DISENCHANTMENT WITH LIBERALISM IN POST-SOVIET SOCIETIES

GALYM ZHUSSIPBEK

RETHINK PAPER 20
JANUARY 2015
DISENCHANTMENT WITH LIBERALISM IN POST-SOVIET SOCIETIES

GALYM ZHUSSIPBEK

RETHINK PAPER 20
January 2015
The Rethink Institute is an independent, not-for-profit, nonpartisan research institution devoted to deepen our understanding of contemporary political and cultural challenges facing communities and societies around the world, in realizing peace and justice, broadly defined.

The Institute pursues this mission by facilitating research on public policies and civic initiatives centering on dispute resolution, peace building, dialogue development, and education. Toward these goals, the Institute sponsors rigorous research and analysis, supports visiting scholar programs, and organizes workshops and conferences.

© Rethink Institute. All rights reserved

ISBN: 978-1-938300-27-1

Printed in the USA

Rethink Institute
750 First St., NE, Suite 1125
Washington, DC 20002
Phone: (202) 842-2026
info@rethinkinstitute.org

This publication can be downloaded at no cost at www.rethinkinstitute.org
# CONTENTS

| Page | Section |
|------|---------|
| 1    | Summary |
| 3    | Introduction |
| 3    | Perceptions of Liberalism in Post-Soviet Societies |
| 6    | Differing Interpretations of Freedom |
| 7    | Explaining the Underdevelopment of Liberal Values in Post-Soviet Societies |
| 9    | Reasons for Disenchantment with Liberalism |
| 9    | *The Neoliberal Reforms of the 1990s* |
| 10   | *Predicament of Post-Totalitarian Societies* |
| 11   | *The Primacy of the Psychological and Sociological over the Political* |
| 12   | *Security Policies* |
| 12   | Problems with the Promotion of Liberalism by Western Countries |
| 14   | Reasons for Optimism |
| 16   | How to Promote Liberalism in Post-Soviet Societies? |
| 19   | About the Author |
Summary

In post-Soviet societies, liberalism has come to be perceived as contradictory to the rule of law and norms of decency, even as the antithesis of order and associated with chaos. However, it may be accurate to talk about disenchantment with misperceived liberalism and a defensive reflex by societies that are struggling with their post-totalitarian burdens in the face of misrepresented liberal ideas. It is important to analyze the reasons for, implications of, and ways to overcome this awkward phenomenon, since the major problems of the region cannot be solved without recourse to liberal ideas.

The paper argues that the methods used to bring liberalism to a number of post-Soviet societies, particularly Russia, proved to be wrong. Nonetheless, we have to be optimistic about the prospects for developing liberal ideas in the region. For one thing, contrary to what is usually stated, the seeming disenchantment with liberalism does not follow from the civilizational underpinnings of contemporary post-Soviet societies. The basic ideas of liberal philosophy are not something unwanted by or alien to the great majority of post-Soviet people. Their disenchantment with liberalism is not a matter of general principles, but rather a collateral result of abuses of liberalism and systematic disinformation.

It seems proper to assert that, after the collapse of the totalitarian system, post-Soviet societies have returned to their natural path of developing liberal values, which had been seriously interrupted by the Soviet system. A liberal outlook is indispensable to finding durable solutions to most problems and difficulties that have befallen post-Soviet societies. In the examples of Russia and Kazakhstan, it can be argued that a post-Soviet society will inevitably transition to a society with a more liberal outlook, if the internal demands for achieving this goal can be maintained. However, robust internal demands for liberalization can emerge only through promoting a kind of liberalism that is acceptable to the minds and hearts of the people and elites of post-Soviet countries, which takes into account the peculiarities of their economic and social structures.
Introduction

It has become a commonplace to talk about disenchantment with liberal values in post-Soviet societies and a subsequent rise in anti-liberalism, which have manifested as official state policy. Today, in Russia, and to a lesser extent in Russia-leaning post-Soviet countries, liberalism has become associated, and even equated, with moral and social degradation; unlawfulness, unfairness and unfair privatization; loss of social benefits; defense of jailed Russian oligarchs or former Kazakh billionaires who are still at large; being a comprador of some foreign forces; and being preoccupied with the promotion of the rights of sexual minorities and destroying family values. Liberalism in general has become associated with hardships and disorder; the deprivation of basic rights, such as security of life, dignified life standards, and basic medical services, observed in the 1990s; and emphasis on the promotion of the rights of chosen minorities and defense of the chosen people, especially oligarchs and controversial members of political opposition who are disliked by a majority of society. In short, liberalism has come to be perceived as contradictory to the rule of law and norms of decency, even as the antithesis of order and associated with chaos.

Why this happened? How can we explain the phenomenon when intellectuals, who in the late years of the Soviet period were the most enthusiastic and passionate promoters and defendants of liberal ideas, who were the ideational engine behind true Perestroika and true Glasnost, are seen in recent years to be disillusioned with liberal ideas and to have fallen in love with authoritarianism, nationalism bordering on chauvinism, and even racism and aggressive secularism? In fact, one of the paradoxes of many post-Soviet societies is that people with a relatively high level of education have become anti-liberal, or at least skeptical about liberal ideas, in recent times. However, this group is generally expected to be more liberal.

The importance of exploring the phenomenon of disenchantment with liberal values lies in providing an explanation of differences in interpretations of international processes, particularly international crises (from the Syrian civil war to the social cleavage in Ukraine). It can even be argued that while during the Cold War, differences in political ideologies fuelled tensions between the Soviet Union and the West, in our times, differences in perceptions of liberalism, democracy and globalization play a central role in tensions between Russia and the West. To put it differently, the underlying reasons for the sometimes fundamentally different interpretations of international processes by Russian and Western politicians, academics and publics should be sought in differences in perceptions of liberalism and democracy, among others.

Perceptions of Liberalism in Post-Soviet Societies

Today, there is a total confusion about what liberalism means in a number of post-Soviet societies. First, critics and opponents of liberalism accuse it of creating a society of spoiled people; they blame liberalism for creating societies without moral standards. A stereotypical view of liberalism shared by a great majority of conservative Russians assumes that liberalism, specifically a liberal understanding of liberty, defends “liberty to commit sin, even liberty to live like a beast, therefore, liberalism downgrades human
dignity, while the Orthodox Christian understanding of liberty means liberty from sin”.
Moreover, liberalism is perceived as “elimination of God’s image in human nature, making
humankind devoid of the sacred”. Similarly, liberalism is equated with absolute profaneness and hedonism. It can be argued that these perceptions of liberalism by conservative Russian Christians are also shared by a majority of Muslims living in Russia and Russia-leaning countries.

