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ON SOME ACTUAL ASPECTS OF THE INTERPRETATION OF THE LIBERAL TRADITION IN RUSSIA¹

ABSTRACT

The article examines the key moments of the transformation of the liberal tradition in Russia in the context of the analysis of the main directions of the transformation of liberal ideological discourse and liberal culture in Western Europe and the United States. The need for such an analysis is primarily determined by the fact that since the early 1990s Western liberal stereotypes have become an ideological basis of the new Russian political elite and the dominant trend in state propaganda. However, the following main fact is often overlooked: in the 20th century, Russian liberalism was compromised twice, so in the short-term the hopes for the revival of liberal ideas are gone. In the West, the liberal tradition has also been in a state of crisis: Western liberalism has been undergoing a very significant transformation that has far-reaching cultural and political implications. In particular, at the turn of the 21st century, a more active role in Western public discourse was taken by the radical neo-conservative versions of an ideology that combined a conservative program of political reforms with a strong libertarian (neoliberal) rhetoric. This ideology is actively used by the ruling circles of the US and Western Europe to influence ideologically the political elites of Russia – as it happened in Central and Eastern Europe during the so-called “velvet revolutions”. At the same time, what came to the fore increasingly clearly and sharply in the late

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twentieth century is anti-liberal thought and criticism that has always evolved in parallel with liberalism itself and that almost never ceases to exist.

Key words: Russia, ideological discourses, liberalism, political culture, political transformation, political theory, postcommunism, anti-liberalism

INTRODUCTION

The history of the emergence and evolution of liberal ideas and policy in Russia is very enlightening as this is the sphere in which the utopian moods and illusions, so characteristic of all Russian ideologies, were particularly dramatic: many times liberalism approached the point at which an idea becomes a reality, yet it failed dismally again and again, defeated by its more successful ideological and political rivals and condemned to the miserable role of ephemeral opposition. The particular historical circumstances and forms of the downfall of national liberal ideology and politics also serve as a testimony to the fact that neither the “liberal international” (либеральный интернационал), which emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries, nor its leaders, who played had a key role in ideological and political discourse in Western Europe and the US, were never inclined to overcome their Russophobic prejudices and global aspirations coupled with regional selfishness in order to provide real and effective support to like-minded Russians.

In the 20th century, Russian liberalism twice compromised itself so badly that there can be hardly any hope for the rebirth of liberal ideas in the nearest future. The contemporary book market is literally flooded with publications whose authors explain in detail – and sometimes quite convincingly – the causes the historical failure of liberalism, hoping, not unreasonably, that the readers will understand them.

The “liberal revolution” that took place in the early 1990s and again – like in 1917 – led the Russian state to an economic disaster, was conducted under the motto of planned demolition of the “Soviet totalitarian empire”, which immediately awoke the worst suspicions about the then-popular national liberal groups, which were associated with conventionality, inertia, theoretical mediocrity, and practical impotence. A question raised again and again in Russian scientific literature is whether the “liberal revolution” in Russia can be considered as a movement whose goal was to restore the political and cultural traditions of the pre-Soviet era, and ultimately to strengthen and further develop the economic and military power of the country. A negative answer to this question is related not only to the very significant fact that the revolution began with intentional downfall of Russian statehood – also those liberals that came to power in the early 1990s presented the concept of returning the country to a world civilization. However, from the very beginning this idea was entirely anti-historical and carried a very specific ideological weight.

Considering all the peculiar turns of its history such as the traditional confrontation with the West, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries imperial Russia became an

inherent part of the economic and political system of Europe. This can be confirmed by the fast development of capitalist relations following the reform of the mid-19th century as well as the system of financial and military alliances between the Russian Empire and Western states at the turn of the 20th century (including the famous French loan that allowed the tsarist Russia to stabilize its financial system and deal with the first revolutionary wave, joining the Triple Entente etc.). But for October 1917, Russia – as one of the victors of World War I – not only would have strengthened its geopolitical position but also in all likelihood would have been able to transform smoothly and quickly into an equal partner for any great power by gradual modernization of its economy and introduction of political reforms. After 1917, while the Soviet Russia opposed the West presenting itself as the stronghold of the “world revolution”, it soon began to restore traditional trade and economic relations with Western partners although it was always considered as a potential aggressor and a source of civil unrest. The victory in World War II and transformation of the USSR into a world superpower naturally strengthened the process of its integration with the world economy even though the states of the West maintained their ideological attitude to what they perceived as the center of the “communist threat”. Considering the above, the concepts proposed by Russian liberals had a different focus, connected with the plan of a radical change to the algorithm of the economic and political development of the country based on Western recipes and reform programs.

