

## **Why Russians Prefer Expansion to Consumption and Autocracy to Democracy?**

In the twenty-first century Russia has become an autocratic power with unsatisfied geopolitical ambitions within the territory of the former Soviet Union. This transformation has a wide public support despite the recent hardships that followed after the annexation of Crimea and all kinds of sanctions. The explanation of this paradox is possible to find in the development of theoretical concept that is known as "Muscovite matrix".

### **The internal roots of Russian imperialism**

"Muscovite matrix" as the Russian "Sonderweg" was firstly introduced in the article of US historian Richard Hellie (Hellie, 1977) and found further application in his work on Russian imperial history (Hellie, 2005). Meanwhile, the Swedish economist Stefan Hedlund made serious attempts to develop this concept on the basis of new institutional economic history that is the branch of modern economic thought opposing neoclassical mainstream (Hedlund, 2005; 2006; 2011). In his 2005 book he defined the core of Russian institutional matrix.

"... The real core of Russia's institutional matrix is a strong aversion to the very notion of formal rules and impartial enforcement mechanisms. It was firmly entrenched not only in formal organizations that had been built to exploit the absence of rules, and in skills that had evolved amongst the players in such games. Even more so, it was entrenched in systems of norms that served to rationalize this as a superior and just system" (Hedlund, 2005: 207-208).

Further Hedlund mentioned five main pillars of the Muscovite matrix. They are: unaccountable government, suppression of rights to private property, absence of the rule of law (rule by law instead of the rule of law), *kormlenie* (feeding) that leads to the rent-seeking society, and, finally, state ideology (Orthodox Church, Third Rome, xenophobia). "The combine outcome of these five stepping-stones was reflected in a rather peculiar form of political culture that would come to be known as a 'service state', staffed by a 'service nobility'" (Hedlund, 2006: 784).

For the purpose of detecting the roots of Russian imperialism we should, first of all, pay attention to the fact that the first four pillars of "Muscovite matrix" doom Russia to permanent backwardness. The numerous researches prove the fact that deficit of the rule of law and property rights results in the relatively low levels of GDP per capita (e.g. IPRI, 2013)<sup>1</sup>. But the occasional oil and gas revenues supported traditional Russian believes in the "strong hand" delivering prosperity and rising wealth. The term "democratic values" became identified with the disasters of the 1990s. Constructed on the "World Values Survey" data the evaluation of political culture in Russia by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) displays the decisive rejection of democratic values by the Russian people<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Countries in the top quintile of IPRI (International Property Rights Index) scores (i.e. top 20%) show a per capita income approximately seven times that of the bottom quintile countries. Russia's standing in the bottom quintile had been accompanied by the per capita GDP equal to the third quintile's average figure (IPRI, 2013) only due to the windfall oil and gas revenues in the previous years.

<sup>2</sup> The Russian score for political culture is 2,5 that is equal to Afghanistan, Iran and Central African Republic. The lower score has the only one country – North Korea – 1,5. For instance, in Turkmenistan it is two times higher than in Russia (EIU, 2014). It has sense to note that sometimes the statements in the opinion polls in Russia which support democracy may be misleading. In the special report on the attitude to democracy prepared by the Russian leading sociological think-tank "Levada Center" there are the following figures: 64% consider that Russia needs democracy against 24% who think that it doesn't. But only 13% say that it should be democracy which is similar to the developed countries in Europe and America. The majority of 55% prefers democracy that is "very special, conform-

At the same time resurrecting during the Putin's era Russian service state had accumulated huge resources and launched subsequent militarization. The idea to restore empire penetrated into the minds of Russian ruling elite because of the awareness of the weakness of the Russian social order in the long run. The satellite states viewed as the protecting belt that creates international community based on the similar anti-democratic principles and which jointly stands against the further western expansion to the areas that Kremlin considered its natural domain.

Ukraine under Yanukovich was to much extent governed by Kremlin and treated as the most important country in this coalition. Its turn to the West terrified Russian elite not only as the breakthrough in the protecting belt but, first of all, as the direct menace to the fundamentals of the "Russian Power" as they are. The real nightmare for the Russian rulers became the expectations of the Ukraine's success in the western-oriented reforms and its unpredictable effect on the Russian population. So, the decision to intervene and interrupt this awkward "experiment" was very natural for them.

