

ETHICAL LIBERAL VALUES VS. THE SOVIET ADMINISTRATIVE HERITAGE: THE DRAMA OF THE RUSSIAN TRANSIT

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The paper is concerned with the ethical aspects of the processes of transformation in Soviet society during perestroika and in the period since. This phenomenon has been multi-dimensional and complex. Indeed, public ethics is—in particular—a very important part of any comprehensive analysis of the period, having been highlight influence both in the unfolding of events and in their long-term consequences. Moreover, the true significance of the public ethics in the reform process was underestimated by political and economic decision makers at the time. Nevertheless, public activities during perestroika and in the early 1990s did contain a substantial “moral component”, directed against long-established and multi-layered ideological and political lies, hypocrisy, dishonesty, disgrace, Orwellian “double think”, etc., mostly attributable to developments in the Soviet period.

I consider the Russian bureaucratic mentality and Russian liberalism mostly as essentially opposed approaches. It examines the specifics of the interrelations of these two phenomena during a turbulent time in Russian history, observing briefly the development of their dramatic changes at two critical junctures and concludes with some judgments on the condition of contemporary Russian situation regarding liberal views and values.

Epistemologically, I can proceed from the classical paradigm of liberalism based firstly on the English school of the so-called “new ethic”—presented by those outstanding scholars such as George Edward Moore, Isaiah Berlin, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Karl Popper—and also on the contemporary Russian school of applied ethics. The latter is represented, in particular, by Vladimir Bakshtanovsky, Ruben Apresyan, Andrey Prokofiev, Yury Solomonov, and others.

I suppose that underestimation of the importance of ethical factors by politicians of perestroika and the early post-Gorbachev period engendered a dramatic crisis of identity for many people—the practical consequences of which proved to be very negative—and also a certain crisis of liberal values in public consciousness in general.

In spite of negative, even pejorative, treatment of liberalism by official circles, some positive—even ideal—image of it survived in the intellectual underground of Soviet political and social thought. When ideological and political pressure weakened at the time of perestroika, this image revived and grew, but in rather strange way. This

created the curious phenomenon of the “paradox of dual treatment of liberalism”. In this way, liberalism became a forbidden dream that has been cursed and ridiculed at official levels but—nevertheless and even in spite of this—has proven strongly desired (and even idealized) at unofficial levels, in the mind and imagination of many people. It was—in point of fact—a typical case of the so-called “doublethink” first described by George Orwell.ⁱ

The bureaucratic mentality and liberalism

The mentality of officialdom can hardly be matched organically with liberal ethical values. This is rather problematic, even in Western countries. Bureaucrats everywhere are more inclined to a paternalistic vision of their role and status in society; to so-called *dirigisme*. For the Soviet system, this was true, only to a much greater extent. The standard Soviet bureaucrat was completely anti-liberal. He proceeded from the general requirements and principles of the Soviet autocratic system of governance, which was based on the maximum possible centralization and strict control of the communist party officials and state bureaucrats at the different levels of hierarchy. Such super-centralization tended to become weaker after Stalin. However, in terms of the prevailing attitudes of the Soviet officials, not much changed. They continued to be oriented not to “below” but to “above”. In other words, not to public needs and expectations but, first, to following the orders and wishes of superiors and, second, to fulfilling orders, instructions, regulations, etc. for all the lower levels of the bureaucratic hierarchy and beyond it, for citizens as well. The very concept of the public service did not exist in the Soviet Union at all.

We need to recognize that the Soviet case was not unique in this respect. In all socialist countries, the officialdom were primarily cogs or driving belts for the ruling party. The meritocratic system practically did not exist either, while a deteriorated version of patronage—in the form of a party-nomenclature system—dominated instead. This was only natural, since public service as such, in the genuine meaning of the word, is essentially incompatible with the autocratic way of rule and with nomenclature principles of cadre selection. As a matter of fact, after the fall of the Soviet system, several post-Socialist countries conducted certain efforts to create a genuine public service. Some cases fared relatively better compared with others. But it would be hard to name any completely successful example of public service reform in this part of the world. Alternative versions of the bureaucratic state evolved in many countries instead.