Second, in general, liberalism is conceived of as a policy of the powerful towards the weak, depriving the weak of any chance of becoming strong. Particularly, critics and opponents of liberalism in Russia claim that liberalism is committed to destroying Russian power and greatness. For instance, the epigraph of the book Krepost Rossiya (Fortress Russia), written by a group of Russian economists, contains the expression “Russia has a great future ahead if the authorities finally say goodbye to the liberalism that is hated by the people”. A number of anti-liberal Russian intellectuals believe that the elite who are pro-liberal will inevitably turn out to be compradors of Western neo-colonial powers. Even those who feel mere sympathy toward liberal ideas tend to be regarded, not just as pro-Western, but as lackeys of Western powers who are determined to destroy Russia.

Third, closely related to the second stereotype, the extrapolation of neoliberalism to liberalism in a broad sense is frequently observable in Russia. However, neoliberalism is, in fact, only one of the models of liberalism, specifically a model of economic governance. Some Russian thinkers, by mingling the concepts of liberalism as a political ideal/liberalism in broad sense and neoliberalism as an economic model go so far as to argue that liberalism assumes that people live for profit, puts the state at the service of global business, not of its people, and leads to the elimination of the middle class.

It should be admitted that in a number of post-Soviet countries the basic idea of liberalism in the practical dimension has been distorted into the ideal of trying to get something [material], often in an unlawful manner, while the basic idea of properly

---

1 As it was formulated by one of the leaders of the “Radonezh” association. See Daniel, Alexander, “Eshe raz o liberalnih tsennostyah i interpretatsiyah” (“Once again about liberal values and interpretations”), Moscow-based Russian human rights organization “SOVA Center,” January 25, 2005 [http://www.sova-center.ru/religion/publications/secularism-limits/2005/01/d3390/] . See also, “Svoboda lichnosti: vzglyad liberalniy i vzglyad pravoslavnii” (“ Freedoms and liberties of individual: liberal view and Orthodox Christian view”), Radio Liberty, July 13, 2005, http://archive.svoboda.org/programs/rt/2004/rt.071304.asp
2 Nikiforov, Yevgeniy, “Tam Gde dobdo pod zapretom” (“Where goodness is prohibited”), Russian Orthodox Christian Community “Radonezh”, October 5, 2004 [http://radonezh.ru/analytics/8879.html]
3 Leontyev, Mihail, “Proschaniye s Liberalizmom (Farewell to Liberalism)” in Leontyev, Mihail et al. Krepost Rossiya (Fortress Russia), Moscow: Yauza, Moscow: EKSMO, 2008, e-book: [http://projectrussia.orthodoxy.ru/]
4 Delyagin, Mihail, “Liberal elimination of Russia will go on,” Nakanune.ru, January 30, 2012 [http://www.nakanune.ru/service/print.php?articles=6183]; [http://rusinform.ru/index.php?newsid=129]
5 Leontyev, Mihail, “Proschaniye”.
6 See, for example, the views of Mihail Delyagin, personal website “Delyagin.ru”, [http://delyagin.ru/position/22660-liberalnyj-fundamentalizm-ne-yekonomicheskoe-techenie-a-reliigiya.html]
understood liberalism is “the ideal of a society of individuals trying to be something”\(^8\). Post-Soviet people, especially intellectuals who criticize liberalism, do so because of the failure of early liberal reformers to protect values such as justice, equal opportunity, and foremost, the basic, fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals, which constitute the cornerstone of any variation of liberalism. That is why, while in the United States liberalism means more responsible government to secure the achievement of equal opportunity and equality before the law for all, in post-Soviet societies, a considerable number of people started accepting these principles in opposite as “not liberal values”.

The perception of liberalism as a phenomenon of social injustice gradually emerged after the collapse of Soviet Union, as the process of disintegration of the Soviet Union was carried out by some liberal politicians and interest groups that were liberal only in name to gain benefit and privatize state (Soviet) property, not infrequently in an unfair and illegal manner.\(^9\) As one of the most ardent critics of this process in Russia, Mikhail Delyagin, director of the Moscow-based Institute of Globalization Studies, espouses the view that the political groups presented as liberal divided Russia and grabbed much of its wealth.\(^10\) Assylbek Bissembayev, former leader of the liberal movement in Kazakhstan, warns that the transformation of the Soviet economy, especially privatization of public property, which was implemented under the banner of liberal reforms, in reality hardly resembled any liberalism, let alone a policy of marketization which was supposed to be implemented through legal methods. Reforms aimed at establishing market economies in post-Soviet countries are falsely identified as liberal, when in fact they were only part of the marketization process. Moreover, since these were identified as liberal reforms, mistaken perceptions of liberalism emerged.\(^11\) In reality, what occurred was not development of liberal ideas as such but a process by which particular groups of opportunists benefited enormously from the transition from socialism to capitalism.

---

\(^8\) Thompson, Dorothy. “Liberalism and Morality” in Laura Grey, Liberalism and Morality, October 5, 2008 [http://littlehoppingbird.blogspot.com/2008/10/liberalism-and-morality.html].

\(^9\) Tatilya, Kenzhe, “Kristalnoy dushi liberal” (“Liberal with a pure heart”), Central Asia Monitor, July 12, 2013 [http://camonitor.com/archives/8406]; Tatilya, Kenzhe, “Kto i kak ispolzoval liberalism v Kazakhstane” (“Who and how exploited liberalism in Kazakhstan”), Centrasia.RU, July 12, 2013 [http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1373832480]

\(^10\) Delyagin, Mikhail, “Towards a liberal dictatorship?” [http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/towards-a-liberal-dictatorship-MkkvQLEFiSPyX5Lh.99]

\(^11\) Tatilya, Kenzhe, “Kristalnoy”.
Fourth, what is extremely surprising is that a number of people in Russia and Russia-leaning countries assume that liberalism shelters fascism and extreme nationalism. This tendency has accelerated, particularly since the crisis in Ukraine of 2013-2014. In the face of the hijacking of liberalism by some extreme nationalist groups in Ukraine and Baltic countries, the juxtaposition of concepts like fascist pro-liberals or nationalist liberals (expressions that are actually oxymorons) and anti-fascist anti-liberals have occurred in post-Soviet societies. Likewise, the assumption that “liberalism defends only the rights of some chosen minorities while neglecting the basic rights of the majority” has been formed.