In the past, the October Revolution very clearly revealed the utopian character of the liberal program of the political parties that came into power in February 1917. As Nikolai Berdyaev said, *utopias were little known or forgotten, and people mourned their impossibility too much. Yet utopias turned out to be much easier to implement than people thought. And now there is another painful question: how to avoid their ultimate realization. We considered the Bolsheviks to be utopians, out of touch with actual life processes, while the cadets were considered realists. Experience, however, has taught us something different. It was the cadets who turned out to be utopians and visionaries. They dreamed about a kind of a legal system in Russia, about the rights and freedoms of a man and a citizen in Russian conditions. Pointless dreams, unlikely utopias! The Bolsheviks turned out to be actual realists; they did the most, followed the path of the least resistance, they were minimalists, not maximalists. They adapted to the interests and instincts of the masses, to Russian traditions of wielding power. Utopias are feasible, much more feasible than what seemed to be ‘realpolitik’ and what was simply a rationalist calculation of people in the offices.*²

Over the decades of the Soviet rule, the conservative imperial instincts were well-rooted both at the level of ideology and in everyday practice. This strengthened the foundations of Russian conservative traditionalism, and created economic, socio-political, and psychological conditions for continuation of deep traditions of Russian political culture. At the beginning of the 1990s those traditions were again questioned, and

² Н. Бердяев, *Новое средневековье. Размышление о судьбе России и Европы* [The New Middle Ages. Deliberation on the Fate of Russia and Europe], Москва 1990. Translated into English for the purpose of this article.

at this historic moment, which turned out to be a very fertile ground for presenting an alternative program, the Russian state was experiencing a deep crisis of values resulting from total disorientation of social consciousness, which in turn was a logical result of the failure of perestroika, initiated by Gorbachev.

A question arises naturally: to what extent does the political philosophy of liberalism share the blame with liberal politicians who at different times tried to implement it in Russia? Or will the country still experience the “greatest paradox of Russia’s fate”, which Nikolai Berdyaev so aptly characterized by stating that *liberal ideas, notions of law as well as social reforms turned out to be utopian in Russia. However, Bolshevism turned out to be least utopian and most realistic, most fitting the entire situation in Russia in 1917 and that for Russia, communism turned out to be an inevitable fate, an internal moment of the fate of the Russian nation.*³

POLITICAL METAMORPHOSES OF WESTERN LIBERALISM

The answer to the above questions can be found for example by comparing Russia to the contemporary Western liberal states, which have undergone the period of industrial modernization and at the turn of the 21st century entered the post-industrial era. In Great Britain, which in the 19th century became a laboratory where the principles of liberalism successfully passed the test of history, as well as in many other countries of Western Europe and the United States, it is commonly thought that these principles are the foundations of economic efficiency and the stability of democratic institutions and administration. Thus if the program of economic and political liberalization fails – as it did in post-communist Russia – it is the ideological preferences of the participants in numerous debates that determine to a great extent the approach to the analysis of the reasons why liberalism was ineffective in social consciousness. Yet all the methods currently used to explain this phenomenon can be traced to the two main concepts: either liberal principles are not universal, or the historical features of the socio-political and economic development of the country (“the Russian way”) as well as the Russian mentality, shaped in specific conditions, make it impossible to implement those liberal principles in the nearest future. Furthermore, the majority of those who subscribe to the latter point of view – both scientists and active politicians – continuously emphasize that the main proof supporting their standpoint is the absence of a Western-style legal culture in Russia – an idea comprehensively justified in the early 20th century by the authors of the famous *Vekhi* collection (Rus. Вехи, i.e. Landmarks).⁴

In the history of Russian philosophical and political thought, the above questions reappeared continuously in a variety of forms during disputes between supporters of

³ Idem, *Истоки и смысл русского коммунизма* [The Beginning and Meaning of the Russian Communism], Москва 1990, p. 93.