Meanwhile, the anxiety of the Kremlin in relation to the "harmful" influence of Ukrainian developments on the Russian population was rather excessive. First of all, the social capital of many generations is strongly adjusted to the "service state" with its absolute domination of personal and hierarchical relations and totally corrupted practices. The rule of law and property rights thus represent institutions that are not only incompatible with the sustainability of the Russian type of governance but simultaneously with the accumulated value of rather specific human capital and cultural habits of the masses. Autocratic rule seems to them as the reliable insurance against its melting.

Secondly, the latter circumstance constitutes the links between the masses and the authorities' basic interests. The danger to the ruling machine is viewed as the threat to the convenient "status quo" of the majority. And if this threat is coming from the alien changes in the largest state which has decisive meaning for the building of international authoritarian bloc named "Custom union" the aggression against "defector" is viewed as the noble rescue mission. Moreover, the mission that is not only in the interest of Russia but in the interest of unwise "younger brother" also. What we see here may be called "paternalistic imperialism".

And, finally, territorial expansion historically had the sacred value for the Russians as the main instrument for the defense of naturally unprotected land. In the process of time this mental model had transformed into the perception of the controlled areas as the precondition of the affluence. It is appropriate to say that this way of thinking has material grounds: "Muscovite matrix" is unable to guarantee steady scientific progress and the proliferation of its achievements to different fields of economic activity; instead it is based on the exploitation of natural resources (agricultural lands under the Russian and the first half of the Soviet empire; oil and gas fields in the second half of the Soviet empire and later, including Putin's imperial revival). This fact, of course, contributes to the imperialistic aspirations but one should remember that it is not all explaining.

The Russian empire at the same time represents ideological project. Under communism it had been the land of Marx-Lenin's true teaching; nowadays it again carries true teaching, namely, orthodox Christianity. Thus the Russian nationalism obtains high mission and an ordinary Russian citizen feels himself as the participant of this great noble enterprise. It is relevant to mention that the true God justifies the Russian social order as a whole. The slogan "Russia über alles" is not declared openly yet but certainly implied.

Anyway, we may conclude that the imperialism is deeply embedded in the Russian reality and Russian soul. It has fairly high value for the absolute majority in Russia. And this means the readiness to sacrifice present wealth to the expected gains from expansionism. Empire ("Great Power") is treated like valuable public good that will pay off in the future. The opinion polls confirm this view.

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ing national traditions and peculiarities" and 16% even the democracy that had been in the Soviet Union. 5% consider that Russian doesn't need democracy and 11% hesitate with answer (Volkov, Goncharov, 2015).

## The readiness to sacrifice

First of all, it is interesting to address to the widely spread public opinion that supports the assumption concerning the view at Crimea’s annexation as the investment in the public good that will bring benefits in future. According to the “Levada Center”, in August 2014 85% of the respondents shared the statement that “Crimea’s accession to Russia is the great achievement of the Russian leadership, the positive effects of which will be felt in the future”. And only 6% demonstrated solidarity with the opposite judgment that “Crimea’s accession to Russia is the fatal error” (Levada Center, 2015a). Since then Russians’ approval of Crimea’s annexation remains very high and only tiny part of the population is definitely against it (table 1).

Table 1.

Do you support Crimea’s accession to Russia?  
(%)

|                        | 2014* |    |    |    |     | 2015 |    |     |    |    |     |      |    |
|------------------------|-------|----|----|----|-----|------|----|-----|----|----|-----|------|----|
|                        | III   | V  | X  | XI | XII | I    | II | III | IV | V  | VII | VIII | IX |
| Definitely yes         | 57    | 54 | 55 | 53 | 50  | 50   | 52 | 55  | 55 | 56 | 51  | 50   | 54 |
| Mostly yes             | 31    | 36 | 31 | 31 | 36  | 34   | 32 | 33  | 34 | 29 | 33  | 33   | 30 |
| Mostly no              | 6     | 4  | 7  | 6  | 7   | 8    | 9  | 6   | 6  | 7  | 8   | 10   | 9  |
| Definitely no          | 1     | 1  | 2  | 5  | 3   | 4    | 3  | 2   | 2  | 2  | 3   | 2    | 3  |
| It is difficult to say | 4     | 5  | 5  | 6  | 4   | 4    | 4  | 4   | 4  | 6  | 4   | 5    | 4  |

\* In March and May the question was asked in the following way: “Are you personally for or against the accession of Crimea to Russia?”

