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RUSSIAN EDUCATION AT THE NEW FRONTIER OF EPOCHS (DIALECTICS OF THE PAST AND THE FUTURE). WHAT DOES RUSSIA NEED?

Introduction

The Chinese curse “may you live in interesting times” springs to mind. Our world is very different today due to a pandemic and a special military operation. Our students will inherit the current changed reality, one which – it must be admitted – is not as comfortable as it used to be.

We see western propaganda, led by the UK’s Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary. Russophobia is encouraged, together with widespread economic sanctions and belligerent actions with arms supplies to those who do not support our way of life. As a result, the world in future will treat our young people differently.

Russians, as we all know, do not surrender. We might say – “let them do their worst, we will survive.” And of course, we will. But we cannot be passive. Instead, we must take, an active life position.² We cannot let those outside our borders dictate how we should live, forcing us to exist according to their terms. The famous programme «Их нравы» shows us what those terms and standards can be. Colour revolutions and gender freedoms are not part of our culture. So, what can be done?

The European Space

This has significantly changed since the post war 1947 Dunkirk Treaty between the UK and France. The European collective expanded with the Brussels Treaty, the Modified Brussels Treaty, then again with the North Atlantic Treaty (with its 12 original signatories), and yet further with the subsequent 18 further State accessions to NATO membership.

The 1948 Vandenberg Resolution of the US Congress is the heart of American commitment to military intervention for mutual defence of European territories, which enabled the establishment of NATO. This Resolution also lies at the heart of the exertion of influence, opinion making and subtle control over these territories and peoples.

In the words of F. A. Lukyanov:

“February 2022 marked the end of a large-scale historical experiment aimed to test the hypothesis that Russia may be included in the international order created by the leading Western powers without its participation but providing certain room for its development in accordance with the rules established by the leaders of this order. The result is negative.”³

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² Colloquially this was referred to as having an “активная жизненная позиция,” or “АЖП”

³ Lukyanov F. A. Old Thinking for Our Country and the World // Russia in Global Affairs. 2022. № 20 (1). P. 5–10. DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2022-20-1-5-10.

As to the effects of this – an interesting person to listen to is Nikita Mikhalkov.⁴ For the foreigner, he offers many rich insights into Russian thinking and culture. His famous programme “Besogon,” has the ikon of the famous 4th century saint, implying driving out demons, and eliminating false thinking. The famous biblical words “They have eyes but do not see – ears, but do not hear”⁵ can be easily applied to those abroad who look to Russia and Russians.

The interesting website “Have Fun with Russian” has a useful bilingual piece by him in which he states (about Russians):

“...we understand that we will never be liked. We are different. Our faith is different. Our ideas about good and evil are different. Not because we are better, but we are different... we must be powerful, independent, armed, know our place and understand for sure that we will not give it to anyone. And that should be the basis for us. It seems to me that the basis of our existence should be only the national interests of our country and our peoples.”

It is to be regretted that the creation of post war European space ignored the wide gulf between their thinking, aspirations, and culture – and those of the peoples of the Soviet Union – simply imposing their own order. One might call it a permanently expanding collective colonialism. This is the backdrop to the current situation

Effects on Russia

Some ideologies are seductive, admired for qualities outside one’s own experiences. Liberals will be easily seduced. The Bologna education system experiment is one such example which Russia has been tempted to explore. This exploration recalibrated and redefined Russian higher education and its diplomas to a model for western integration. The result is not good. For example, we have seen an absolute dilution of the 5-year qualification of Specialist, and a simultaneous retrograde shift in the provision of school education.

The general role of education, in the words of Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation N. P. Patrushev is to:

“develop logical thinking, give knowledge and the ability to make independent decisions.”⁶

It is impossible to disagree with him that children today are taught to put crosses in boxes. Those of us who are parents who supervise homework, see an increasing tendency towards box-ticking, and a move away from tasks which develop the person and their intellect.

Mr. Patrushev also draws our attention to the fact that education cannot be digitalised – because it needs the development of personal intellectual and spiritual qualities. These are not delivered through online zoom sessions but only by close interpersonal interactions between student and teacher.

⁴ Famous Soviet and Russian filmmaker.

⁵ Mark 8:17.

⁶ See: Глава Совбеза призвал вернуть советский опыт образования. Что не так с нынешней системой? // Накануне.ру. 2022. 31 мая. URL: <https://www.nakanune.ru/articles/118751/>.

One of my strongest impressions living here is the film culture of the Soviet era, notably Lenfilm and Mosfilm. Hollywood compares unfavourably. With a few notable exceptions, our films are richer in the depiction of human interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal strengths are a bedrock of our society, and we must capitalise on them.

Educational Funding

O. N. Smolin¹ reveals some uncomfortable news in the article referred to above. Have we really slipped down the UNESCO and World Bank league table of education funding as a percentage of GDP from 98th to 120th out of 193? In Soviet times, education spending was 7% of GDP. Current data is hard to come by, but in the recent words of the OECD:

*“The Russian Federation was among the ten OECD countries that spent the lowest proportion of GDP on primary to tertiary educational institutions. In 2018, the Russian Federation spent 3.4% of GDP on educational institutions, which is 1.5 percentage points lower than the OECD average.”*²

In my view, the amount of money available to education is a matter for the Security Council, and I think we should all support the Secretary who is highlighting the dangers of a population poorly equipped intellectually to undertake all necessary tasks required of them. Moves to reverse this, and improve the population bring another Soviet achievement to mind,

Electrification

The re-emergence of central strategic economic planning³ brings a return to Soviet thinking that the economy and its sectors can be positively controlled for societal benefit. This idea was often ridiculed in the West, notably the so called “Five Year Plans,” born as it was of communist ideology, something unacceptable.

