinced that they are rushing forward. Their road is full of stereotypes inherited from Soviet mentality that found suspicious everything that was not “ours” and a vague realization that we were lagging behind. Today, the dangerous cultivation of rejection of everything “alien” interferes with constructive self-determination and quiet and firm confidence we need to adapt to the contemporary world.

In fact, the national mentality that will determine the main trends of Russia’s foreign policy will inevitably rely on the shared conviction that we should work together to adapt the unique wealth we have inherited from the previous generations – the vast space – to the imperatives of the rapidly changing times. This is a challenge fiercer than those with which our ancestors managed to cope. For Europe, Eurasia and the rest of the world this trend in Russia’s national identity is not confrontational. It does not challenge and should not challenge our far and near abroad. This is our challenge and we should respond to it with dignity. This is what patriotism is about.

NOTES

¹ Putin V.V. Meeting with the core group of the Leaders Club // <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51263>

² Marx K. *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge

University Press, 1982, p. 134.

³ Weber M. *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Routledge, pp. 51-126.

⁴ See, for example: Prokhanov A. *Svoy–chuzhoy*. Moscow, Algoritm, 2007 // http://www.e-reading.club/chapter.php/103804/10/Prohanov_-_Svoii_-_chuzhoii.html

⁵ Lines from a poem by Andrey Voznesensky // <http://wysotsky.com/0009/527.htm#26>

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