Source: Levada Center, 2015b

These latest results testify against the assumption that Crimea’s euphoria is slowly fading away (Garmonenko, Gorbachev, 2015). This optimistic conclusion was based on the Levada Center’s press-release in August 2015, which contained information that the percentage of respondents who think that the accession of Crimea brought more harm than benefit has increased from 18 to 23 and, on the contrary, the percentage of respondents who think that benefit exceeded harm decreased from 70 to 59 (Levada Center, 2015c). But the rising perceptions of harm in the present time do not necessarily lead to disapproval of the annexation in general. The problem lies in the readiness to endure accompanying hardships and, as we are to see further, it is not reduced.

Research company “Romir” (the exclusive representative of the largest international research network, Gallup International, on the territories of Russia and CIS) presented the exploration of import bans on food supplies from EC, USA and some other countries that were introduced by Russian government 1 year ago (officially called countersanctions). The main conclusions were the following: a) if in September 2014 21% of the Russian citizens noticed the consequences of this self-imposed sanctions, then a year later this number grew to 43%; b) 39% mentioned deterioration of the food quality; c) but, nevertheless, the extension of the action of Russian government supported 71% when only 21% were against it; d) 39% declared that they fully support countersanctions extension because see in it an “adequate answer to the West” and 32% explained their pro-sanctions position owing to the chances that they provide for the development of local production (Romir, 2015).

Approximately the same results received “Levada Center” (table 2). Here it is worth noting that the positive relations to sanctions remains at the same high level for the whole year (it never had been lower than 64%).

Table 2.

How do you generally refer to the administration ban by Russian leadership on imports of food and agricultural products from the European Union and United States in response to the sanctions introduced by these countries with regard to Russia?

(%)

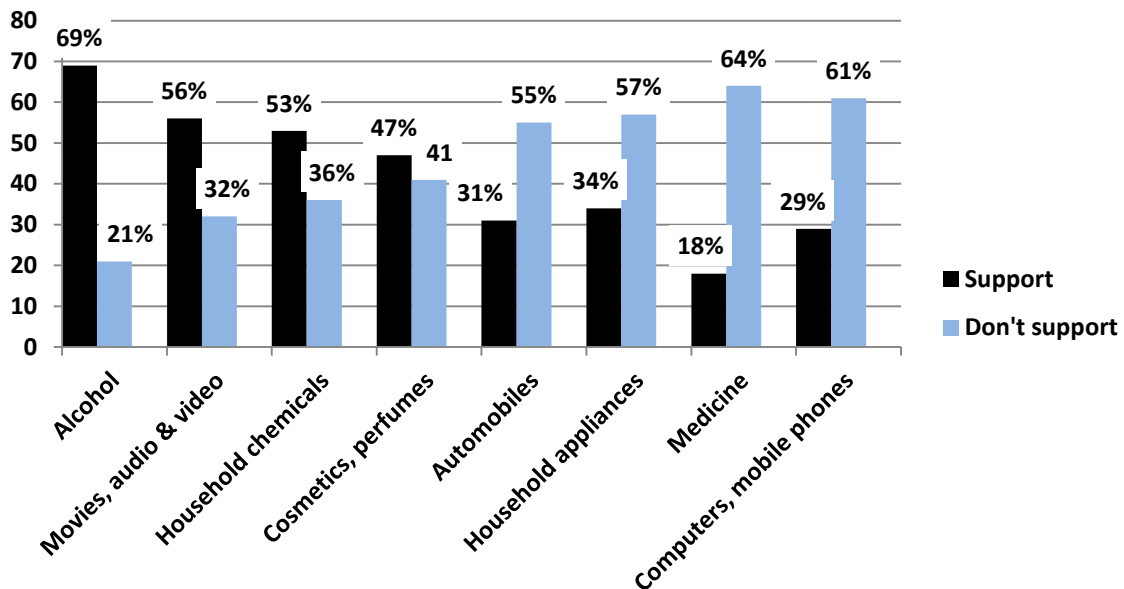
|                        | Aug.14 | Oct.14 | March.15 | 7-10 Aug.15 | 21-24 Aug.15 |
|------------------------|--------|--------|----------|-------------|--------------|
| Definitely positive    | 36     | 29     | 19       | 30          | 25           |
| Mostly positive        | 42     | 44     | 45       | 38          | 42           |
| Mostly negative        | 8      | 13     | 21       | 17          | 17           |
| Definitely negative    | 5      | 2      | 4        | 7           | 4            |
| It is difficult to say | 9      | 12     | 9        | 9           | 12           |