Yet the idea of central planning was exactly mirrored in their economic recovery plans, such as the 1948 American Marshall Plan (aka the European Recovery Plan). At its end, there was a significant increase in European agricultural and industrial production, and as a significant improvement in the balance of trade and related “dollar gap.” Proof that central planning can work. The Plan was oiled by \$15 billion USD of financial (and no doubt ideological) contribution (simultaneously with the Vandenberg Resolution noted above enabling the commitment to American military intervention in Europe). There is no such thing as a free lunch, and with this Plan there was undoubtedly significant ideological penetration with values from abroad into places where hitherto they did not exist. And which expanded increasingly eastwards.

Any study of central planning must start with Lenin’s “Electrification of the Soviet Union” programme. Delegates here will be familiar with GOELRO,⁴ the first Soviet plan for national economic recovery and development. There is a well-known statement from these times that “Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the country.”

¹ First Deputy Chairman of the Education Committee of the State Duma.

² Russian Federation // OECD ilibrary : [website]. URL: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/7659c2a2-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/7659c2a2-en> (last accessed: 3 May 2022).

³ Федеральный закон от 28 июня 2014 г. № 172-ФЗ «О стратегическом планировании в Российской Федерации» // КонсультантПлюс : [сайт]. URL: http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_164841/.

⁴ GOELRO – State Commission for the Electrification of Russia.

Re-Electrification

We surely do not want unnecessary confrontation, but we can no longer be seduced by illusions of democracy and liberalism. Nor should we accept living in a space (both physical and intellectually) with boundaries (both geopolitical and cultural) that become increasingly threatened year on year.

From these threads above, I derive my opinion that we need a “Re-Electrification” of society, using education reforms to create the essential tool needed for the “active life position” to reestablish a balance between our way of life and that of the West. In particular, I would like to see a return to the Soviet education system, with a refocusing onto dialectical training to challenge and repel that which exists outside our borders that is unacceptable to us. Those whom I meet who came through this Soviet system are cultured, intelligent, questioning and capable. But what do I mean by dialectical training?

Dialectical training

Dialectics is substantially more than mere debate. At its heart is a discourse between two parties who hold different viewpoints about a topic, where both wish to discern the truth through reasoned logical argument. It requires openness of mind mutual respect, and inquisitiveness. Unlike debate – beloved in the west as a symbol of democracy – it excludes subjective matters, such as emotions or rhetoric. There is a mutual wish to discern the truth – not simply force acceptance of one party’s position upon the other. Currently, the imposition of unilateral (and illegal) sanctions⁵ shows a clear wish to impose a view, not engage in a dialectical discourse.

In my own sphere, the use of dialectical methods is found in international moot court law competitions. These involve a case, with legal issues to be researched and argued in writing and orally. Students do this for both Claimant and Respondent on the same facts – and must defend, with deep legal reasoning, their points of view. These are done in the student’s free time, and payment for the teacher – if at all – ignores the amount of time invested to support students. Nonetheless, Russian teams regularly do very well. My own university and faculty under our Director Y. A. Alimova has recorded two first places in the international Jessup Russian rounds in the last five years, and twice a placement in the top 16 (out of 540) in the international Willem Vis competition. Both are English language moots. The faculty also has other significant placements and wins in Russian moots. These competitions are fiercely competitive and intellectually rigorous.

Languages

Should be studying foreign languages as part of education in Russia? We must be equipped to take our battles abroad in the language of our opposing teams. It should be noted that our Foreign Minister speaks English fluently, and our President speaks fluent German. In the sphere of high political global interactions, our leaders and those who support them clearly understand the thinking behind the well-known quotation:

⁵ Many of the sanctions measures involve new laws that make certain things illegal, that were once legal – such as ownership of property and other assets. The new laws are then used to justify theft of State and individual property. The jurisprudence of retrospective laws and their illegality is well known. We hear that legal actions by Russia against these sanctions are already in progress (see for example: Медведев заявил, что Россия подаст в суды из-за санкций // Коммерсантъ. 2022. 6 апр. URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5294610>).

“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart.”¹

For young lawyers, the new reality is pregnant with opportunity. We must be able to challenge illegal actions taken against us, abroad and in the language of the oppressors. In particular, the field of State Investment Arbitration is an important one, made more so by actions being taken by hostile States against investors which may be the Russian state, or a Russian entity. There is an international moot competition on this topic, the Frankfurt State Investment

Competition² that will help prepare students to a dialectic ability in this field.

Conclusions

We must reelectrify our society with rich interpersonal Soviet era type education, with an emphasis of developing effective dialectics. Some fields, such as law need this as a core skill. Other fields need it to support and develop citizens to a level of intellectual ability to meet the tasks demanded of them – including defending our way of life whenever called upon to do so.

¹ President Nelson Mandela.

² I have taught this subject at Masters level to both Russian and international students. The field is complex – the standard textbook runs to over 1200 pages. I am thinking of taking a group of students through this competition in 2022–2023, a competition that we have never yet entered so far. But it is a field that our young students will benefit from being capable within.