⁴ *Манифесты русского либерализма. Проблемы идеализма. Вехи. Из глубины* [Manifestos of the Russian Idealism. The Problems of Idealism. Milestones. De Profundis], ed. B.B. Сапов, Москва 2009.

liberalism and its main opponents from the mid-18th century until the end of the 20th century. However, a proper analysis of those disputes depends on the ability to formulate an initial model of classification that can be used to develop a scientifically acceptable typology of Russian liberalism that unifies historical approaches with purely theoretical ones. The search for a solution to this problem is complicated by the extremely broad range of scientific and philosophical interpretations of the very concept of “liberalism”, of historical sources and the semantic structure of liberal ideology.

The scientific and philosophical literature on liberalism is vast: a researcher's life may be too short for even a superficial study of all monographs and articles that have been published since the 1950s. Yet even a brief look at the published texts can lead to very specific conclusions that are hardly reassuring: there is still no universal typology of liberalism. The division include e.g. numerous spheres of life and culture – economic, political, and social – or intellectual activity – philosophy, history, politics. Such classification can also use regions and states or the historical stages of the evolution of a civic thought. In his somewhat recent analysis, M. Freedmen truthfully and wittily noticed: *There is no single, unambiguous thing called liberalism. All the liberalisms that have existed, and that exist, select – deliberately or unconsciously – certain items from an accumulated and crowded liberal repertoire and leave others out, both because some elements are incompatible with others and because intellectual fashions and practices change. As a consequence, a host of belief systems and theories nest under the heading liberalism, none of which can contain all the possibilities – the ideas and the political arrangements – that the term in its maximal but hypothetical fullness can encompass, or that liberal political practices have encompassed over time and across space.*⁵

As rightly noted by E. Fawcett, *Liberalism has no foundation myth or year of birth. Although its intellectual sources go back as far as energy or curiosity will take you, it arose as a practice of politics in the years after 1815 across the Euro-Atlantic world, but nowhere significantly before. Liberalism responded to a novel condition of society energized by capitalism and shaken by revolution in which for better or worse material and ethical change now appeared ceaseless.*⁶ However, significant differences in formation of liberal cultures and traditions began to appear at the early stage. In contrast to the United States, in Europe the evolution of liberal tradition turned out to be much more complex and contradictory: *“much of the tradition of liberalism was accepted but its name became confined in the minds of many to the elements which were rejected. Many of those who called themselves liberals, as in the United States, disavowed significant parts of the tradition. Certain elements of liberalism, particularly the appreciation of the material well-being of individuals, entered into combination with the tradition which had been animated and developed as a negative response to the failure of liberalism to raise the remnant minority of the population out of poverty [...] The tradition of European liberalism came under severe criticism in intellectual circles in the latter part of the nineteenth century because of the discrepancy*

⁵ M. Freedmen, *Liberalism. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2015, p. 5.

⁶ E. Fawcett, *Liberalism. The Life of an Idea*, Princeton 2014, p. XII; cf.: P.W. Kahn, *Putting Liberalism in Its Place*, Princeton 2005.

between its predicted benefits and failures to produce those benefits.⁷ Thus the West saw gradual formation of groups called by Shills “collectivistic liberals”, ideologically close to democratic socialists.⁸

Such ideological metamorphoses could not avoid extreme “pragmatization” of the approaches to defining the very concept of liberalism, frequently attributing a purely utilitarian character to it. *Liberalism, it might be said*, Thomas Magnell notes, *is not what it used to be. The term ‘liberal’ has come to stand for something approaching a free use of power, especially by politicians ready to promote programs with other, though not unprecedented for terms tending to the honorific. In any event, verbal appropriation people’s money. How the term has come to be appropriated by partisans favoring expropriation is curious only adds to the importance of safeguarding against encroachments on individual freedoms.*⁹ Recognizing the validity of this analysis, one may draw the following conclusion: the general evolutionary trend in liberal politics and ideology can be perceived as a process of abandoning the classical tradition of John Stuart Mill and Benjamin Constant as well as its gradual transformation, considered by many contemporary critical thinkers as full degeneration.