To summarize, after the tumultuous 1990s and a set of crises that have erupted in recent years, liberalism has become fundamentally misunderstood in the post-Soviet context. Along with equating liberalism with the neo-liberal economic model, perceptions that liberalism means injustice, disorder, abuse of power by power-holders, oligarchism and nepotism, and even servility to the West and fascism, have become widespread in a number of post-Soviet countries. In contrast, in developed liberal countries, liberalism is premised upon the rule of law, all being bound by laws and obligated to obey laws, accountable and citizen-oriented government, meritocracy and pluralism.

**Differing Interpretations of Freedom**

It is natural that post-Soviet societies may have their own modifications (and some changeable priorities) in interpreting the concept “freedom/free individuals,” which surely does not change its ontological essence. In other words, modifications which are in no way fundamental differences of interpretation can be observed in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. In Kazakhstan individuals may define being free as being able to interpret history as they understand or perceive it, speaking the mother tongue and earning enough money to live a dignified life and raise children. In Russia, individuals may define being free as having stable incomes and secure and stable lives free of abrupt reforms and social experiments. As confirmation, according to a survey made in March 2013 by the Foundation of Public Opinion, Russians prioritize the right to free medical services, the right to work and have dignified income and the right to have free education. For this reason, when Western politicians talk of reform, many Russians not only disregard them but even despise or fear those appeals because the calls for reform are seen as endangering their sense of security and freedom.

---

12 Kubanov, A. “Contemporary liberalism is the vanguard of fascism,” Zavtra, April 1, 2014 (Russian source)

Ibrayev, T. “From where do Maidans come?” Nomad, March 28, 2014 (Kazakhstani source), [http://www.nomad.su/?a=3-201403280017]

13 Patriarch Kirill, “Pravoslaviye i Liberalism: Protivostoyaniye ili Dialog: Mitropolit Kirill o ‘pravah cheloveka’” “Orthodox Christianity and liberalism: confrontation or dialogue: Patriarch Kirill on ‘human rights’”), Russian Orthodox Christian Community “Radonezh,” July 2, 2004 [http://radonezh.ru/analytic/8839.html].

14 “Kak my sami otsenivaem prava cheloveka v Rossii” (“How do we evaluate human rights in Russia?”), Russian Protestant Newspaper, April 5, 2013 [http://www.gazetaprotestant.ru/2013/04/kak-my-sami-otsenivaem-prava-cheloveka-v-rossii/] derived from the Foundation of Public Opinion [soc.fom.ru].
In short, it cannot be expected that people in post-Soviet countries have the same priorities in interpreting the concepts “freedom/free individual” as people in Western countries. At the same time, that does not mean that liberal ideas and liberal values are totally alien to post-Soviet people. Even Kazakhstani and Russian societies may be more liberally predisposed to some issues than some segments of conservative-minded people living in Western countries (e.g., concerning the rights of religious or ethnic minorities, abortion, civic marriage, secularism, state-religion relations), insofar as they are deeply modern societies that were exposed to systematic, brutal modernization under the Soviet regime. Before the Bolshevik revolution, liberal values had been developing among Russian and Kazakh intellectuals, who were granted official amnesty after the collapse of the Soviet system, especially in Kazakhstan, and were recognized as national heroes and even leaders.

Finally, relatively young people and those who are more integrated in globalization have more positive attitudes towards liberal ideas, except adherents to marginal views whether radical ethnic or radical religious.

Explaining the Underdevelopment of Liberal Values in Post-Soviet Societies

It seems necessary to touch on some common stereotypes concerning the reasons for underdevelopment and misperception of liberal ideas in post-Soviet societies, since only reasons that are clearly understood can show us proper ways to improve the situation.

One of the stereotypes has already turned into a classic cliché. This argument is in essence the contention holding that classic/traditional Russian and Kazakh societies did not have in their histories any semblance of civil rights and private proprietorship, which are key liberal values. However, in opposition to this essentialist claim, civilizations are not monolithic entities, but are capable of changing over time.

While it has become common to consider Russian or Kazakh civilization as historically alien to liberal ideas and democracy, alternative interpretations of pre-Soviet history show us that before the Bolshevik revolution, liberal values had been nurtured and promulgated by Russian and Kazakh intellectuals, who were granted official amnesty only after the 1990s and whose ideas are still unexplored. According to this view, Russian liberal thinking “had many bright pages.” With ups and downs, by the middle of the nineteenth century liberalism had become a dominant philosophy of educated Russian society15 and even of the Russian imperial administration in later periods. However, Western studies of Russia have often focused on issues such as Slavophiles or Bolshevism, leaving Russian liberalism in the shadows.16 Similarly, a number of Kazakh intellectuals, especially of the Jadid orientation, adhered to liberal ideas and developed a good relationship with Russian liberals. Later, they embarked on building the provisional

15 Schenner, Johanna “Birth of Russian Conservative Liberalism”, The US Russia Center for Entrepreneurship, E-Bulletin Entrepreneurship Insights, Issue 15, May 2012 [http://www.cfe.ru/en/resource_center/bulletin/issue1791/1804.htm].
16 Ibid.
Alash-Orda Government and the Autonomous Kokand (Turkestan) Government, both of liberal and democratic character.

In other words, the improbability of claiming that pre-Soviet Russian and Kazakh societies were apart from liberal values and from general trends experienced by a great majority of modern societies shatters the above-mentioned orientalistic argument. Even if this argument were true, the Soviet totalitarian system destroyed all classic civilizations, as civilizations based on religion and traditional economic activities or enterprises. It is well-established fact that under the Soviet regime Russian and Kazakhstani societies were exposed to systematic, brutal modernization which does not have any comparable analogue in world history and which destroyed to a considerable degree the classic settled and nomadic civilizations. Basically, the Soviet regime did everything in its power to get Soviet people, including Russians themselves, to abandon any paradigms, styles of reasoning or sets of beliefs that might be even slightly an alternative to the official ideology. Consequently, modern Russian and Kazakhstani societies have been “engineered” by the highly invasive modernist Soviet system.

