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Abstract

Russian leaders need a way to bond the various peoples and groups of their country together. To solve this problem, they have turned to the idea of teaching religion and ethics in schools. However, each region and school is implementing this directive in a different way. The question of how best to instill spirituality and morality—thereby unifying the people living in the Russian Federation—is being hotly debated.

Uniting a Country of Diverse Peoples

By unleashing political and economic pluralism, Gorbachev's Perestroika released the country from the ideological strictures which once bound the Soviet Union together. Shaken by the 1991 coup, the various peoples in the country quickly separated themselves into their own national homes and traditional cultures. The new, post-Soviet Russia did not have adequate ideological slogans (beyond the appeal to "Enrich yourself!") capable of consolidating the nation.

The consequence of economic reforms in the absence of established civil society institutions was social-economic polarization. People from various social layers, residing in one country, actually live in different Russias which do not intersect with each other and it is difficult to describe Russian citizens as a united people. There are several of these Russias, which have almost nothing in common except for their language.

In order to maintain control of Russia, its leaders have introduced a series of manipulable symbols into the social consciousness, such as "managed democracy," "state interests," "the vertical of power," "stability," etc.¹ The effort to define a national idea showed that these concepts either had no real basis in society or quickly went out of style. Of all the various slogans, the only one that currently ties together the collective subconscious is: "At least there is no war." But the recent experience of the countries in the Middle East and North Africa shows that authoritarian stability is deceptive and fragile. The situation at home is also alarming: the unending conflict in the North Caucasus, terrorist acts, skin-heads, the murder of emigrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia, military hazing, corruption, and "werewolves in epaulets [policemen seeking bribes]."

Against this background, religious leaders raised their voice. We must go into the schools, they said, because the only thing that will save us is spiritual and moral education among the new generation. Secular political leaders, who now are regularly visible at holiday services, quickly grasped at this straw. "The rela-

tionship between the state and religious organization in the sphere of education and up-bringing is extremely important," President Medvedev noted. They affect the most significant questions of forming one's world view, the system of values of any person, and, of course, in the most serious way influence the shaping of an individual citizen of the Russian Federation's personality.² The authorities spoke of their citizens' world view and a general system of values and, apparently, consciously gave the national idea religious coloring.

In August 2009, the president issued a directive about introducing spiritual-moral content into schools. On October 29, 2010, the Russian government confirmed a plan for pilot testing a course on "The Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics." The explanation issued along with the course noted that its goal is to "inspire in young people an understanding of moral behavior based on knowledge and respect for the cultures and religious traditions of the multinational peoples of Russia and a dialogue with representatives of other cultures and world views."

An Experiment in Religious Education

The three-year experiment in teaching the comprehensive course, "The Basics of Religious Culture and Secular Ethics" began in April 2010 in the fourth and fifth courses of Russia's middle schools. At the end of the three years, a decision will be taken whether to introduce the course into the federal curriculum. The course has six modules, examining the fundamentals of Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, world religious cultures, and secular ethics. Typically, the classes are taught by history, literature, and art teachers. By the beginning of 2011, 240,000 Russian school children in 21 regions were involved. The parents and their students decide which of the six modules they will pursue. These choices are influenced by objective factors, such as the religion of a given region, and subjective factors, such as the level of activity among local religious organizations, the personal convictions of bureaucrats, and

1 Georgij Satarov. «Nedovarennaya lapsha na razvesistykh ushakh. Manipulyatsii-2». «Ezhednevnyi zhurnal», 19 January 2011 <http://www.ej.ru/?a=note&id=10742>

2 Remarks by President Dmitri Medvedev during a meeting with representatives of Russia's leading faiths at Barvikha, Moscow region, 21 July 2009, <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/4864>

the nature of the relations between the local authorities and religious leaders.