Russia seems a classical example of such a metamorphosis. Since 1991, Russia has come through at least five rounds of reform; three state programs of reform have been announced and formally fulfilled, for the most part. However, the real achievements were very modest, even by most optimistic judgments and, moreover, what was achieved was counter-productive, in some important respects.ⁱⁱ It seems remarkable that Russian officialdom remains in service of the “state” rather than the “public”, even in name. This reveals its prevailing essence and orientation to the top. Effectively, words matter.

This does not mean, however, that all Soviet bureaucrats—or even most of them—were “bad guys”. Their moral profile was much more complicated. However, they were all trained, worked and judged in the frame of an anti-liberal system, according to completely non-liberal rules.

New roles, same actors

The substantial issue became that—under conditions of the new policy—all bureaucrats were deprived of their status and habitual feeling of being an important, even essential, part of the system. During the transition period, their role seriously changed and diminished. Their previous skills, competences and psychological attitudes—based on a grounded system of moral values and training—proved to be no longer in demand, no more needed. However, these same persons formally stayed in the same (or similar) posts and were, ironically, supposed to conduct politics completely incompatible by rules and content of it, with their previous experience, habits, values and competencies. This inevitably caused a loss of self-respect and brought many of them to a condition of “moral anomia”, to follow Emile Durkheim’s terminology.

Moreover, the educational, and sometimes intellectual, level and consciousness of officials, their perception and understanding of their own responsibility for their actions (or non-actions), as a rule, could not provide satisfactory fulfillment of their new political and administrative duties and tasks. Former Soviet bureaucrats chose different ways to adapt to this new situation. It varied in amplitude from estrangement, alienation and escape, through to open or masked resistance, to highly corrupted behavior and actions, to cynical use of their positions in exploiting the huge opportunities for personal gain that opened up. For the latest kind of people, the time that emerged recalled, in a sense, the “Klondike experience of free riding” or the “Gold Rush” seen in Alaska during the second half of the nineteenth century. It was unprecedented in the degree and speed of redistribution and the semi-criminal seizure in many cases of former state property under the slogan of privatization. Moreover, it added to a general, highly uncertain and ambivalent situation of transition some extra troubles.

Proceeding from the experience of several post-socialist countries, one can highlight that a kind of lustration or purging of the state apparatus could improve a situation substantially, if it were conducted in due time and in an effective way. Certainly, I do not mean the massive firing of honest and politically neutral administrators, or purges of the “witch hunt” variety. However, at least something needed to be done in this direction. Unfortunately, nothing had been done and Russia inherited from USSR the same bureaucratic personnel.

One negative exception has made this situation even more troubling. Those individuals who proved to be most capable at adapting to new circumstances and opportunities are the ones that end up abusing their connections and access to confidential details of the privatization process and financial operations for personal profit. Most of them moved to the newly founded commercial and for-profit

organizations, or just traded on the special knowledge and contacts acquired through their former official posts with business interests, including the newly emerging oligarchs. Some others, who kept their formal posts inside the state apparatus, proceeded to trade confidential information. These (in a sense) smart bureaucrats managed to transform their “exoteric” knowledge for real money and other material benefits. Not only administrative “big wigs” but also some lower ranked “clerks” managed to get their share in this “market”.

The empirical data on the continuity of middle-ranking political— and almost all administrative—cadres in the 1990s looks very alarming and surprising, if not to say absurd. In the mid-90s, 75% of those in the Russian government apparatus were members of the former Soviet nomenclature; the corresponding figure for business was 61%.ⁱⁱⁱ Moreover, more than a half of them had not been hired under Gorbachev or Yeltsin, but much earlier, during the Brezhnev era.^{iv} However, the political leadership of the time neglected this absurd situation, ignoring a danger of it for chances of positive development toward democracy and rule of law

As a result, the quality of the bureaucratic machinery in post-Soviet Russia deteriorated seriously. The current quality now is the worst at almost any time in the country's history; at least, for the two latest centuries. This is common knowledge across the country, from the president to ordinary people. The situation demands substantial improvement, but it is really difficult to bring this about. Any half-measures will simply not work. The time when moderate reform was possible was wasted. On the other hand, radical transformations require political will, consistency and readiness to take risks. Thus, the current political establishment is also barely interested in radical reform of the existing bureaucratic system.

