

Russia and Europe

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Russia is one of two countries located simultaneously in Europe and in Asia. The other country with the same geographical fate is Turkey. The histories of the two countries have, as it happens, dramatically crossed several times in the past and the future of their relationship might prove to be very unexpected.

The mentalities of both peoples and countries have been torn between Eastern and Western orientations, with one or the other orientation being dominant at certain times. Is Russia today a European or an Asian country? And Europe – what does it signify?

These questions are as pressing today as ever, especially as the pitfalls of the Maastricht treaty are becoming more and more evident, and the tendency to preserve national values, such as the national language and even the national currency, are standing in the way of creating a United Europe.

Geography textbooks point out that, in the East, the European sub-continent is defined by the Ural Mountains, the Kumo-Manichsk plateau and the Caucasus Mountains. Therefore populations beyond the Urals and Caucasus, despite a long history of Christian traditions are not within Europe. But not all of the sub-Caucasus considers itself to be in Asia. Consequently, the sub-Caucasus states joined the European Security Council soon after declaring independence. It is proving difficult for multi-national Georgia to regain its cultural-historical bearing. The same is true for Armenia – the first Christian state in the history of mankind – and also for Azerbaijan with its close ties with Eurasian Turkey on the one hand and the Turkic states of Central Asia on the other.

The eminent Oxford sociologist, Professor Ralf Dahrendorf, approaches the question of the cultural borders of Europe with especial rigour. He counts in only the Catholic and Protestant states and excludes the Orthodox states – Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, Moldova, the Ukraine, Belarus, Russia and also Georgia and Armenia. In other words, the Eastern borders of Europe, in his view, coincide approximately with the Western boundaries of the Ottoman and Byzantine empires; the advance of European traditions and institutions to the East seems problematic to him.

Events of recent years, the velvet (or bloody) revolutions in Eastern Europe and the days of the August “putsch” (coup d’état) of 1991 in Russia, have shown the

world that the populations of post-totalitarian states understand good and evil and love freedom just as much as their Western neighbours.

So can the Russian people as a living entity be divided by the Ural Mountains, or does our Europe stretch to Vladivostok and Kamchatka?

We are integral to the geography and the history of Europe, to the greatest achievements of its culture and to the gravest delusions of its spirit. Russia shares, together with Germany and Italy, the historic burden of responsibility for giving birth in the 20th century to the most terrible and ruthless forms of totalitarianism – Bolshevism and Fascism. Unfortunately it is difficult to separate Russia and Europe in this responsibility as well.

It is impossible to include in the concept of Europe, fragments of European geography and European history chosen at random. It is possible to authorise membership of the Council of Europe or to allocate seats in the European parliament, but no one has the right to determine whether this or that nation is part of Europe – nevermind how hard the currency in the pockets of its people.

The Russian Empire began to form in the 15th century, during the reign of Ivan the Terrible, widening its borders in the East and West. Even such a strong Eastern European country as the Ukraine has existed peacefully, not on its own, but within the empire for 340 years.

The last territorial annexations of the Soviet Empire were gained, paradoxically, both from pre-war agreements with Hitler's Germany and as a result of the victory over Germany and Japan in the Second World War and relate to the period of 1939-1945. A special mention should be given to Tuva Republic which was annexed in 1944, although its independence before that was in name only.

The bulk of the Eurasian Russian territory was annexed to the Russian crown several centuries ago and the length of existence of this multinational state gave it an illusion of stability. The geography of the USSR enhanced this effect: contrary to the geographical location of British, French, Dutch and other empire's colonies, Russia's colonies were situated not beyond the seas, but on neighbouring territories.

This fact predestined the ethnic mixing of populations, for example the relocation of 25 million Russian citizens (of various nationalities) beyond the borders of the Russian Federation into other republics of the USSR. Often there were cases of planned migration.

Unlike the home territories of other empires, Russia often turned out to be poorer than its colonies: two thirds of its landmass is classed as extreme North or having a harsh climate. Russia has often performed donor functions for other republics that were less rich in natural resources but had higher birth rates. In practice the standards of social security were the same for all republics.

The economic and political unity of the USSR was upheld by one main pivot – the military-industrial complex, whose tentacles covered one sixth of the world's land-mass. This profoundly informed the militaristic consciousness of the Soviet citizen – not least through the systems of school and army upbringing.

The integrity of any state rests on two whales: the inter-dependency of economic relations between its different regions plus the existence of a common ideology or sum of common values. Both these factors have been, at the very least, weakened and there are now concerns for the integrity of Russia itself. Russia is still home to representatives of 126 nationalities just as the USSR was. These nationalities belong to a range of different linguistic families, cultural traditions and religions.