However, at the end of the 20th century, some theoreticians, including the most eminent ones, still were of the opinion that – judging the general balance of historical successes and failures – liberalism was more stable historically and politically than e.g. socialism. As noted by Gerald Gaus, *in light of the alarm – indeed dismay – of liberals throughout much of the first part of the twentieth century, liberals at the advent of the next century may understandably feel entitled to celebrate. The twentieth century was a surprisingly liberal century. Liberalism has apparently vanquished socialism, the rival that so attracted but also worried Hobhouse and Dewey. Consensus on the preeminence of the liberal ideals of liberty and markets appears well-nigh universal. To a large extent what is today called ‘socialism’ is a sort of left-wing liberalism. Today’s democratic socialists, arguing for a generous welfare state and a healthy democratic life within an essentially private-property market society are much closer to the new liberalisms of Hobhouse and J.A. Hobson than to the socialism of Karl Marx or even that of G.D.H. Cole. Indeed, so dominant is liberal thought that many socialists adopt some version of John Rawls’s liberal theory of social justice. The difference between ‘egalitarian liberal’ and socialist theories of justice is often impossible to discern.*¹⁰ Ultimately it was, however, a pyrrhic victory; at the turn of the 21st century, the most active role in Western political discourse was taken over by radical neo-conservative versions of this ideology, combining a conservative program

⁷ E. Shills, *Tradition*, Chicago 1981, p. 224.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁹ J. Narveson, S. Dimock (eds.), *Liberalism. New Essays on Liberal Themes*, Dordrecht 2000, p. 1; cf.: J. Christman, J. Anderson (eds.), *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism. New Essays*, Cambridge 2005; W. Thompson, *Ideologies in the Age of Extremes. Liberalism, Conservatism, Communism, Fascism 1914-91*, New York 2011.

¹⁰ G. Gaus, “Ideological Dominance through Philosophical Confusion: Liberalism in the Twentieth Century”, in M. Freedman (ed.), *Reassessing Political Ideologies. The Durability of Dissent*, London 2001, p. 14; cf.: A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, Notre Dame, Ind. 1988, p. 392.

of political reforms with clear libertarian (neo-liberal) rhetoric, which was actively used by the groups ruling in the United States and Western Europe to influence ideologically the political elites of Central and Eastern Europe during the so-called “velvet revolutions”. *The Central European revolution*, R. Beiner wrote, *was hailed in the liberal, market-oriented West in a self-congratulatory mood. The self-congratulation was thought to be warranted because, first, the West had “won” a certain kind of war that had been waged in the preceding four decades, and second, because the economic dynamism of liberal societies was deemed to be the decisive mark of superiority of the West over the East in the winning of this war.*¹¹ Yet at the same time the contradictions of contemporary liberalism were becoming ever clearer – politically, ethically and culturally. *Another deep paradox of the modern liberal dispensation is that while it enforces a highly contracted vision of the dignity and uniqueness of the individual within his or her particular subgroup, it simultaneously offers a collective way of life (“Americanism”) that is rapidly expanding to encircle the globe [...] Liberalism, no less than socialism, feudalism, or any other social order, is a global dispensation – that is, a way of life that excludes other ways of life.*¹²

As proved by the experience from the Western ideological discourse in the second half of the 20th century, the inertia of fundamental skepticism towards the theoretical and practical opportunities offered by liberal ideology turned out to be so powerful that at the beginning an alliance of scientists and philosophers against what they called “hegemonic liberalism” only continued to gain force. One of the turning points in this process was the development of a specific philosophy and “philosophy of history” of anti-liberalism in numerous works of economists, sociologists, philosophers, and political scientists who criticized liberalism not only with regard to contemporary reality but also reaching for a long tradition of eschewing liberal philosophy – a tradition dating back to the Enlightenment. *Hegemonic liberals*, notes S. Wolf-Devine, *wish to extend liberal principles to every sphere of life, even private associations such as the family and churches. When pushed all the way, of course, hegemonic liberalism ceases to be liberal at all, since it fails to accord any respect to the preferences and consciences of noncompliant persons.*¹³