THE FIRST STAGE OF THE PROCESS.

At the end of the 1980s, when perestroika was entering its active phase, neither the economic, nor the legal side of liberal values was championed in the minds, moods and hopes of the people. Other things proved to be at the top of agenda. First of all, there were such political liberal values as freedom—freedom of speech and publication, freedom of media, of political critic, freedom of meetings and rallies. A considerable part of the country —and not only the main cities—partook of what could be described as political discussion clubs. This liberal turn was natural and inevitable after many decades of ideological pressure and hardly restricted freedoms. Hence, such natural human needs as the human wish to express opinions, thoughts, needs and pains overtly and loudly, to cooperate with like-minded people (or, on the contrary, to eschew association with others), to create new groups freely, without any permission, approval or instructions from above—became dominant part of life for many. The new conditions of *glasnost*—which but several years beforehand, Russian people could hardly have imagined—made all this possible. I remember how, walking in July of 1988 along the main street of a small town in the Vologda oblast', located several hundred kilometers north of Moscow, my wife and I were able to hear through people's open windows the broadcast of Gorbachev's

speech at the 19th All-Union Conference of the CPSU. It was a warm summer, windows were wide open and the Gensek's voice seemed to emanate from virtually all of them. It was very unusual and strange that so-called "ordinary" people could be found listening voluntarily to the broadcast of party meetings. And later, when evening descended on the town, people gathered near their homes, in small public gardens, at the shore of the lake and spoke, argued and debated what they had heard. Exchanges were sometimes rather harsh and hostile. But nobody cared to seek permission for these spontaneous meetings—such a thing could not happen now, by the way. Later, in the spring of 1989, during the first Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union, emotional interest in politics reached almost epidemic proportions. Many people basically did not turn their radios off the whole time. Even during walks or touristic tours among historic sites and nature sightseeing points, they went, small radio sets pressed to their ears or larger ones carried by hand. They exchanged their thoughts and impressions very vividly and emotionally. Certainly, this was not a normal condition of the mind and could not continue long. But, I think, it was a necessary stage of psychological recovery and rehabilitation after many decades of forced silence and vetoes of political discussions.

These were very romantic years, full of hopes, aspirations and also illusions, unfortunately. Such ethical values as social honesty, "togetherness" and mutual respect, solidarity in the face of difficulties, mutual aid, and so on, flourished in broad circles of society. Unfortunately, pathetic words prevailed over practical deeds and this faded quickly under the pressure of more vital, practical needs and egoistic impulses.

With this highly emotional background, the "prosaic" liberal values and details—such as the necessity of hard work in private business with some personal risk at stake, the rule of law, minimizing state involvement in private entrepreneurship, relying on yourself and partners, not on government support, and the like—proved to be at the periphery of the agenda, even among the intellectual circles. Certainly, economic reforms were also discussed, but mostly inside narrow professional circles, and attracted less public attention than political liberties and much less than they deserved. The economists assumed that the "invisible hand" of the free market would provide the solution to all of the other issues almost automatically. The concept of *homo economicus*, albeit in some oversimplified, obsolete version, has prevailed among decision makers. Given the difficulties of the post-Soviet transition—especially considering Russia's dramatic situation—the number and amount of moral and economic distortions in the mass consciousness had also been underrated.

Certainly, the ethics of entrepreneurship also developed in some way, but in specific and sometimes in perverted forms. Priority has been given not to classic market principles, nor to producing public goods for consumers, but firstly to the opportunity to quickly seize as much as possible of the former state property to make a fast profit. It has been a kind of war for the national silver, captured by

methods as varied as more or less legal privatization up to mafia-style seizure. Such approaches to property acquisition and business in the '90s in Russia was probably inevitable after seventy years of the Soviet anti-market regime, after the long-term persecution of any independent economic activity as a severe crime, and the suppression of individual freedoms. However, it made has had an almost fatal impact on the entire post-Soviet life-world—economic and otherwise—and on its public psychology and the evolution of events.

