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What Is the Meaning of "National" in the Russian Debate about the National Interest?

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Reflecting on the Russian debate about the "national interest," prominent political analyst Gleb Pavlovsky has said:

> Today, there are no centers that would work to delineate Russian national interests, nor politically rigorous terminology that could be used for that purpose. Everything being written on this topic is fiction, often politically irresponsible. We hear fairytales about supremacy, telling the other countries that they are no more than targets for our Iskander missiles.

Pavlovsky is an apt observer, and his text pointed to a serious issue. However, I believe that his diagnosis is not entirely correct. The problem lies deeper than the lack of a proper definition of the national interest, or of institutions that would allow Russian society to arrive at such a definition in the course of open democratic debate.

The very idea of "the national" takes a peculiar form in Russia. The nation's intellectual and political elites obstinately look away from grassroots concerns and demands, and focus instead on a set of "eternal Russian questions": Is Russia a European country? Are Russians ready for Western-style democracy; if not, will they ever be? Is Russia a normal country? If not, should this be a reason for pride or for shame?

The national interest is thus debated not by looking within the country but without, and mostly to the West. This is a universal tendency shared by both the government and the opposition, by both nationalists and liberals. Furthermore, this phenomenon needs to be considered as rooted in a much wider pattern of dependent development. The only chance to break Russia's vicious circle of pro-Western modernization followed by nationalist reaction is to put the people first and refocus the political agenda on domestic issues.

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Perseverance as National Idea

Pavlovsky highlights the prevalence of status and recognition over substance in senior officials' remarks about the Russian national interest. Indeed, Russia's leaders, including President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, keep insisting that Russia's national interests must be protected and respected by others, even before any conversation on concrete issues, such as the future of European security, can begin. As Putin said at a July 2015 Security Council meeting, convened to discuss Russia's national interests under sanctions, "we do not trade in our national sovereignty." Standing up to Western pressure is the Kremlin's unconditional top priority, while economic policy has to be adjusted to the imperatives of confrontation.

The same pattern has been easy to discern in the wider debate around Ukraine and, later, Syria. The dominant anti-Western voices resolutely demand not to "give in," and even to press forward "to the end." Yet what lies at "the end" is a mystery. There is hardly ever a hint of what Russia as a nation stands to gain from its uncompromising position, except for, once again, being treated with respect by outsiders, particularly the West.

Aggressive anti-Westernism was one of the major contributing factors to the decision to annex Crimea in response to what Russia saw as an Orange Revolution-type coup in Kyiv orchestrated by Washington. This step consolidated the entire nation (with the exception of the liberal minority) and in this sense can be interpreted as an achievement in advancing the national interest, or at least a certain understanding thereof. However, the violation of territorial integrity of a neighboring state resulted in Russia's isolation, with costs incurred by the entire population.

Russia's entanglement in eastern Ukraine ended in a stalemate. Unable to offer any sustainable solution to the problem (which the Kremlin helped create), Russia found no better solution than to distract public attention by starting another war. As in Ukraine, Russia's interests in Syria were defined predominantly as a question of relative standing vis-à-vis the West. The declared aim of defeating ISIS was not expounded in concrete terms, and the exorbitant cost of the intervention was not duly taken into account.

Soaring inflation and other negative economic and social consequences are unlikely to make Russians regret the "return" of Crimea and the intervention in Syria, but they are likely to generate new rifts within society. These steps can thus be classified as achievements only within a very narrow definition of the national interest in a zero-sum game against the West, where international status matters much more than the quality of life.

Scholarly literature has established that status and recognition are powerful driving forces in world politics. States are often ready to put their survival at risk to safeguard

their "ontological security"—their self-identity and their "due role" in international society. Still, this purely external orientation on what constitutes valid policy goals is remarkable.

Traditionalists without Tradition?

The recent conservative turn in Russian politics might be interpreted as an indication that Russia has finally found its own positive agenda. After Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012, the Russian state defined key social priorities, including support for traditional family values, respect for religion, and promotion of Russian language and culture. Along with fostering a national cult of "the victory over Nazism," such policies are meant to strengthen Russians' "spiritual bonds" which, according to Putin, will make the nation more cohesive.

Achieving these seemingly positive goals, however, necessitates a set of policies that are almost exclusively negative and repressive. Support for traditional family values translates into prohibitions (in some cases, just proposals) against "homosexual propaganda," the banning of adoptions by foreigners and same-sex families, restrictions on abortion, and increased fees for divorces. Respect for religion means introducing criminal punishment for those "offending religious feelings." Reverence for the sacrifice of those who fought in World War II becomes a weapon against those who engage in illegal "falsifications of history." Promotion of Russian language and culture means more than just restricting Hollywood films; it involves repression against any contemporary artistic trends that irritate the undemanding mass consumer.

In the end, the Kremlin's entire conservative turn comes down to nothing more than an offensive against "the fifth column." This label lumps together all "freaks"—the *Pussy Riot* punk band, NGOs, intellectuals, scholars supported by foreign funding. They are all stamped as Western collaborators, whose main goal is to undermine Russian traditional values. At the same time, the values that are being championed tend to recede in the background, while center stage gets occupied by the epic fight against forces of evil; for pro-government forces, of whatever stripe, the national interest is reduced to anti-Westernism.