Another stereotypical contention used to explain the reasons for underdevelopment of liberal ideas is the concept of “Eurasianism.” This concept is used widely to provide ideological underpinning for Eurosian Union - Russia-led integration project - and is employed, among other things, to prove that Eurasian countries by their very nature are “genetically immune to Western liberalism”\(^17\). However, this understanding of the concept seems to be reverse-orientalist and essentialist. As has been pointed out above, civilizations are not monolithic. In reality, the concept of Eurasianism is contestable and is prone to differing interpretations. For instance, Eurasianism is not the same in Russia and Kazakhstan. In Russia the concept is considered by some groups more in reactionary terms and as being developed against “the (Atlantic) other,” while in Kazakhstan this concept tends to be considered more positively as being developed, not against anyone, but rather to strike a kind of balance, integration, and even symbiosis between the West and the East. For the incumbent Kazakhstan administration, “Eurasianism is part of regional and global initiatives where Kazakhstan is positioned as a country with open economy, possessing great transit potential and a multi-ethnic society.”\(^18\)

**Reasons for Disenchantment with Liberalism**

In general, the reforms of the 1990s led not only to systemic crises but also brought about conceptual and epistemological misunderstandings of liberal values.

**The Neoliberal Reforms of the 1990s**

Presenting neoliberal economic doctrine, which started to rise beginning in the late 1970s in the capitalist world, to the former communist states as panacea for all problems inherited from Soviet period and as the only way to become developed states eventually appeared to be a misleading and false belief, and wrought enormous damage to

\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) Author’s interview with Kairat Moldashev, PhD candidate, University of Malaya, February 22, 2014.
Disenchantment with Liberalism in Post-Soviet Societies

liberalism, particularly in Russia. The ascendancy of the neoliberal model has caused serious problems in the developed countries also, not just in former totalitarian states. In particular, while classic liberalism defends individuals against abuse of power by those in authority, this stance started eroding even in a number of liberal countries with the systemic rise of the neoliberal economic model in the 1990s. As a result, not only the humanistic premises of liberalism but also the idea of democratic governance eroded, since the neoliberal model appears to promote the rule of big capital owners over ordinary citizens struggling to meet their daily needs.

Despite the truth that successful market economies cannot be created overnight in formerly totalitarian societies with heavily centralized economies based on state ownership of assets, abrupt implementation of neoliberal reforms was enacted in the 1990s. Although the idea of free markets, which is the main idea of economic liberalism, was adopted as a general principle by neoliberal reformers, this idea turned out to be predatory. Liberalism as a political ideal and core liberal values, which are inherently humanistic and human-oriented, were sacrificed for immediate gains that were seemingly liberal in nature and focused on launching a campaign of massive privatization and founding unregulated financial markets, which was all seen as the aim in and of itself. In other words, it was shortsighted to start massive privatization in legal void, found unregulated financial market in the absence of a well-functioning real economy, and demolish the more or less functioning social welfare system of the Soviet period without offering opportunities to gain dignified income.

Neoliberal reforms as carried out could not and did not exemplify genuine liberal values. According to some experts, these reforms were not in any way liberal in character, but on the contrary, were characterized by excessive radicalism and even neo-Bolshevism.19 The Russian and Kazakhstani societies witnessed “substitution of concepts”20; instead of being freed or emancipated, they slid into a new kind of subjugation to unrestrained capitalism prospering in a legal void. A considerable portion of the Russian people became convinced that all of these reforms were made, not because of liberalism as such, but to get access to Russian resources and markets. In the second half of the 1990s, even liberal Western specialists on Russia started warning of the failure of reformers to bring about liberalism.

It can be argued that in the 1990s liberalism, which was premised upon “enormous respect for personality and above everything else was human and humane,”21 degenerated into the grotesque, as profoundly humane and ethical conceptions transformed into rapacious and amoral ones. The idea of self-realization and self-development became perverted into the idea of self-interest (egoism),22 specifically in the environment of transition and a legal void that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet system. It became obvious that markets cannot regulate themselves, only law and justice maintained by society and state can regulate markets.

19 Peshnyak, Aleksandr. “Liberalizm v Reformirovannii Sovremennoy Rossii” (“Liberalism in Reforming Contemporary Russia”), Candidate of Science Dissertation, Moscow, Russian Academy of Science, Institute of Socio-Political Research, 2003
20 Tatilya, Kenzhe, “Kristalnoy”.
21 Thompson, “Liberalism”.
22 Chuykov, Aleksandr, “Ministr Livannov gotovit krovavuyu revolyutsiyu” (“Minister Livannov prepares bloody revolution”), Argumenty Nedeli, No 48 (340), December 13, 2012, p. 12
It can be asserted that these reckless efforts killed early liberalism in Russia and Kazakhstan, including the eradication of liberal-minded Soviet intellectuals as a distinct social force or stratum. It is ironic that the post-Soviet intelligentsia who had been the most ardent promoters of liberal ideas were stripped of the function of being the brain or locomotive of society as a result of neoliberal reforms. This was simply because with the abrupt emergence of unrestrained capitalism, the intelligentsia virtually lost its place in a society as distinct social force, inasmuch as many had to migrate or change their profession, joining the business sector. In short, neoliberal reforms turned a majority of post-Soviet intellectuals into migrants or mere vendors at bazaars.

Therefore, it was logical that seriously negative transformations in perceptions of liberalism and liberal values emerged in many post-Soviet countries after the havoc caused by the series of so-called “neoliberal” reforms that exposed Russia, Kazakhstan and a couple of other states to a kind of “shock therapy.” Especially in Russia, the consequences of the abrupt process of privatization of state assets were enormously damaging for the institutionalization of democracy and further sustainable development of liberal ideas.

To conclude, the underlying meaning of liberal ideas was not understood properly by reformers who, with the aim of introducing free markets, undermined almost all basic civil rights of citizens. Neoliberal reform programs became simply rapacious, while the original liberal thinkers had an ethical background upon which to base liberalism. Notwithstanding the fact that neoliberal reforms caused huge problems, they must not be blamed for every bad thing that happened in the societies embarked on implementing them. At the very least, the countries that underwent shock therapy at the same time laid the foundations for diversification of economic, social and cultural life which in the final analysis made any prospects for the return of the totalitarian past irrelevant.