The country thus faced the phenomenon of what might be called “selective liberalism”, where political liberalism was disjoined from economic liberalism. I consider this split as one of the saddest paradoxes of the first stage of perestroika. It has had a considerable influence on the whole evolution of post-Soviet Russian capitalism.

The second stage of the process

During the late 1980s and the very beginning of the 1990s, as progress was achieved in political and intellectual freedoms, the economic situation deteriorated in parallel, unfortunately, turning from bad to worse. The national economy reached the brink of collapse. Apparently, it was easier to open channels for *glasnost* and even to start democratic reforms in politics than to cope with growing economic problems.

For sure, people—being inspired by new huge opportunities in the areas of intellectual and liberal political freedoms—were ready to tolerate some economic difficulties. However, even mainly idealistically oriented people did not have an unlimited tolerance for material losses. Rather soon this red line of tolerance was reached.

Yeltsin's first post-August 1991 government faced this almost tragic situation. The time for more mild, moderate economic measures had been wasted in political disputes and battles. Now the government had to act in the economic sphere quickly, decisively and firmly. This it did—actually saving the country in the process—but at a very high political price. Indeed, the liberal economists running the government at that time introduced a very harsh and socially painful correction. Apparently, most of the measures then conducted were inevitable. There was not much room for maneuver. And the threat of further deterioration in the situation—which might have led to complete economic collapse—was very real. The country proved to be at the edge of an abyss but thanks to the measures of the government—chaired by Yegor Gaidar and his team of liberal economists—the country stood firm at the precipice. However, in the process liberal political and ethical ideals and expectations were pushed aside—to the periphery of the government's agenda and program. And the price was massive disappointment in liberal values as such. Moreover, the hard economic measures became associated unjust in the mass consciousness with the very essence, the very principles of liberalism. The traditional Soviet disinclination toward liberalism re-emerged. This

has been particularly embodied in the pejorative word *liberasty*, which sounds rather indecent in Russian because of its similarity to homophobic insults.

One of the symptoms of this crisis has been the revival of an ideology proclaiming the existence of a so-called “special path” for Russia. According to this concept, Russia is a unique country, whose history stands outside and beyond of the general rules, standards, and regularities that apply to the historical development of other nations. This supposed uniqueness presumably makes Russia incompatible with the experience of other societies up to assuming some “divine” global mission for Russian civilization. The spirit of the philosopher Nikolay Danilevsky and late Fedor Dostoevsky seem to be resurrected in these views. I consider this symptom as a genuine social indicator of national crisis and a failure in reaching a “normal” path for national development. Dmitry Travin, for example, considers it as a form of psychological self-defense, the kind that emerges in periods of social frustration.^v

Negative moral and psychological consequences

In the mid-1990s, the people discouraged by the difficulties of the transition also faced the phenomenon of having been betrayed by the powers that be, which had an additional negative effect on the Russian public consciousness and opinion. During perestroika and the early nineties, a clear and strong social appeal for liberal democracy existed among the people, who had high hopes that corrupt officials at all levels would be replaced with honest and effective ones who would genuinely serve the public good. They believed initially in new faces with democratic manners and words. Unfortunately, this initial faith was, in large part, a kind of naive idealism, which was cynically exploited by the new tycoons and the *nouveau riche*, their political friends and administrative “lackeys”.

This gap between great expectations and severe reality—and the public disappointment that followed—was surely inevitable, especially in transition times. Reality always differs from (i.e. is worse than) the romantic hopes and images of a happy future we might expect just behind the next corner. However, in the Russian case the size of this gap and the amount of disappointment proved to be overwhelming. And the price for that was a loss of trust in democratic institutions, in social justice entirely, in the possibility of honest governance, and in the personal integrity of anyone coming to power. I would like to name this phenomenon as a tragedy of deceived trust.