The Arrogance of Liberal Cosmopolitanism

In the debate about policy priorities, a lack of focus on "the national" is even more obvious at the opposite end of the political spectrum. Russian liberal intellectuals take pride in their cosmopolitan outlook; many even scorn the very idea of a Russian national interest. For liberals, the West unconditionally sets the standards of what is normal in today's world; Russia's national task, insofar as this concept is valid, is to "Go West" (which happens to be the title of an article by Mikhail Khodorkovsky about Russia's misplaced national interests).

We tend to view cosmopolitanism as a noble position that strives to overcome the narrowmindedness of nationalist thinking and places the interests of humanity above other concerns. Universal human interests are by no means a self-evident given, however. Any universal model, be it market economy or democracy, can only exist in a variety of local forms that reflect reality on the ground. Russia, as a semi-peripheral country with social and economic structures different from those in a typical market democracy, has to be governed and reformed in a different way. A painful lesson of post-Soviet reform was that replacing resource-oriented central planning with open markets is a way toward corrupt and authoritarian state capitalism, not market democracy.

Hence, the values that the liberal opposition tries to promote must be grounded in the local context. Protecting gay rights or the freedom of speech in a country like Russia are noble and valuable pursuits. To be politically valid, however, these demands must be linked with other grassroots concerns, not just justified by reference to abstract universal norms, which the majority of Russians perceive as being imposed by the West. The Russian opposition must be able to demonstrate to ordinary Russians how disrespect for individual rights or a lack of political freedom leads to poor heating in their homes, exorbitant kindergarten fees, or the closure of local hospitals.

The leaders of the Russian opposition sometimes make these efforts, but in a rather incoherent way. The Russian creative class as a whole is moving in the opposite direction. Shocked by overwhelming popular support for the increasingly authoritarian leader, and especially for what they see as the illegal annexation of Crimea, the intelligentsia has reacted in a way familiar since the mid-nineteenth century, by distancing itself from the common people. This alienation has manifested itself in several ways: the use of disparaging labels to refer to supporters of the regime, unending discussions about emigrating, or, most widespread, a refusal to take any open political stance outside a narrow circle of friends.

Another equally characteristic way in which intellectuals dissociate themselves from the people is, paradoxically, by supporting the regime. Following poet Alexander Pushkin, many educated Russians today would begrudgingly agree that the government is the "sole European" in the country and authoritarian rule the only way to avoid "the Russian revolt—pointless and merciless." While such a position is understandable from a psychological perspective, it leaves unfulfilled the intellectuals' main mission—critical appraisal of the most pressing issues facing the nation both domestically and internationally.

Time for a People's Intelligentsia

There are political forces in Russia that are trying to establish a domestically-based national agenda. Certainly radical nationalists put the (Russian) people first. Some might

be capable of overcoming their primitive anti-Westernism to come up with genuinely national slogans. However, their extremely narrow concept of "the people" generally leads to xenophobia and social exclusion.

On a more moderate flank, Alexei Navalny has repeatedly attempted to play along with the nationalists, for instance by combining democratic and anti-immigrant rhetoric. The rest of the opposition tends to react with suspicion, if not with contempt. While flirting with racist ideologies is dangerous, there is no way around the fact that the presence of migrants is high on the list of concerns for the average Russian. Similarly, while Putin's opponents tried to capitalize on the unexpectedly large wave of anger against the government's campaign to destroy "illegally" imported food, the opposition failed to connect it to other popular concerns, in particular financial anxiety in the face of Russia's deepening economic recession.

The democratic opposition must encourage a constructive discussion about these and other issues, and it must be part of a global debate involving Western intellectuals. Ignoring voices from below, even if they do not always like what they hear, is a disservice not just to Russian democracy but to the liberal cause as such. If people feel that their legitimate demands are discarded because they conflict with abstract normative frameworks, they are more likely to reject this framework than abandon their concerns.

Isolated attempts to bring up national issues that are snubbed by the majority of the educated class cannot make up for serious discussion about future reforms. While nearly everyone agrees that reforms are inevitable, there is very little understanding of how to approach the condition Russia finds itself in, as opposed to treating it as just another case of "democratic transition." Given the profound impact of decades of rent-seeking and corruption across the entire society, the excessively cosmopolitan orientation of Russian intellectuals could cost dearly in the future, especially if radicals hijack democratic politics.

On a broader note, even though the Russian political debate has lost its domestic orientation to an unusual degree, the problem is hardly unique. It was one that Antonio Gramsci identified in his writings on Italian history as one of the consequences of the country's peripheral position in capitalist Europe. Gramsci emphasized the cosmopolitan outlook of Italian intellectuals, and also their lack of attention to issues of nation-building and unification. There are striking parallels between Italy as analyzed by Gramsci and other stepchildren of European civilization, such as Russia, Turkey, and South America.

Russia thus suffers from a fundamental political problem of popular representation. Making sure the plebs get a chance to become a populus, a political subject in control of their own destiny, is the task that defines democratic politics. As Gramsci demonstrated,

this can never be trusted to any institutional design, however progressive the latter might be. Giving voice to the people requires constant creative work on the part of the intellectuals—a class that in the end is defined by this very function. To be worthy of their name, the Russian intelligentsia will have to leave their ivory tower and speak in the people's voice.

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