**Predicament of Post-Totalitarian Societies**

It can be argued that one of fundamental reasons behind the phenomenon of disenchantment with liberal ideas and the subsequent rise of anti-liberal sentiments lie in the nature of post-totalitarian society. “Post-totalitarian” is a more accurate and explanatory depiction of post-Soviet countries. The concept “Soviet” bears as a rule a negative connotation in Western countries and academia. In contrast, the concept can have positive meaning in a number of post-Soviet countries and societies, as a result of neo-Gramscian-style successful indoctrination of communist ideas into the hearts and minds of the last generations of Soviet people. For a considerable number of post-Soviet people, “Soviet” still implies the rule of law, internationalism, accountability of elites (in accordance with Communist Party perception and directives), orderliness, high morality, dignity, and so on. Therefore, it is natural to observe that the liberalism and liberal ideas with which post-Soviet people became acquainted in the tumultuous 1990s, and the very ideas that became associated with the military interventions of liberal countries in the

---

23 Evans, Alfred, “The failure of democratization in Russia: A comparative perspective”, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol.2, No1, 2011, pp. 40-51

24 See Peshnyak, Aleksandr, “Liberalism”.

25 Author’s interview with Dr. Alessandro Frigerio, KIMEP University in Almaty, January 6, 2014
Disenchantment with Liberalism in Post-Soviet Societies

Middle East, Balkans, and Africa in recent times, have been automatically contrasted with the Soviet characteristics that are positively perceived by many post-Soviet people. In other words, a major reason for the low level of development and popularity of liberalism, and the predisposition of political and intellectual elites to misinterpret and misunderstand liberal ideas in the face of problems is the ideational legacy of the Soviet period. Hence, not infrequently positively perceived Soviet values and negatively interpreted liberal ideas are juxtaposed and the liberal West is depicted like the existential “Other”. It is natural that the concept “post-Soviet,” which is used in Western academia to connote lack of order, an underdeveloped sense of the rule of law, low accountability of elites, and interventionism sometimes may not conflate with the perceptions of post-Soviet people, and, what is more significant, with the analyses of post-Soviet intellectuals. In short, it seems more logical to use the concept “post-totalitarian” instead of “post-Soviet” to depict the existing deficiencies and problems in the development of post-Soviet countries.

The Primacy of the Psychological and Sociological over the Political

To better understand the transition process in post-Soviet countries, the reasons for its successes and failures, the psychological and sociological peculiarities of these societies must be taken into account. The sociological and psychological fabric of all Soviet societies was heavily transformed by 70 long years under a totalitarian system. As a result, after the collapse of the Soviet system in the early 1990s, a paradoxical situation concerning mind-sets and consciousness emerged. On the one hand, the values imposed by the Soviet regime became redundant (e.g., the Soviet sense of the rule of law, accountability). On the other hand, the centuries-old traditional values were erased and discarded by the Soviet regime, and the liberal values adopted by liberal and democratic societies were relatively distant, although somehow attractive.

One of the best examples of the sociological peculiarities of post-totalitarian states is “legal relativism,” the phenomenon which can be depicted as an underdeveloped sense of the rule of law (legal consciousness) coupled with underdevelopment of institutions, such that people prefer to solve their problems through their own networks or by so-called “telephone law.”

In all post-totalitarian societies, the development of liberalism is inhibited by narrowly-defined exclusivist identities, whether of secular-nationalistic, tribal, clan or religious/secular character, which often becomes entangled with the criminalization syndrome. Criminalization in its turn, especially of some minority groups (ethnic-based mafia), triggers anti-liberal attitudes in many post-Soviet societies, when the anti-liberal state apparatus is seen as the sole protection against criminal groups of ethnic minorities (more relevant in the Russian context).

The persistence of the post-Soviet criminal subculture, which is a derivative of the infamous Soviet criminal subculture, in some segments of post-Soviet societies also plays a particular role in misinterpretation of liberal values. The post-Soviet criminal subculture, which denies the liberties and rights of individuals, has emerged as the mirror reflection of official Soviet ideology with diametrically opposing aims (premised on despising state and official ideology) but with the same totalitarian character (based on negating the rights of individuals).
Corruption in post-Soviet states, and in general in states in transition, besides political reasons, has more deeply rooted sociological and psychological reasons. In most post-Soviet states the political culture of state thought has not yet developed. Moreover, the notions of the rule of law and serving the state and nation are to some extent alien to the ruling elites and state officials of the newly established states. During the Soviet period these notions were quite well-established; however, later on with the beginning of the Zastoy period and Perestroika, they began to erode and the notion that “the state is cow” became popular with state officials and the public. Consequently, the state was downgraded to the status of ownerless property or a shop in abeyance, the goods of which had to be taken away to the maximum level possible. It is not rare to observe in these states a degrading attitude of state officials towards their own societies, an attitude downgrading the common people to the level of mere herds or flocks. That is one of the primary reasons for low accountability of officials to citizens, which may be more explanatory than the nature of political regimes per se, because officials in some authoritarian regimes of non-post-Soviet character may be really accountable to their own citizens (e.g., Singapore).

Security Policies

Tightened security policies focused on counterterrorist measures have also led to a rise in anti-liberal attitudes in society and, paradoxically, among the educated. Reckless efforts by pseudo-liberal opposition forces and the demonization of liberalism by a number of politicians and local experts, especially after the tragic events unfolding in the Middle East pursuant to the military interventions of liberal countries and color revolutions in former Eastern bloc countries, have exacerbated the disenchantment with liberalism in Russia and Russia-leaning countries.

Problems with the Promotion of Liberalism by Western Countries

A number of more or less successful efforts to promote liberalism and democracy have been undertaken since the late 1980s. These efforts ranged from educational programs and NGO activities (focused on promotion of human rights and development of civil society) to the neoliberal reform projects of the IMF and World Bank. However, these attempts were of limited scope, since only some elitist, privileged or marginal groups have been targeted, or of limited influence, simply because it is unconceivable to change the mindsets of people through unsystematic and external efforts or to correct the overly bureaucratic and corrupt system of higher education in many post-Soviet countries. At the worst, these attempts (specifically the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s) caused prolonged crises and deep resentment in a majority of people, especially intellectuals, in post-Soviet countries.