The emergence and malignant growth of Putin’s autocratic and highly corrupted regime is one of the dramatic political consequences of this mass disappointment in liberal values, justice and ethics in public matters. The terrible growth of systemic corruption became one of its immanent traits, a common approach to—and even purpose of—governance.

The psychological identity crisis among people in intellectual professions also made the situation worse. The reason was that the members of previously highly respectable social groups—like scientists, artists, writers, etc.—who had enjoyed

habitual public esteem, whose statements and opinions were earlier meaningful to an essential part of the population, are now excluded from any influence on processes. They have, naturally, felt themselves betrayed by the new order.

First of all, this crisis affected the circles of scientific and artistic intelligentsia, but not only them. People who used to be – and really were – the intellectual cohort and basic part of the country's liberal capital, proved to be out of demand in the “brave new world” (following Aldous Huxley’s famous book), to world what they idealized, promised to the nation and promoted with all their strengths and intellectual capacities. In spite of their large contribution to the process of country liberalization, they became the stratum that had maximal troubles comparing with many other social groups in the process of adaptation to new conditions of life. Therefore, Russia has faced a dramatic decline in social respect for people in intellectual professions.

Moreover, this decline has brought some highly educated intellectuals a substantial decrease in living standards up to the condition of real poverty. The former high-status persons, in order to survive, have even needed to pursue menial labor or become small merchants trying to sell stuff in pot markets or on the streets, near metro stations, in pedestrian underpasses, etc. Such a dramatic decline has inevitably brought them to an internal crisis in consciousness, a loss of self-esteem, even the loss of a sense of life.

On the other hand, everybody can see how enormous fortunes arose from scratch – and how these parvenus surprisingly quickly acquired a feeling of themselves as the new masters of life with the attributed manners and style of behavior. Even the term “new gentry” (*novoe dvoryanstvo*) appeared among members of similar circles as a way to describe this new status. Ironically, it became especially popular and relished among people in the security services, such as former KGB officers. This circumstance also had been put on the total negative account of liberals' accusations

A note of cautious optimism in conclusion

However, in spite of the generally pessimistic picture presented above, I would like to conclude with some notes of cautious optimism. The substantial reason for this is what I see as the revival of ethical values and attitudes, such as the demand for fairness and honesty among the general public. People are less and less inclined to tolerate the multiple and growing pathologies of the current regime. This trend is manifesting in at least two ways.

It appears firstly, though not exclusively, in the growing waves of protest in many places all around the country. These demonstrations arise for different reasons, not connected necessarily with politics. The reaction on the opposite side – from the authorities – demonstrates their inability to deal adequately in most cases with these protests. Indeed, their typical reaction is manipulative and reflects a mixture of stupidity and fear that can be counter-productive even for the narrow-minded bureaucratic vision.

Regardless of the practical pretext for particular protest, a general basis for any of it is the need of the public to display openly and loudly its disagreement with authorities who neglect popular opinion, citizens' rights and public expectations. From the side of the current Russian authorities, one can see a defiant hatred toward opponents and the absence of any desire or capacity to communicate positively with them. I believe that people in power have to understand, for their own safety, that public protests are not a dangerous pathology, but a normal element of independent public life, a pre-condition for the existence and development of civil society. Protesters are thus an essential part of civil society. They are not a zero-sum game but bring gains to both sides—citizens and government. Certainly, protests may somehow undermine bureaucratic feelings of comfort and the special corporative interests of some powerful groups and might generally cause them some inconvenience. I think, however, that bureaucratic comfort and security should hardly be considered a serious criterion for the evaluation of governmental quality and effectiveness.

In democratic societies, public protests are considered a natural form of political participation. And this becomes especially topical when other forms of participation and attempts to influence politicians do not work, as in contemporary Russia. Another case might be disappointment of some people in other legal forms of participation and political pressure, as in the USA, for example. In general, the way that authorities treat civil protests seems one of the key indicators to understand the true character of a country's political and administrative regime.