The anti-liberal view on the historical process assumes that from the point of view of its opponents, the process of liberalization – and liberalism itself, considered as a direction in economic and political thought, and practice – always developed along the rising curve, in the spirit of Francis Fukuyama’s book *The End of History and the Last Man*.¹⁴ Its development from the mid-18th century was actually progressive, yet towards the end of the 19th century, the vectors of historical development rapidly turned in the direction unfavourable for liberalism. Some economists (e.g. David Henderson and

¹¹ R. Beiner, *What’s the Matter with Liberalism?*, Berkeley 1995, p. VIII.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹³ C. Wolf-Devine, “The Hegemonic Liberalism of Susan Moller Okin”, in Ch. Wolfe (ed.), *Liberalism at the Crossroads. An Introduction to Contemporary Liberal Political Theory and Its Critics. Second Edition*, 2nd ed., Lahnam 2003, p. 42.

¹⁴ F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York 1992.

others) perceive the very idea of neoliberal hegemony as a propaganda myth; they stress that the policy of British neo-Conservatives in 1979-1990 was only partially liberal and involved only some sectors of production while in other areas of social policy (such as science) it had purely a dirigistic character.¹⁵ At the beginning of the 21st century, the characteristic majority attitudes towards economic issues are anti-liberal.¹⁶ Anti-liberalism at the beginning of the new millennium differs in many aspects from similar trends that emerged a quarter of a century earlier. Henderson identifies its three contemporary, very significant differentiating features: 1. increased number of supporters for the Russian- and/or Chinese-style economic policy; 2. rapidly increasing criticism of neo-liberal reforms; 3. growing number of states, groups and associations who consider themselves to be victims of neo-con policy and support governments actively intervening to regulate economy and other spheres of public life.¹⁷ In other words, anti-liberalism as a direction of social thought and policy is by no means dead.

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF RUSSIAN LIBERALISM

Historically conditioned transformations of liberalism that have been occurring in the West for at least three centuries are of fundamental importance for the contemporary researchers of Russian liberalism – primarily because many of the above described evolutionary paths of the Western liberal and anti-liberal traditions were recreated in Russia. They followed the same loop of history's spiral and at the same time they clearly had historical characteristics. The latter turned out to be so complex that attempts to develop a typology of Russian liberalism, numerous in contemporary Russian literature, as a rule turned out to be either incomplete or seriously flawed. Hence the frequent temptation to give way to the Western scientists who are familiar with both the origins of the Russian liberal tradition and today's philosophical debates. One of them undoubtedly is Klaus von Beyme. In his work *Politische Theorien in Russland 1789-1945* (Political Theories in Russia 1789-1945)¹⁸ he noted that, in comparative perspective, out of all the variety of concepts produced by Russian theorists, what gained international interest were only the right-wing Christian religious thought and the left-wing socialist and anarchist thought. Russian liberals were ignored, as it is difficult to answer the question whether the traditional Western categories of liberalism/radicalism, conservatism, socialism/anarchism/communism are generally applicable to Russia.¹⁹ In Russia, during the reign of Alexander [I], like in Germany and Spain, there existed prerequisites for "bureaucratic liberalism" (*Beamtenliberalismus*). M.M. Speranskiy (1808-1812) as the