The importance of differences between various peoples is still undermined in our society because it was brought up on ideas of internationalism and assimilation. Recent historical examples show that national communities resist attempts to level out their unique characteristics. The academician Yulian V. Bromley pinpointed this effect as “the ethnic paradox of modern times”. Living conditions for contemporary urban populations – technologies, fashion, food and life-style – are becoming more unified but ethnic self-consciousness is becoming more pronounced and carries more meaning for the people. Nations are resisting the winds of entropy at all cost. The idea of cosmopolitanism proposed by those great “citizens of the world” such as Bertrand Russell, Albert Einstein, Andrei Sakharov and others are not popular today and it looks as though this was not taken into account by the architects of the “pan-European house”. The failure of Maastricht, despite its obvious economic benefits, was pre-destined because it was built on an attempt – albeit unconscious – to build a United States of Europe according to the model of the USA. But in the “Old World” where the culture and geography of ethnicities are so tightly tied together, cutting the European lawn with its deeply set roots proved a difficult task.

In the founding idea of the European Union lies a great and noble understanding of the priority of rights of the individual over any group and collective features (including ethnic). The same idea is central to ethics and justice in the USA.

Today, at the end of the 20th Century, many significant individuals are willing to limit their own rights (sometimes even to give their life) for the common good of their nation.

In Europe and the USA, the influence of such “ancestral” factors is looked upon as archaic. But in countries with undeveloped democratic institutions, such national movements can help to establish an open society, as national factors in people's lives cannot generally be controlled by a totalitarian State system. A nation with a culture and a historical memory does not subordinate itself to the State; a nation where the importance of custom and public opinion serves as a regulator of people's behaviour is hostile to a non-democratic or mono-ethnic State (third Reich) and is especially hostile to an imperial State. A people's nation can serve as a foundation for building civil society where other foundations have been destroyed by dictatorship, whilst national-freedom movements can evolve into democratic ones.

At the same time there is a great risk of these movements becoming nationalistic and clerical and limiting the personal freedoms of citizens. Examples can be seen in the denial of civil rights to ethnic Russians living in Latvia and Estonia or the abortion ban adopted under pressure from Catholic clerics in Poland.

All these tendencies exist in embryo in today's Russia, especially as its most sizeable nationality looks towards Europe due to a millennium of conversion to Christianity, whilst some Islamic or Buddhist nationalities are aligning themselves with Asian cultural traditions.

In our view, only the idea of a flexible confederation can save the integrity of Russia today. This idea was proposed by academician Andrei Sakharov and the author of this article in 1989 (within the framework of the Inter-Regional Group of Deputies on the new Union treaty and new state structure of USSR). At the time, the proposal to delegate some plenary powers to the federal centre was not supported by Mikhail Gorbachev. Not many could foresee the decisive influence the referendum of 1 December 1991, concerning the independence of the Ukraine, would have on the fate of the former USSR. Not everyone has evaluated the meaning of the Belovezh attempt conducted a week after the Ukraine's independence that aimed at keeping it at least within the CIS.

The Federal treaty adopted by subjects of the Russian Federation realises, in principle, Sakharov's idea of "flexible membership"; and the possibility of Tatarstan and Chechnya entering it under special conditions cannot be completely discounted.

A thousand years experience of building the Russian State was constantly focussed on its territorial enlargement and this undermined the development of both the old and the new lands. It is no coincidence that historian and philosopher Nicolay Berdiaev wrote of "the power of space over the Russian soul". This understanding of the vastness of our country became one of the dominant points of the ethnic self-consciousness of Russians and in the ethno-psychology of Russians; geography took the place of history – the main organising motive of ethnic self-consciousness of other nations that have a written language. True, Russians do not even have a full, truthful textbook on their national history. After an August coup that catalysed the break-up of the USSR and after Belovezh attempted to hold together the pieces, Russia had to build new foundations, establishing borders, territories, and a federal structure. At the same time it was constructing a roof over its State system with the institution of the Presidency. Now we are defining ourselves within geopolitical and spiritual coordinates.

Within the history of social thought in Russia there have always been two orientations. One of them – the European way – was defined by the deeds of Peter the Great, Radischev, Chaadaev, Pushkin, Gherzen and other "Westernisers". In our day it has found its brightest expression in the views of Andrei Sakharov. The other approach, characteristic of Russian "slavophiles" contemplates the uniqueness of Russia's geography, economy and history; the very spirit of Russia that makes it impossible to apply Western social models to the realities of Russian life. It can be

said that this position is shared to some extent by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a prominent son of Russia.

One should bear in mind that uniqueness is indissolubly connected with the futility of borrowing on the experiences of other more developed societies; it is therefore associated with isolationism. It seems that at the end of 20th Century no country can develop without interaction with others. After the establishment as independent countries of Ukraine, Belarus and the Baltic States, Russia has become more remote territorially from Western Europe but our interest in it has not weakened. On the contrary, it has grown.

Sakharov's idea of convergence between the West and the East seems even more vital now than it did before the fall of the Berlin Wall that divided the two worlds.