Surely, liberal ideas can by no means be transplanted in a society by being imported or imposed from outside, for instance, through launching special democratization programs or promoting chosen people as contenders for political power, or at the worst, through the direct military operations. In these cases, only the names or labels of leaders are
changed, not the essence and very underpinning of these countries, since they are rooted deeply in society. The situation unfolding in some countries of the former Eastern Bloc and the Middle East is a telling result of this misperception. In one country, a tyrant was overthrown by military means, but afterwards the people promoting exclusivist sectarian identities started alienating and crushing their own “others.” In other countries, society became deeply divided along ethnic, regional or tribal lines, and divisive rhetoric was overwhelmingly used instead of promoting essentially inclusive liberal discourse leading to the formation of an inclusive national identity, embracing all people regardless of their origin, lifestyles and views.

On the whole, the promotion of liberal ideas in post-Soviet countries has been undertaken by importing them, a method which is prone to be interpreted by post-Soviet people, particularly intellectuals, as imposition. Furthermore, very little has been done to prevent liberal ideas from being misperceived and downgraded, nor have specific efforts been made to foster the understanding that liberal ideas are not a product of the capitalist West that are promoted with the aim of achieving its own interests. It is alarming that in Russia the bulk of the population, ranging from qualified experts and politicians to ordinary citizens, believe that the Western powers, under the banner of liberalism, support anti-Russian groups with the aim of disintegrating and destroying Russia and its so-called “near abroad” (Russia’s sphere of “privileged interests”). These views have also become popular in some Central Asian countries, where this kind of information and analytics are strongly felt and where the intellectual elites, because of lack of communication and prevailing stereotypes, cannot directly benefit from the global academic environment. Consequently, Western academics should understand the seriousness of the situation, when even a little criticism of incumbent regimes on behalf of liberalism or democracy may be viewed in post-Soviet countries as at least tacit support for foes of the nation.

It is no exaggeration to say that it was suicidal (for promoters of liberalism) to nurture liberalism by promoting foremost the rights of LGBTs in a society where family values are top priority and both officially supported and non-official culture (an underground which is rooted in the criminal mind-set) regard being LGBT as at least as a serious a deviation, or even worse than, absolute meanness.

Finally, the direct juxtaposition of two concepts – old Soviet which is always bad and new liberal which is always good – should have been avoided. Gramscian indoctrination of Soviet ideals into the minds and hearts of at least three generations of Soviet people produced a lot of Soviet Union admirers. Consequently, “contrary to most of Eastern Europe, a strong anti-communist consensus had not taken shape in Russia.” 26 The same can also be argued regarding post-Soviet Central Asia. First, this hindered smooth political

---

26 Evans, “The Failure,” p. 40
and economic transformation from both directions: from above, top-down, and from below. Second, it is one of the main reasons that not liberal-minded but heavy-headed authoritarian politicians resembling Soviet leaders were sought by Russians and people in other post-Soviet countries in the face of crises. However, paradoxically, “in the early and mid-1990s, scholars who had specialized in the study of communist regimes warned that the post-communist states would need to carry out radical economic and social changes as well as sweeping political transformations”.  

Reasons for Optimism

A reason for optimism is the fact that no one in Russia or Kazakhstan, whether a state official or intellectual, can openly renounce the fundamental rights and freedom of individuals, such as the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, justice, equal opportunity and diversity. Similarly, no one among ordinary citizens wants to see any governmental policy that would infringe upon the rights and private lives of individuals. Honestly, no one in the post-Soviet countries consciously wants the rebirth of the monster-state Leviathan.

Furthermore, in the face of international crises, such as the crisis over Ukraine in 2014 and ongoing civil war in Syria, where Russia adopts a policy of not being friendly to the West, it is premature to argue that Russia is turning into a state that is not governed by the rule of law and antagonistic to liberal values. Statistics show that during the last four years the importance of both liberal and traditional values has increased in Russian society. According to surveys, Russians believe that politicians have to orient their decisions toward human rights (82 %), the rule of law/law (80%), morality (64%), and respect for other peoples’ views and pluralism (56%)  

Truly, there is a nexus between the development of liberalism and the rise of economic competitiveness in a country. The development of liberal ideas inevitably leads to the overhaul of oligarchic economic systems, which is indispensable for diversification of the economy. Without diversification of the economy, both countries cannot get rid of a lopsided economic structure based on the primacy of the extraction sector that was inherited from the Soviet period and became solidified in the course of reforms (oligarchic economic systems in Russia and Kazakhstan emerged, among other things, as a result of neoliberal reforms).

For example, Russian political expert Dmitriy Trenin states that “democracy and human rights are the future of Russia... unstoppable development of capitalism and institutionalization of free market will inevitably push Russia to liberalism... only liberalism can turn Russia into a power which can compete in the age of globalization.”

27 Ibid.
28 “Rossiyane hotyat morali” (“Russians want morality”), The Results of Public Opinion Polls in Russia, Rosbalt News Agency, September 20, 2013 [http://www.rosbalt.ru/blogs/2013/09/20/1178183.html].
29 Trenin, [http://www.nationalassembly.info/forums/viewtopic.php?t=116].
National ideas of economic competitiveness are important and popular, particularly in Kazakhstan. This idea turned out to be an indispensable part of official policy. Assylbek Bissembayev, former leader of the liberal movement in Kazakhstan, emphasizes that “there can be no question of the failure or crash of liberal values in Kazakhstan. Not least, because [the development of liberal ideas] is still ahead. […] Without development of liberal values, [such as] free market, democracy and realization of human rights, there cannot be equitable international partnership. It is also naïve to argue that in Kazakhstan there is no ground for developing and nurturing liberal values. In fact, there are already strata that profess liberal values.”

In the post-Soviet context, because of underdevelopment of political institutions, the primacy of economic liberalism over political can yield more beneficial results for further development of liberal ideals. Basically, while political liberalism and economic liberalism are not the same, they support each other. Inasmuch as Kazakhstan and Russia are countries with relatively high levels of income and have the most advanced economies and diversified societies in the region, individual rights and liberty, which are the cornerstone of liberalism, matter the most. Moreover, in Soviet times these countries experienced the deepest modernization, and since the early 1990s have embarked on serious reform processes. Although neoliberal reforms cannot represent liberalism as such, any hope of a return of the totalitarian past has sunk into oblivion, no matter how deep the crises and social havoc that were caused by the tumultuous years marked by these reforms. In sum, it has to be admitted that individual rights and liberty, which are the cornerstone of liberalism, matter in Kazakhstan and Russia, even if not to the degree in liberal countries.