¹⁵ D. Henderson, *Anti-Liberalism 2000. The Rise of New Millennium Collectivism*, London 2001, pp. 8-10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁸ K. von Beyme, *Politische Theorien in Russland, 1789-1945*, Wiesbaden 2001.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

head statesman presented the reform bills to the tsar. Constitutional monarchy, which in Western Europe led to a compromise between revolution and monarchical principle, could not emerge in Russia due to the lack of conditions facilitating the development of national representation. The *zemstvo* [local government] system had received no chance before 1864, and until 1906 the first Duma did not include representatives of the entire nation.²⁰ The development of the *zapadniks*' [Westernizers'] thoughts only sometimes transformed into liberalism. Hegelian ideas acquired liberal character only in right-wing Hegelian thought, for example that of Chicherin.²¹ The ideas of Chicherin, Kovalevsky, Kistiakovsky, and Struve are collected in a dedicated chapter "Constitutional Liberals"; a significant part of them, in Beyme's opinion evolved later in liberal-conservative direction. He notes that in Russia it was impossible for liberal conservatism in Chicherin's version to prosper as it had in Prussia. As soon as the liberals tentatively requested a constitution, they were dismissed from the government service. And yet all of them turned conservative. Ultra-reactionaries such as Katkov and Pobedonostsev started once as liberals. However, liberals did not move too far to the right; they wanted to still be able to maintain dialogue in order to support the autocracy.²²

Anyway, the matter of defining and classifying Russian liberalism was extremely confusing from the start and remains so even nowadays. Today, like in the 19th century, the opponents and supporters of liberalism are involved in endless disputes as to who in Russia should be called a "true liberal".

One of the most important features of Russian ideological discourse was that its evolution often resembled a contradiction of the famous thesis of K. Mannheim which he formulated in his famous work *Ideology and Utopia: In its original form, conservative mentality was [...] not concerned with ideas. It was its liberal opponent who, so to speak, forced it into this arena of conflict. The peculiar characteristic of intellectual development seems to lie precisely in the fact that the most recent antagonist dictates the tempo and the form of the battle. Certainly there is little truth in the so-called progressive idea that only the new has the prospect for further existence, and that all else dies off gradually. Rather, the older, driven by the newer, must continuously transform itself and must accommodate itself to the level of the most recent opponent.*²³

In contrast, during the 18th-20th century in Russia liberalism developed as a reaction to the attacks coming from much stronger conservatives, and later from socialist opponents and competitors. This situation was predominantly determined not so much by the specifics of internal "political mentality" as by the specifics of socio-political structure which created an appropriate type of consciousness. As noted by Alexandr Gradvodsky, an eminent theoretician of Russian liberal conservatism, *mutual relations [...] of*

²⁰ Ibid., p. 8.

²¹ Ibid., p. 29.

²² Ibid., pp. 40-41; cf. A. Walicki, *The Flow of Ideas. Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to the Religious-Philosophical Renaissance*, Frankfurt am Main 2015, pp. 447-449.

²³ K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia. An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, London 1998, p. 208.

two elements, the estates and the bureaucracy, should have been determined in a different way than in the West, that is, giving primacy to bureaucracy, to the leaders of administration [...]. The general legislation in the 19th c. facilitated the growth of administrative governance and bureaucracy.²⁴ The system of governance control and administrative supervision creates a spiritual atmosphere in which liberal ideas obviously could not develop. The civic voice was not heard anywhere; it was absent from a court trial and the forms of the process of law; it was absent in the press, oppressed to the breaking point; it was absent from institutions where all estates could find advice to their benefit; the very social institutions were absent. In the conditions of ceremonial, formal state, every indivisible element was condemned to live alone, separately, without building social bonds with other people, growing up outside the circle of social issues, drawing no strong impressions from those social matters that shape a civic activist. On the contrary, everybody has locked themselves in their shells, escaping into their internal world and, out of all social influences, they experienced only those of a close circle of similarly thinking people. In such isolation every worldview should be purely subjective; no idea can be raised to the rank of a social principle; it cannot be verified by actual social needs and processed accordingly to the latter.²⁵