The authorities did not introduce this idea out of the blue: it also reflected some requests from below. Discussions about studying Orthodox Christian culture in Russia's schools began in the beginnings of the 2000s, if not earlier. They were led by enthusiasts, such as Russian language and literature teacher at Ulyanovsk Gymnasium no. 33 Irina Petrishcheva. For ten years she sought to introduce such classes for second graders. She said that she taught the kids the basics of the Bible in line with traditional Orthodox Church teachings.

Although Ulyanovsk was not among the regions where the experiment was conducted, Governor Sergei Morozov independently introduced the courses into the region's schools. Now 10,000 students in the vast majority of the region's schools study these topics. This is Morozov's management style: to track federal tendencies and introduce in advance what the federal leaders consider among the top priorities at the moment. Today's federal tendency is to turn the state toward the church. In his January 2011 Christmas greeting, the governor spoke of a "sacral vertical" as a moral buckle binding the people, discussed the concept of "spiritual security," described the church as an engine of modernization, and thanked the local church for adopting a "state-centered approach to the problem of up-bringing."

Liberal analysts speak about the clericalization of the state and the statization of the church as important processes that are now combining in Russia. Church representatives reject any clericalization of secular life, declaring that they come only when they are called. "The state is searching," according to Archpriest Dmitry Savelev from the Vladimir Church in Ulyanovsk. "Lacking ideological and spiritual supports, it is seeking a basis for the unity of the people and grabs at all possibilities. They remembered that Orthodoxy is a state-forming church and now the president and local authorities are appealing to the Russian Orthodox Church in a more positive manner. This is correct. They suppressed us for decades and now the state is partially trying to apologize for what has been destroyed and compensate for it."

It is clear that the new course is contradictory and causes confusion: Is it primarily focused on education or is it aimed at providing a moral upbringing? The majority of the Ulyanovsk teachers who agreed to be interviewed, regardless of their religious convictions, believe that the course is moral and even "rehabilitational."

Choosing a Topic of Study

The contradictions in the course also cause confusion among the parents who must choose which of the six topics their children will study. The preferences vary from

region to region. In Ulyanovsk, the parents are almost evenly divided between "The Fundamentals of Christian Orthodoxy," "Secular Ethics," and "World Religions," with a small preference for ethics. The choice depends on what the parents expect the result of the course to be. Those who support a dialogue of cultures in order to promote agreement chose to study world religions; those who want a moral upbringing and the study of traditional religion, choose Orthodoxy or a different religion; those who feel that the children's primary goal in school is to study pick ethics. Parents who fear that the teachers will try to convince the children of their personal beliefs also choose ethics.

If you recognize that spirituality is an attribute exclusively of religious knowledge, as priests and church-oriented pedagogues believe, and morality is the product of secular learning, then everything becomes complicated. In this case fourth graders and their parents have to decide one of the basic questions of philosophy: between spirituality and morality. Thus a focus on world religions is often the best choice for people interested in pure knowledge. It is possible to make secular ethics a part of a moral upbringing, but not the history of world religions, according to Sociologist Natalya Zakharova.

Both church and secular authorities agree on the need to incorporate spiritual-moral education in the humanitarian topics of the school program. Vasilii Dronov, a teacher and religious studies expert and a member of the missionary department of the Simbirsk and Melekes Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church, is convinced that the best way to teach Orthodox culture is through a correct understanding of Russian history and literature. Margarita Lukyanova, head of the department of pedagogy and psychology at the Ulyanovsk Institute for Continuing Education, notes that questions of ethics and religion are part of courses on history, world art, literature and it is necessary only to know how to discuss them. "Instead what we have is dividing the questions into separate courses making additional work and complicated problems—the same holds for secular ethics—we are ripping these topics out of their organic context."

These arguments call into question the whole idea of the new courses. They make clear that the state, church, and teachers went down a simple path: It seems that it is easier to introduce into schools spiritual-moral upbringing as a separate topic, hand out textbooks and syllabi, force teachers to take week-long training sessions rather than it is to competently include the spiritual-moral problem in history and literature lessons, which would require of the teachers a qualitatively different level of skill and knowledge.