Another less dramatic—but no less cynical—case was the multiple efforts by Moscow city bureaucrats to distort the results of the municipal elections in September 2017. A whole bunch of technological tricks and manipulations—including direct pressure and bribery of electoral commission members—were used in this case. However, the authorities did not manage to reach a full victory in all districts, as they had wished. Muscovites were able to elect some independent municipal deputies—mostly democratic candidates—in certain city districts.^{vi}

Fear and hatred of authorities toward any uncontrolled public activity sometimes reaches literally paranoid levels. It appears, for example, in the persecution of non-political initiatives such as the actions of volunteers to help flood victims and victims of other natural disasters, or ecological activists—which are only indirectly connected with political issues. However, the authorities seem even not clever enough to understand that their efforts to prohibit or, at least to hinder, the independent activities of people are counter-productive and undermine the reputation of the state as such and the citizens' respect for those in power.

In response, people—who do not wish to reconcile with suffocating atmosphere of growing state intervention into public matters—try to create horizontal networks of connections, or parallel social bodies to avoid or at least minimize any contacts with state structures. The common denominator of all these very different associations is the need and desire to be maximally independent from the state bureaucracy. As a rule, these organizations are not political. They are mostly oriented to cultural,

educational, ecologic and other social matters, sometimes to business, but not to politics. Frequently they do not cooperate with each other and many of their members do not identify themselves as liberals.

Indeed, the very word “liberal” is no longer a part of the positive vocabulary for “ordinary” people because they are familiar only with negative, pejorative connotations of it from the central TV channels and other brain washing propagandistic media. In some cases, they do not know what this word really means or have never even heard it. However, I believe that they can be considered as “intuitive” or “latent liberals” and ground the prospective potential for development in this direction. In the psychological terminology they could be described, I think, as subconscious liberals.

Hence, it seems that no united liberal minority exists in today’s Russia. However, quite a lot of different, liberally inclined people and groups do exist. Again, their main common denominator is the intention to become as independent of the state as possible. I do not know whether it would be possible or even reasonable to try to consolidate them under one flag.

Anyway, according the polling data, people do not trust most state institutions and do not believe in the good intentions—or even the honesty—of their personnel. Therefore, the disbelief in the capacity and intentions of current system of governance—which became completely anti-liberal again, like in Soviet times—to run the country in the proper way and in accordance with morally appropriate standards and to serve ordinary people but not the kleptocratic caste, offers some hope in a new reincarnation of liberal values. This is the basis for my cautious optimism. Concerning the exact time of practical changes—nobody, including social scientists and professional analysts—can give any reliable forecast. The political dynamic is unpredictable.

ⁱ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four. A novel* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949).

ⁱⁱ See: Alexander Obolonsky, “Why it is So Difficult to Reform Russian Officialdom?” in Don K. Rowney and Eugene Huskey (eds.), *Russian Bureaucracy and the State, Officialdom from Alexander III to Vladimir Putin* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 301-316; Alexander Obolonskii and Aleksey Barabashev, “How to Clean Out the Augean Stable of Our Bureaucracy,” *Russian Politics and Law* 52, no. 2, 2014, pp. 78-79; Alexander V. Obolonsky, “The Crisis of the Bureaucratic State and the Failed Attempts to Overcome it in the Russian Public Service,” *Croatian and Comparative Public Administration* 17, no. 4, 2018, pp. 569-591.

ⁱⁱⁱ Olga Kryshatanovskaya, “Transformatsiia Staroi Nomenklatury v Novuiu Rossiiskuiu Elitu,” *Obshchestvennye nauki i sovremennost'* 1, 1995, p. 65.

^{iv} Olga Savvateeva, *O tekhn, kto nami pravil*, *Izvestiya*, 10 January 1995.

^v Dmitry Travin, “Pochemu ichshut osoby put'... kotorogo net,” in Alexander Obolonsky (ed.), *“Osoby put'” strany. Mify i real'nost'* (Moskva: Mysl' and Liberal Mission, Foundation, 2018), pp. 55-120.

^{vi} The Putin re-election campaign of 2018 is a special question beyond of this topic.