Gradually, in Russian social thought there formed a super-powered intellectual field, somewhat resembling a black hole: not only did it swallow all positive features of liberal philosophy and culture but also the oppositions, contradictions, misunderstandings, and variations of almost all schools of thought have been practically erased, from Slavophilia (славянофильство) and *zapadnichestvo* (западничество, Westernizing) to orthodox monarchism and radical socialism – a destruction of all good impulses, reasonable scientific judgements, and ethical actions. Here the dominant role was played by the concept of anti-national nature of liberalism, where the “people” were set in opposition to the “educated society”, “intelligentsia” or “public”. The outer contours of the anti-liberal field were first delimited by Pyotr Chaadayev, and later by intellectuals of entirely different character and cultural affiliations, such as Alexander Herzen, Fyodor Tyutchev, Vladimir Meshchersky, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, and many others. The general tone was set by the features of liberal mentality, very vividly drawn e.g. by ultra-conservative Prince Meshchersky. *It is entirely clear, he wrote, that the word ‘liberalism’ has a very definite – though most absurd – image, and we can attempt to list the entire simple catechism of our ‘liberalism’, which can be easily understood even by those soft in the head in its uncomplicated and seductive simplicity. There is no need for knowledge of life, experience, convictions, talents or practical knowledge – it is a talisman owing to which people deprived of all of the above can write volumes.*²⁶ As noted by Alexandr Gradovsky,

²⁴ А.Д. Градовский, *Собрание сочинений* [Works], ed. А.А. Шахматов, vol. 6, Санкт-Петербург 1901, pp. 290-291. Translated for the article.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 357.

²⁶ В.П. Мещерский, *За великую Россию. Против либерализма* [For the Great Russia. Against Liberalism], eds. Ю.В. Климаков, О.А. Платонов, Москва 2010, p. 331. Evidently Prince Meshchersky, who in his insults against Russian intelligentsia (which included both educated nobles and bureaucrats) included also accusation of treason against the nation, was the forefather of the famous formula included by Erich Remarque’s novel *Arc de Triomphe*: “Vaterlandsverrat als eine Art von Patriotismus”

the aim of such type of characteristics is to convince the entire Russian nation that *every liberal is a man of the West; ergo, every liberal is a fool and a degenerate, who betrays his national principles, his country, the faith of his fathers. It is as if a uniate [a Russian Greek Catholic] subordinated to the spiritual authority of another person, observing only some forms of Orthodoxy. The conclusion is that all the aspirations of liberals focus on one ultimate goal – distortion of the entire Russian way of life in a Western way. There is no further 'analysis'. The word 'liberal' has no other interpretation. But is this not enough? Does this word have any independent meaning besides Occidentalist aspirations? We do not get such an independent – so to speak, non-fictional – definition. Thus willingly or not, we have to take the path of collecting pieces of evidence – or better said, accusations – against liberals*".²⁷

One of the consequences of the turn of the 20th century in Russian social thought was the full emergence of a polemic tradition which hardly can be called a creative debate, philosophical dialogue or political discussion – it resembled rather an exchange of stereotypical insults, which the representatives of opposite ideologies traded constantly (and, as Pushkin would say “so to speak, mechanically”) for decades, giving their contemporaries and descendants a constant sense of *déjà vu*. In reaction to the severity of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's opinions in his *Writer's Diary* directed against liberals and his pathos-filled calls for “reconciliation” and re-discovering the strength coming from the deep, Christian roots of the Russian nation (these notions clearly revealed the influence of ideas formulated by Slavophiles and Tyutchev), the theoreticians of liberal conservatism Kavelin and Gradovsky responded calmly, firmly, and quite rightly: *We Russians are in reality half-wild people with very weak foundations of culture; “The social ideas of our people are still at the stage of forming and growth. We still have to work on ourselves to become worthy of the title of a great nation. There is still too much falsity, the residue of centuries-long slavery, in [the nation] for it to demand worship and, what is more, to demand even that the whole Europe should convert to the true path, as foreseen by Mr Dostoyevsky.*²⁸

At the beginning of the 20th century, the fundamental difference between Russia and Western Europe or the US was the fact that the process of forming political parties in the era of the first Russian revolution was to a great extent determined by political radicals: the ultra-revolutionary tactics of the left wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP, or the Bolsheviks) and the Socialist Revolutionary Party (the Esers) were opposed by the ultra-reactionary Union of the Russian People (Союз русского народа), whose leaders appealed to the tsar's autocracy as the only force able to deal with “Marxist troublemakers” and the leaders of the “Freemason plot” ruling the State Duma. In such conditions the ideas and policy of Russian liberal parties,

(Betrayal of the motherland as a form of patriotism). Ibid., pp. 321-322, 336-338; E.M. Remarque, *Arc de Triomphe*. Roman, Köln 1988, p. 311.