Picking the Right Age

Generally, teachers say that the best age to start education in religious cultures is in the younger grades and the earlier the better. By the fifth grade, the kids already have a “character.” By contrast, it is possible to talk to young people about God in simple words. In these cases, however, one gets the feeling that the teachers would prefer teaching kids at a younger age because they fear “adult” questions which they cannot answer because of insufficient religious and methodological preparation. According to the Ulyanovsk Pedagogical University’s Lyubov Guryleva, at a younger age, the teacher is still an unquestioned authority and teaching spiritual culture possibly will be more effective. On the other hand, this involves a certain amount of force, with the imposition of values, including religious ones, because the child at this age is defenseless before adults and not prepared to make a conscious choice.

Many specialists think that the age chosen for the courses was not the best possible. The children who have finished elementary school are adapting to a new situation at middle school where they have a different teacher for each subject. Second, at age 10–11 children are going through a crucial middle period and are becoming more

“critical.” Information from adults is often received with great doubt. Children can only understand the abstract concept of God when they are nearer the higher classes, when they are more self-aware. Shame appears in children when they are 8–9 years old, specifically when a child knows that he did something wrong and is afraid that someone else will find out about it. Only at the age of 15–16 do (a minority of) children start to develop a conscience, when they are embarrassed in front of themselves regardless of whether anyone else knows about it. At this moment, they start on the path of autonomous morality and this is the source of genuine religiosity. Smart Orthodox priests and psychologists understand that helping a person develop faith, one can only operate on what is already in the person and not on what might eventually be there.

When I visited the second grade at a private gymnasium, I conducted a series of short interviews with the children. They said things like: “We learned a lot of interesting things, what happened before our era and after.” “We learned about icons and churches, what happened long ago. I learned about God and how to read Orthodox Christian books.” Only one boy said that the topic was difficult, boring, and not interesting to him.

About the Author

Sergei Gogin is an independent journalist and a regional correspondent for Radio Liberty. He has published additional material on this topic at the following site: <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2011/3/go12.html>.

ANALYSIS

Siberian Regionalism Today

By Anton Sveshnikov, Omsk

Abstract

With a long history reaching to the 19th century, neo-regionalist ideas continue to carry weight in Siberia. But the movement as a whole has had little success attracting support among the political and business elite or ambitious young people. Accordingly, neo-regionalist promoters are continuing to try to increase the popularity of their ideas.

Classical Regionalism

The precursor of contemporary separatist (or regionalist) ideas in Siberia and a model that the ideologists of Siberian independence often refer to is the social political movement of the second half of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century that was known as Siberian Oblastnichestvo (Siberian Regionalism). Among the representatives of this movement were such prominent social activists as Nikolai Yadrintsev and Grigorii

Potantin. The basic ideas of the movement were laid out in Yadrintsev’s book *Siberia as a Colony* (1882), which became the “Bible of *Oblastnichestvo*.”

Yadrintsev’s ideas can be summarized as follows: under current conditions, Siberia is a colony. Necessary reforms, aimed at improving this situation, include, in particular, ending the use of Siberia as a place to send criminals from the European parts of Russia; developing a system of measures allowing the growth of Sibe-

rian industry, culture, and education; creating local self-government bodies in Siberia, and changing state policy toward the indigenous peoples of Siberia.

This essentially liberal movement developed through several stages. However, beginning with the famous “Case of the Siberian Separatists” (1865–8), the authorities were constantly exerting pressure on it. The height of Siberian separatism came in 1918 with the adoption of the “Declaration of Siberian Independence” and the creation of the Siberian Oblast Duma. But given the Civil War raging at the time, this action had no real practical consequences. The same Temporary Siberian Government that adopted the declaration revoked it three months later and the Siberian Duma was disbanded. Following the establishment of the Soviet Union, Siberian separatism practically came to an end. Soviet historiography took a negative view of *oblastnichestvo*, describing it as “bourgeois separatism.”