On the whole, the attitude to liberalism and liberal ideas is more positive in Kazakhstan than in Russia. Kazakhstan has a more balanced nation-building process that is devoid of extremes, whereas Russia suffers from outbreaks of exclusivism on the side of both majorities and minorities. As well, the Russian academic and media environment features an abundance of subjective interpretations of liberalism by a number of experts and analysts who deeply resent unjust globalization and international system. Furthermore, Eurasianism, which is negatively predisposed to liberalism, is much more popular in Russia.

It is noteworthy that not only independent or opposition figures but also pro-government thinkers and experts in Kazakhstan have started expressing liberal values again in recent

---

30 Concerning Kazakhstan, see the works of Assel Rustemova, for example, “Political economy of Central Asia: initial reflections on the need for a new approach”, Journal of Eurasian Research, Vol.2, issue 1, 2011, pp.30-39
31 Tatilya, Kenzhe, “Kristalnoy".
years. For instance, philosopher Valikhan Tuleshov at the Foundation of the First President claims that in the 20 years since the collapse of Soviet system, along with social democracy, liberal ideology has again become popular in the country. He goes further, interpreting the pro-independence movement of Kazakh intellectuals in the early 20th century as being in line with liberalism. As well, some pro-governmental politicians (e.g., Azat Perunashev) put forward the idea that today’s Kazakhstan can be seen as the embodiment of liberal ideas promulgated by pre-Soviet liberal Kazakh intellectuals.  

Some strong pockets of liberalism already exist in the field of education and sciences in the country. For instance, KIMEP University in Kazakhstan, which is the oldest, largest US-style academic institution in the CIS area, has produced thousands of graduates who are employed in top state organs and private institutions. The recently established Nazarbayev University curriculum is designed according to American and British requirements. A number of young bureaucrats, technocrats and academicians have been educated through the Bolashak program in the Western universities, according to liberal programs. 

Elections and administrations matter, but institutions and perceptions of people matter much more. It is obvious that two decades is a relatively short time to establish viable institutions and nurture the perceptions and culture recognizing the primacy of individual freedom. Nonetheless, it seems that both Russia and Kazakhstan are heading towards the right destination. We should be hopeful and avoid stereotypical and orientalistic interpretations. Even if we assume that the existing regimes are authoritarian, they are more or less institutionalized regimes that are predisposed towards “free trade,” which in turn will bring about gradual liberalization in other spheres. Furthermore, it can be assumed that the dominant political groupings in Russia and Kazakhstan can achieve their aim “to be firmly institutionalized as economic-financial groups with minimum negative consequences,” which is undoubtedly one of their primary aims, if only the political system resembles more or less the features of a normal country that respects liberal values. In other words, the dominant groups holding power groups have already ripened to look for a predictable future that demands establishing stable institutions and the rule of law, which are strong prerequisites for nurturing liberal values.

How to Promote Liberalism in Post-Soviet Societies? 

To deal with the challenge of underdevelopment and unpopularity of liberal ideas successfully, post-Soviet societies must first be provided with proper representation of and proper information about liberal ideas. Liberalism must not be downgraded to the level of promoting the rights of sexual minorities or allegedly oppositional oligarchs. In other words, liberalism must be properly promoted as a practical (workable) and comprehensive set of ideas firstly dedicated to the development of all individuals to the heights of personal advancement, and protection of the rights and well-being of the 

---

32 Tuleshov, Valikhan “Liberalizm v predverii sobstvennoy natsionalnoy istorii” (“Liberalism: at the threshold of our own national history”), Ak Zhol, August 11, 2012 [http://www.akzhol.kz/index.php?p=news_unit&owner_id=6&parent_id=0&iid=6222; http://old.abai.kz/node/9965]

33 Hankla, Charles, R.; Daniel Kuthy, “Economic liberalism in illiberal regimes: Authoritarian variation and the political economy of trade,” International Studies Quarterly, Vol. 57, No 3, 2013, pp. 492-504.
A great majority of post-Soviet people (standard families, students, academicians, pensioners, the disabled, religious believers and others) and lastly dedicated to providing venues for political and intellectual elites to benefit from the achievements common to all humanity.

It is necessary to transfer correct information about the benefits of liberal ideas through different channels to academia, officials and ordinary citizens of post-Soviet countries, particularly where the greatly flawed, abrupt marketization of the 1990s brought no less than social catastrophe to a majority of ordinary people and to educated strata in general.

Second, it needs to be shown that the social welfare state as an economic model and liberalism as a political ideal are not contradictory concepts. Furthermore, the social welfare state as a model for market economy, and liberalism as a comprehensive political ideal and pluralistic outlook, are actually two halves of one whole. The social structure of “Eurasian” societies is inherently oriented more toward the social welfare state than laissez faire capitalism, which does not at all imply being inherently non-liberal. Therefore, it is necessary to do intensive research on different models of liberal states featuring welfare state models of capitalism.

Basically, the variation of liberalism called social welfare liberalism, or general welfare liberalism, tries to strike a balance between individual liberty and social justice. In other words, this model, similar to classic liberalism, is firmly based on market economy and expansion of civil rights and freedom; however, it stands for a governmental role in addressing issues of healthcare, education and poverty; i.e., it represents an accommodation of classical liberalism to the harsh realities of corporate capitalism.

It is very important to realize that the common feature of a great majority of pre-Soviet liberal Russian thinkers was their desire to modify classical liberalism (of Lockean character) in the direction of “a strong state which addresses issues that go beyond the individual and are common to all people, and without which no individual could exist, nor would it be possible to fully realize the principle of freedom.”34 In other words, although researchers label the concepts of liberalism developed by various pre-Soviet Russian thinkers differently (for instance, P. Struve’s concept is depicted as “constructivist liberalism”35 or “constitutional liberalism,” Chicherin’s concept is called “conservative liberalism”36), in essence, all of them supported, on the one hand, absolute primacy of individual liberties and, on the other, responsible government.