²⁷ А.Д. Градовский, *Собрание сочинений*, vol. 6, pp. 394-395.

²⁸ К. Кавелин, *Государство и община* [State and Community], eds. В.Б. Трофимова, О.А. Платонов, Москва 2013, p. 1017; А.Д. Градовский, *Собрание сочинений*, vol. 6, p. 381.

aiming to establish a constitutional regime in Russia, seemed visionary; as Max Weber foresaw in his famous letters to Russian liberals, they were also destined to fail unless they moved to more conservative positions. *The more socialist the radicalism in Russia became*, noted Karl von Beyme, *the more the liberals turned towards conservatism. 'Liberal conservatism' (Liberal-Konservatismus) was [used as] a favourite characterization (Selbstbeschreibung) of this conception [by thinkers] from Chicherin to Struve. In increasingly consolidated autocracy, the status-quo conservatism (ein Status-quo-Konservatismus) could not succeed. Even conservatism was turning into opposition because it was more and more permeated with the intention to be romantic and Slavophilic and to a great extent alienated from the state. Hence within such a system, liberal conservatives should take the role of conservatism. Struve once noted that the Russians too long had remained in stagnation to afford being conservative.*²⁹

It seems that all those circumstances did not offer clear understanding of what liberalism is in Russian reality; on the contrary, they further hindered solving a fundamental issue: *Either one or the other: is Russia actually a country where everything happens topsy-turvy, or is there a certain falsity in the very assessment of our subject?*³⁰

CONCLUSIONS

The aforementioned theoretical insights into the evolution of Russian liberalism are constantly reimagined in contemporary political and philosophical discourses, and remain valid as they resemble the truly tangible process, shaped by the Western European and American background of the second half of the 20th century. First and foremost, the process results in fundamental consensus regarding universal political values – equality, civil rights, democratic procedures of decision-making, based on recognition of the existing social and political institutions. The followed path is focused on recognizing the progressing stability, mutual permeation of views on socio-economic issues, presented by members of various social classes, as well as on gradual disappearance of conflicts.³¹

Naturally, in the post-communist Russia of the 1990s, no scientist familiar with post-war history may seriously speak about civil society and ideological consensus. From its very beginning, the Soviet system was a replica in the new loop of historical bureaucratic spiral – the “commanding” state and political administration, well pictured by Gradovsky. In the majority of post-communist states, the idea of civil freedom was initially trusted in the new state apparatus and the new bureaucracy. As inherent to its nature, these social structures clearly contrasted with Western traditions. The reasons for new, slightly liberalized paroxysm of traditional bureaucracy

²⁹ K. von Beyme, *Politische Theorien in Russland...*, p. 55.

³⁰ А.Д. Градовский, *Собрание сочинений*, vol. 6, p. 354.

³¹ K. von Beyme, *Liberalismus. Theorien des Liberalismus und Radikalismus im Zeitalter der Ideologien, 1789-1945*, Wiesbaden 2013, pp. 29-33.

matrix were, naturally, varied. Russia, with its patriarchal, monarchist, and totalitarian (communist) political tradition (inscribed into a dogmatic pseudo-liberal project), turned out to be ideologized and distant from reality. Anti-totalitarian orientation of this idea mixed with the traditional anti-communist rhetoric led to its distortion and camouflaging the true process of deterioration of the Soviet society, directed towards establishing a neo-nomenclature state, which strived for ideological mutations of liberalism and democracy, but not an actual development of civil society as a counterbalance for the state.

It is beyond doubt that the Western variation of modernization and the virtually idyllic image of the West, which once was so attractive for numerous generations of Russian liberals, got almost exhausted. In the contemporary world, there are new alternatives both for the liberal, cosmopolitan multiculturalism, dominant in the recent decades, and for the *cul-the-sac* of development taken by post-communist elite of neo-nomenclature in the 1990s aimed at establishing full control over national resources and political processes. The pseudo-reforms resulted in fully logical re-establishment of structural elements which so much resemble the not so distant past.

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