Revival of the Regionalist Idea

The revival of the regionalist idea in Siberia took place in the years after Gorbachev announced his Perestroika policy. During this time, a number of social organizations advocating the idea of “Siberian independence from the center” began to appear in the large cities of Eastern Siberia. Irkutsk became a center for this kind of activity. By contrast, there were no visible groups animated by this idea in Western Siberia. The most famous of the East Siberian movements were the Baikal Popular Front (1988 and then recreated in 2006) and the Liberating Army of Siberia (1998), which renamed itself as the Oblast Alternative of Siberia (OAS) in 2000. This movement periodically cooperated on the regional level with various opposition parties (Yabloko and LDPR) and published its own newspaper *Baikal News* (*Baikal'skievesti*). The Popular Front published its own periodical, *Shaman-Kamen'*. Representatives of these movements and activists publically expressing sympathy for the ideas of neo-regionalism simultaneously served in local government bodies.

The Social-Political Program of Neo-Regionalism

The main ideologists of contemporary neo-regionalism are the leader of OAS, the Irkutsk journalist Mikhail Kulekhov and the Moscow journalist and historian (born in the Siberian city of Achinsk) Dmitry Verkhoturov. Despite all the differences in their views (Verkhoturov actively criticizes classical regionalism and considers the Russian colonization of Siberia as a bloody annexation, destroying the high culture of the indigenous Siberian peoples), it is possible to identify several major common elements in their political program. This

program sharply criticizes the status quo system of political and economic relations in which Moscow exploits Siberia as a “raw material appendage,” seeing it essentially as an unlimited reservoir of oil and gas.

The neo-regionalists propose a radical reform of the political system in Russia, aimed at creating a federal system with real rights for self-governance. Within the framework of this federalism, it is necessary first to reexamine the system of distributing financial resources in the form of taxes and other fiscal revenues to increase the share of the regions (no longer giving everything to Moscow). The second step is redistributing power. The federal center should deal with issues of foreign policy and defense, while the regional governments address questions regarding “domestic affairs,” including education, health care, and the development of culture. Third is giving the Siberian regions the right to adopt independent decisions in the economic and legal spheres with neighboring states. In the areas of economic and cultural relations, the Siberian Federation should seek to realize its own (Siberian) interests in strategic partnership with the countries of Central Asia and the Far East. The regional authorities should, using the potential they have accumulated, enable the development in Siberia of a modernizing productive economy and science, thereby overcoming Siberia's status as a “raw material appendage” and staunching the “brain drain.” Given this program, there are considerable continuities between the classical regionalism of the nineteenth century and contemporary neo-regionalism regarding the political status of Siberia.

Contexts

The activity of the neo-regionalists is evolving in a context that favors their goals. First, in various layers of the Siberian population there is a naturally growing dissatisfaction with the policies of the center and the economic and demographic situation in the region. Periodically in Irkutsk there are protest actions, which increasingly use the white and green (Siberian) flag. According to the Director of the Irkutsk Center for Independent Social Research and Education Mikhail Rozhansky “from rally to rally, the anti-colonial pathos and anti-Moscow rhetoric grows.” Even the governors of the region periodically speak about “Siberian” interests and criticize the policy of the center. A prominent example was Tomsk Governor Viktor Kress's speech at the Siberian Agreement regional association in 2006.

Second, various cultural groups now actively use the concept of an original “Siberian culture” and even “Siberians as their own nation.” For example, in 2005, the Siberian Internet project “Siberskaya vol'gota” (<http://www.volgota.com/>) was established to propagate the idea of a Siberian language that differed from Russian. From

the beginning of the 2000s, a group of Siberian artists (V. Bugaev, E. Dorokhov, B. Mironov), art historians, and curators actively propagandized the idea of a new Siberian style in pictorial art—Siberskayaarkheo-art. From 2008, the journal *Unknown Siberia* has been published in Novosibirsk. The classics of regionalism long ago became central elements in defining Siberian identity. These works are being republished and there are various events and conferences dedicated to them. Additionally, many statues and other memorials are being erected in honor of the 19th century regionalists.

