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## EUROPEAN CULTURE – A ROAD OF SORROWS

An adult European 30–40 years ago and now are people from different realities. However, not much has changed in the history books over this time, considering the history of Europe until the second half of the twentieth century. School textbooks in the countries “from Lisbon to Vladivostok” are essentially the products of the same framework cultural matrix, perhaps the most diverse and controversial in the world. Culture is one facet of “long history” – the history of structures that change extremely slowly. Human behavior and perception of the world have never kept up with the pace of technological development. This is especially true about identity of every nation and individual, including the cultural environment in which we are embedded from childhood and which pervades us. This environment is vastly differentiated in terms of culture: high and low, elitist and popular, refined and consumerist, local and global.

Culture reflects the course of history and shapes it in many ways. In the 1980s, Europe was still a postwar phenomenon, a part of the world not only divided by the bipolar epoch, but also shaped by the Great Victory of 1945. However, Europe was already deeply involved economically and technologically in the transition from industri-

al to post-industrial society, from modern to postmodern era, and in culture as well. In 1980, Alvin Toffler’s “The Third Wave,” a futurology classic about the post-industrial world, was published.<sup>4</sup> Yet the real watershed was between the 1980s and 1990s, when after the end of the Cold War and passing of the Soviet Union, the world began to turn global in terms of trade, market relations, finance, politics, and, last but not least, culture.

The words of E. Husserl pronounced in 1935 apply to all of the Greater Europe: “No matter how hostile the European nations may be to one another, they still have an inner kinship of spirit that pervades them all and transcends national differences.”<sup>5</sup> The Europeans – heirs to Greek-Roman and Christian civilizations – were raised, both before and after 1945, on the classical examples and works of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, the literature, poetry, painting and architecture of the New Age – the “golden era” for Russia of the 19th century. Perhaps the century before last was the peak of European culture, at least in its “high” form. Then European humanism was nearly trampled and destroyed by two world wars. The bipolar world has largely, but not completely politicized European culture.

The end of the Cold War between the 1980s and 1990s smoothed out some of the contradictions within the Old World – inter alia, due to the de-ideologization of culture. One of the symbols of the new era was the return of writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn to the new Russia in 1994 – 20 years after he was banished from the Soviet Union. Solzhenitsyn pondered on the renewed union of the three Slavic republics – Russia, Belarus, Ukraine – and Kazakhstan.<sup>6</sup> Another iconic figure banished from the USSR for anti-Soviet views was philosopher Alexander Zinoviev. From 1978 to 1999, he lived in Munich. In many ways following Solzhenitsyn’s, the trajectory of his views evolved from Westernism to Slavophilism.

After dismantling of the Iron Curtain, new cultural rifts, even if at a different level, could not be avoided over time. In confirmation of the diagnosis of its perpetual internal contradictions, Europe became the ground for the new di-

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<sup>4</sup> Toffler A. The Third Wave. N. Y. : William Morrow, 1980.

<sup>5</sup> Гуссерль Э. Кризис европейского человечества и философия // Культурология. XX век : антология. М., 1995. С. 302.

<sup>6</sup> Солженицын А. И. Как нам обустроить Россию? // Комсомольская правда. 1990. 18 сент. № 213–214. С. 1. URL: [http://www.solzhenitsyn.ru/proizvedeniya/publizistika/stati\\_i\\_rechi/v\\_izgnanii/kak\\_nam\\_obustroit\\_rossiyu.pdf?ysclid=137jzb6mj7](http://www.solzhenitsyn.ru/proizvedeniya/publizistika/stati_i_rechi/v_izgnanii/kak_nam_obustroit_rossiyu.pdf?ysclid=137jzb6mj7).

viding lines, and Western Europeans have engaged in new social and cultural engineering. The European Economic Community and later the European Union represented the narrative of the new Europe, with the boundaries equated with the borders of an integration project centered in Brussels. The civilizational boundaries of the Old World have historically been fluid – they have narrowed and widened, but generally absorbed more and more land over time.

But before the 1990s, there had never been an attempt to mark the borders of Europe with the external contour of a postmodern regional integration association, instead of the civilizational, historical, political, social and cultural space of the former European metropolitan cities. In other words – first to confine the European space to the EU territory, and then to expand “Europe” based on the constructed and formally legalized EU rules. In the meantime, Russia resumed the long-standing historiographic dispute in which Russia and the West were confronted.