To develop liberal ideas in the countries participating in Eurasian integration, it is of utmost necessity to differentiate between liberalism as a humanistic idea (liberalism in a

---

34 Schenner, “Birth”.
35 Klimina, Anna, “Ideas of constructed market in late Imperial Russia: Constructivist liberalism of Peter Struve (1870–1944)”, Economics Bulletin, Vol. 31 no.3, 2011, pp. 2041-2052.
36 Schenner, “Birth”. 

broad sense) and neoliberalism as a model of liberalism. There can be essentially illiberal and anti-democratic regimes that can adopt neoliberal economic agendas, like Chile during the dictatorship of General Pinochet.

Briefly, liberal alternatives to neoliberalism which correspond more with the human-oriented classic understanding of liberalism have to be found and developed, especially in the post-Soviet region. Hence, the best model of liberalism in post-Soviet countries is expected to build harmony between the goods of the community and individual freedom. Only then can liberal ideas be saved from being negatively juxtaposed with positively perceived Soviet characteristics.

Third, the characteristics of post-totalitarian society can and should be changed by specially organized education. Particularly, those liberal values which are elevated to the level of “universal” must always be promoted at the individual level and also at societal level by properly organized educational programs. The key structural reforms needed in the educational sector have these aims: making it human-oriented; promotion of human rights education in the entire society (from special courses in universities, the military and police academies to driving courses with the aim of inculcating respect and honor for human life and dignity); reappraisal of academic and school information in the direction of promoting pluralism and tolerance; increasing awareness about liberal ideas, the necessity of civic nationalism and passive secularism among the intelligentsia (who are a key driving force in getting liberal ideas naturalized by a society, or torn away).

To succeed in establishing truly world-class education, the overly bureaucratic and marginalized system of higher education in Russia and Kazakhstan (where talented people rarely wish to work) must be reformed. An overly bureaucratic system specifically impedes the development of social sciences, which are an indispensable vehicle for transforming society from within. Even the Kazakhstan system of higher education, the most ambitious among countries in the Central Asian region, became bogged down in bureaucracy. It is good news that a new minister of education appointed in fall 2013 is a young academician with a liberal outlook who received primary education and experience in the West. However, awareness needs to be raised about the necessity of systemic reforms by doing research, especially comparative studies.

Fourth, the development of the social sciences, particularly independent research centers functioning in close partnership with colleagues from leading universities and think tanks, as well the development of independent media with a liberal outlook that functions by taking into account the sensitivities of their societies, are of utmost importance in naturalizing liberal ideas in Russia and Kazakhstan. All post-totalitarian countries suffer from serious lack of experts and specialists working in the field of the social sciences who are familiar with contemporary notions and paradigms of the social sciences that have contributed greatly to the liberalization and humanization of mind and academia in developed countries. There is also a serious lack of literature concerning the benefits of liberal ideas for post-Soviet states written by local specialists, especially in the face of an uptick in the anti-liberal turn in Russia. On the whole, the developed social sciences and education and well-established liberal values and viable civil societies depend on each other. In general, the cooperation and partnership of the citizens of Russia and Kazakhstan with their colleagues from liberal countries, which already exists in business, must be strengthened in education.
Last but not least, it is of utmost importance to engage with mainstream religious communities in Russia and Kazakhstan, and not just with chosen minority groups, which are generally non-traditional communities. To be able to develop liberal ideas in Russia, it is of vital importance to engage with the Orthodox Christian community, particularly with the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church. One of the main social forces that is very skeptical about liberalism is the Orthodox Church. Some leaders of the Orthodox Christian community assume that the main idea of liberalism is to “liberate a person from divinity and Church and draw them into an abyss of depravity”.

Nonetheless, the main idea of properly perceived liberalism is to provide freedom of choice between good and evil (for believers, to choose between sin and acts that please God), which does not essentially contradict the aims of religion. As one Russian liberal thinker noticed, a great majority of liberal-minded people glorify neither same-sex marriage nor euthanasia, but defend the rights of all people to maintain harmonious coexistence with various groups and communities.37 A basic idea of properly understood liberalism is that the perennial qualities of a good person can develop to their fullest only in a fully responsible individual who is free to choose and act.

Moreover, there is great potential for upgrading the acceptability of core liberal ideas centered around the sanctity of freedom of choice, freedom of religion and the way of life among communities of believers who were systematically purged, or at least ostracized and neglected, for decades. Nonetheless, religious believers themselves have to generate a methodology of interpretation of religious sources which, first, produces “inclusivist religious identity” conducive to accepting the existence of “parallel truths”; and, second, develops in believers the understanding of eschewing or even shunning any idea of “capturing the government or establishing their own regime,” or at least any idea of relying on state power to achieve their aims. Surely, any religious doctrine can develop genuinely only in the realm of civil society independence from the state but protected from encroachments of the state, which can be achieved only as a result of cultivating core liberal values.

Contrary to widespread stereotypes concerning Islam, the paper argues that it may be more difficult to engage with the Russian Orthodox Church than with Sunni Muslim communities in promoting liberal values. Historically, Muslims living in Russia did not have omnipotent centers of clericalism comparable to the Catholic Church in France or the Russian Orthodox Church in the Russian Empire. Moreover, in Sunni Islam there is no category comparable to the Catholic or Orthodox clergy, and no institution like the Catholic or Orthodox Church. Also, Sunni Islam is devoid of a priesthood, hierarchical order and particular state-centrism. As well, in contrast to the Shia doctrine, in the Sunni Islamic context in general, and in the Sunni “Eurasian” context, in particular, religious authorities have usually been controlled by secular rulers. As some scholars have recently started pointing out, if appropriate interpretations of Islamic sources are done, it can be seen that in Islam every single right must be respected; furthermore, the rights of individuals cannot be violated for the interests of a community. These ideas resonate very well with core liberal values, especially with those based on the sanctity of human life.

37 Svoboda Lichnosti: “Vzglyad liberalniy i vzglyad pravoslavniy” (“ Freedoms and liberties of individuals: Liberal view and Orthodox Cristian view”), Radio Liberty, July 13, 2005 [http://archive.svoboda.org/programs/rt/2004/rt.071304.asp].
About the Author

Galym Zhussipbek is a faculty member at Department of International Relations, Suleyman Demirel University, Almaty, Kazakhstan. He also works as an analyst in several research institutions. He received BA, MA, and PhD (2008) in international relations from Ankara University. Dr. Zhussipbek’s main research interests are European security, security in the post-Soviet region, economic, social and religious situation in Central Asia, state-religion relations.