Nevertheless, one should not overestimate the positive nature of the social political context for the regionalist movement. The administrative elite today is too heavily dependent on the “center.” Accordingly, Kress’s statement noted above is more the exception than the rule. In the official media controlled by the authorities, there are almost no stories about neo-regionalism as a political tendency. In official discourse, such ideas simply do not exist. At the same time, the media actively exaggerates the idea of a “Chinese threat,” which would unite the territory of Siberia and the Far East to China. A first indicator of this danger is seen in the massive illegal migration of Chinese to these regions. In state media the neo-regional tendency implicitly can only exist in stories about Siberian “self-identity,” for example, in the broadcasts of the Siberian cultural channel.

The members of United Russia, who formally make up the leadership of the region, naturally, given the name of their party, speak out against any form of separatism. This party consistently wins a majority of votes in all elections.

The regional economic elite, whose significance is obviously weakened by the entrance into the Siberian market of large national and transnational corporations, such as Gazprom and Norilsknikel, also is not interested in such political projects. Its main goal is stability. Siberian businessmen have become accustomed to realizing their interests in the conditions of the existing regime. And in this case, neo-regionalism, with its calls for radical reform of the political system, is seen by the economic elite as a threat to stability. If in the 1990s, the political and economic elite could “play” in neo-federal games, in the 2000s interest in such topics among economic leaders is much lower. However, the neo-regionalists are targeting precisely these groups with their message.

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Additional Reading:

- Verkhoturov, D., *Pokorenie Sibiri: mify i real'nosti*, Moscow, 2005.
- Verkhoturov, D., *Ideia sibirskoi samostoitel'nosti vchera i segodnia*, Moscow, 2009

The political elite of Kazakhstan, to whom some of the neo-regionalist leaders occasionally appeal prefer not to intervene in the “internal affairs” of Russia.

Scholars and university lecturers in the Siberian region are institutionally strongly dependent on the federal government and therefore the majority of them do not openly support the political program of regionalism.

Ambitious young people, who potentially could be a social base for the neo-regionalist movement also have managed to accommodate themselves to the existing “colonial” regime. The basic mechanism for the younger generation to realize their plans is through greater geographical mobility. Increasingly the graduates of Siberian universities are trying to make their career and achieve their potential by moving to the center, either Moscow or St. Petersburg. The geographic trajectory of a successful career was already clear in Soviet times (if not earlier): “From the village to the city, from a provincial city to the capital.” It is clear that the neo-regional perspective, requiring the rejection of such a life strategy, has little interest for young people. However, a small number of students periodically participate in some neo-regionalist actions. Rural residents, industrial workers, and pensioners mainly back the paternal model of a strong state.

Thus, the only potential allies of the neo-regionalists are the political elite of the national-cultural autonomies (Tyva, Khakassia, Gorno Altai) who are seeking to “build small nations.” But the programs of these groups are mainly aimed at ethnic goals and their activity has been declining during the 2000s.

It is clear that the neo-regionalist movement opposes the federal government’s policy of building a strict and effective vertical of power. Nevertheless, the federal government sees these few and insignificant groups as a way to let off steam, publically limiting them through informal comments to the governors not to “play with separatism.” The one real exception was the Federal Security Service warning in 2000 about the extremist character of the AOS, which resulted in the organization changing its name, but not its acronym.

Overall, it is clear that the chances of realizing a neo-regionalist program are not great. Accepting this reality, the ideologists of this movement have set themselves the goal of forming a wide social base by popularizing their views.

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Ortting, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen (www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich), the Resource Security Institute, the Institute of History at the University of Zurich (<http://www.hist.uzh.ch/>) and the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at The George Washington University. It is supported by the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language Russland-Analysen (www.laenderanalysen.de/russland), the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia (www.res.ethz.ch), and the Russian Regional Report. The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

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Layout: Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann, Michael Clemens

ISSN 1863-0421 © 2011 by Forschungsstelle Osteuropa, Bremen and Center for Security Studies, Zürich

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