The unique period of the 1980s in the Old World history was followed by a period of illusions and then disappointments, including those of epic proportions such as the Great Recession or the pandemic. Many of the pillars of the modern European culture began to transpire in the 1980s. It is not by chance that in 1981, Jean Baudrillard published his famous work “Simulacra and Simulations,”<sup>1</sup> especially memorable for one of its signature theses: “We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning.”

In recent decades, in the Western part of the Old World there have been attempts to give new meanings to European culture. One of these was the concept of “new Middle Ages,” developed and popularized by Umberto Eco, inter alia, in “The Middle Ages Have Already Begun” (1993).<sup>2</sup> In this work he argued with Roberto Vacca’s earlier anti-utopia, “The Near-Medieval Future”<sup>3</sup> (1971), in which the author predicted a retreat of the modern technological age into a bleak past.<sup>4</sup> Eco himself was more optimistic and saw the modernity as a “continuous period of transition,” where, as in the Middle Ages, the goal was not to conserve the past, but to bring the conflict between the old and the new under control and create a mechanism for adaptation. These reflections by Eco are consonant with ideas found in the works of other scholars dedicated to various aspects of risk. So, in 1986, Ulrich Beck’s textbook “Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity” was published. The phenomenon of risk was studied by Anthony Giddens in his works on late modernity.<sup>5</sup>

The last decades are experienced by the Europeans as the medieval theme of fear, even with the expectation of the end of the world – at least the world as we know it. Such feelings were whimsically intertwined with periods of euphoria. But the new spiritual upswing always ended with the return of pessimistic sentiments. In the 1980s, Europe feared World War III between the USSR and the

United States because of the deployment of nuclear missiles on both sides of the Iron Curtain. In 1986, a man-made disaster struck at Chernobyl. The euphoria in the end of the Cold War has been replaced by a cold shower of conflicts in the former Soviet Union, the Yugoslav wars and the struggle to preserve the territorial integrity of Russia itself. The illusions of perestroika were overshadowed by the dramas and tragedies of millions of people who found themselves “on the wrong side” of the border after the USSR collapsed.

At the turn of the millennium, expectations of a “happy end of history” were replaced by gloomy predictions of a “clash of civilizations.” The approaching magic number “2000” in the calendar was associated by some with the Last Judgement, by others with the “computer apocalypse.” The new millennium had just begun when the problem of international terrorism rose from the Russian to a new level after 9/11. The project of the so-called global caliphate of ISIS was aimed at the destruction of European culture and its physical extermination. In 2008–2009, Europe was shaken by the Great Recession, and in 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hyper-liberalism phenomena began to multiply, such as the demand in a number of European countries to remove symbols of faith from public places and human clothing. Thus, from the point of view of conservative social thought and common sense, Europe was depriving itself of its cultural roots and cultural immunity, becoming vulnerable to the expansion of other cultures, including the fundamentalist part of Islamic culture. The value system of a modern European citizen increasingly represented a deformed, unbalanced set of ideas, where liberalism in its classical form gave way to neoliberalism, to the detriment of conservative and collectivist traditions of public thought and consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

Since the 1990s, European culture and identity have been challenged by unprecedented migration. After the collapse of the USSR, several dozens of millions of former Soviet citizens found themselves in the new states, where they became a national minority. More than 20 million Russians were particularly affected. At the same time, paradoxically, the new Russia, whose borders moved eastward, became ethnically more European than the Soviet Union, since the proportion of Russians whose worldview was based on European culture drastically increased in the country (up to 80%).

The critique of Enlightenment ideas, of which Nietzsche’s superman and the mass consumer society were a byproduct in the twentieth century, is echoed in many contemporary literary works, such as Patrick Suskind’s “Perfume” (1985).<sup>7</sup> William Golding’s novel “Lord of the Flies,” which later became a cult, appeared in 1954, but the writer received the Nobel Prize for his work in the fateful eighties (1983).<sup>8</sup> Its point is not to praise the man – the book is not about Prometheus or Icarus – but to describe the man’s fall.

The category of empire was another vector of reflection on Europe’s modern identity. The new literature dedicated

<sup>1</sup> Baudrillard J. Simulacres et simulation. P. : Galilée, 1981 ; *Бодрийяр Ж. Симулякры и симуляции*. М. : Издат. дом «Постум», 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Эко У. Средние века уже начались // *Иностранная литература*. 1994. № 4. С. 258–267.

<sup>3</sup> Vacca R. Il medioevo prossimo venturo. Milano : Mondadori Saggi, 1971.

<sup>4</sup> Long before the European intellectuals of recent decades, Nikolai Berdyaev wrote about the “new Middle Ages” in his work “New Middle Ages” (1924). Berdyaev compared his time to the period of late Antiquity.

<sup>5</sup> Giddens A. The Consequences of Modernity. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990 ; *Idem*. Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Громько Ал. А. Метаморфозы политического неолиберализма // *Современная Европа*. 2020. № 2. С. 6–19.

<sup>7</sup> Suskind P. Das Parfum. Die Geschichte eines Mörders. Zürich : Diogenes, 1985 ; *Зюскинд П. Парфюмер. История одного убийства*. М. : Азбука, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Golding W. The Lord of the Flies. L. : Faber and Faber, 1954 ; *Голдинг У. Повелитель мух // Вокруг света*. 1969. № 7–11.

to the European Union as an empire has appeared, encompassing such cultural elements as identity and values.<sup>1</sup> Notably, based on historical experience, empires have sought to continually expand both inward and outward. When they lost the ability to do so, or when expansion led to overstretching, the process of (self) destruction began. Similarly, the phenomenon of “enlargement fatigue” in the European Union has marked the limits of the EU as an empire, even if recognized as one with the noble, “neo-medieval” character. In fact, the history of the past twenty years has shown that expansionism of the EU has followed a hard path, with “soft power” increasingly receding into the background of its foreign policy toolbox, giving way to outright coercion and militarization. But such is the fate of imperial thinking, no matter how well-intentioned slogans might be used to cover it up.

Contemporary European culture appears as the intertwining and layering of old and new, premodern, modern and postmodern. The attitude of “Bread and circus!” has migrated from the depth of history to the contemporary Europe, and turned into hypertrophied mass consumption. Back in the 1920s, thinkers of the Frankfurt School (T. Adorno, M. Horkheimer, H. Marcuse and others) were discussing the pitfalls of massification and standardization of culture. The great folk culture, which gave birth to the tradition of laughter, amusement, and carnival hundreds of years ago in Europe, has nearly degenerated in the era of postmodernity. After the collapse of the socialist camp, the culture industry flooded the post-Soviet space.

Christian humanism gave way to the “universal” humanism as European society’s religious feelings faded; the values underwent unification in the spirit of “end of history” that was somewhat akin to the end-of-the-world expectations inherent in religious thinking. Just as people used to go to church en masse, they sat down en masse in front of

the television pop art, another powerful instrument of moral and aesthetic degradation. The postmodernist wave of mass culture in the form of pop culture marked a setback in the cultural development. There was a movement backward from science to religion and then to magic.

At the same time, technology continued to advance, leaving increasingly less time to be conscious of the reality. As a result, the theme of the man-machine confrontation regained popularity. In cinema, its vivid embodiments were blockbusters about ruthless Terminator robots. COVID-19 also brought about a new kind of Luddism – a “rebellion of people against machines”: in 2020, modern Luddites in Europe were destroying mobile 5G network towers in fear of a pandemic. It also signified the shift in European mass consciousness from consumer culture to post-materialism, manifesting in the ideology of European environmentalists and “greens.”

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In recent decades, Europe and European culture have been deeply immersed in the reality of postmodernism and its new offshoots – post-post-modernism, trans- and post-humanism. The humanistic foundations of New and Contemporary European civilization, rooted in Antiquity and Christianity, are now juxtaposed with modern mass culture and “digital” society, with all their bright and dark sides.

Whether the European cultural space will continue to experience fragmentation, politization, and, to a large extent, degradation, is an open question. Can classical culture continue to serve as its “cementing mortar”? Is it possible to harmonize national traditions with a “digital” world full of conflicts? It seems that the colossal cultural heritage of Europe still has the margin of safety to resist the bad taste, simplification, clip mentality, and deconstruction of high and folk culture.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example: *Zielonka J. Europe as Empire: the Nature of the Enlarged European Union*. Oxford : Oxford Univ. Press, 2006 ; *Тэвдой-Булмули А. И. Европейский союз как имперский конструкт. К вопросу о применимости понятия // Международные процессы. 2019. № 2. С. 91–100.*