Source: Levada Center, 2015c.

The Russian majority is against lifting up the ban. Only 11% would firmly greet this step in August 2015 (in August 2014 – 14%). Meanwhile, 43% expressed their negative relation to this idea in August 2015 against 31% in August 2014 (Levada Center, 2015c). Moreover, a lot of people would support the proliferation of import restrictions from food and agricultural goods to some other goods. Definitely positive and mostly positive relation to the new presumable import restrictions on different goods vs. definitely negative and mostly negative is given below (figure).

Figure.

How do you relate to import restrictions in response to sanctions against Russia?



Source: Levada Center, 2015d

The data in the figure above is related to August 2015. A year ago the support of import restriction was even higher (only the restrictions on import of medicine were not approved). Nevertheless, this doesn't mean that we have encountered something like considerable shift in the public opinion in favor of more openness. Moreover, Russian people favors hard line in foreign policy and rejects the compromises (table 3). It is just what Russian nationalists call the "symphony between the authorities and the people". 58% share the statement that "the policy of

bans on food imports from Europe and the United States already gives effective and positive political results, Russia has become more respected in the world and its interests are more taken into account” (Levada Center, 2015c).

Table 3.

How, in your opinion, should act Russia in response to the Western Sanctions?  
(%)

|   | Sept.<br>14 | Dec.<br>14 | Jan.<br>15 | March<br>15 | June<br>15 | Aug.<br>15 |
|---|-------------|------------|------------|-------------|------------|------------|
| Continue its previous policy, despite sanctions                               | 68          | 66         | 69         | 72          | 70         | 68         |
| Search for a compromise, to make concessions in order to escape the sanctions | 22          | 24         | 21         | 21          | 20         | 20         |
| It is difficult to say  | 10          | 11         | 11         | 6           | 10         | 12         |

Source: Levada Center, 2015c.

It is very popular now in Russia to speak about “the fight between refrigerator and TV set”. To our opinion, in this case the role of state propaganda is exaggerated very often. The Russian people believe Putin’s TV mainly not because it is so convincing but because they at least hear what they always want to hear. Crimea, Eastern Ukraine are only part of the problem. They are undoubtedly the strong catalysts of Russian nationalism and xenophobia but not the cause of them. There is the clash of values and this fact could be seen when Russian citizens are asked about the cultural influence of the West (table 4).

Table 4.

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: “Western culture has a negative influence on Russian life”?

|                   | May 98 | June13 | June15 |
|-------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Entirely agree    | 37     | 24     | 28     |
| Somewhat agree    | 25     | 41     | 39     |
| Somewhat disagree | 22     | 23     | 20     |
| Entirely disagree | 11     | 6      | 6      |

Source: Levada Center, 2015e.

From table 4 it is clear that the cultural confrontation with the West is deeply embedded in the Russian mental model and the grade of hostility to it doesn’t strongly depend on the current events. The percentage of those who view negatively Western culture influence on Russia is high and stable (62% in May 1998 and 67% in June 2015). And namely this conflict feeds the Russian readiness to sacrifice.

### Final remarks

The imperialistic consciousness of the absolute majority of Russian citizens is clearly working to the benefit of autocratic rule. The ideological vision of Russia as a great power and of its higher mission (“the Russian world” and etc.), popular among the masses, raises the achievement of its proclaimed objectives to the level of ultimate values, and hence fully justifies an authoritarian form of government as a necessary and indispensable means of fulfilling these aims. Autocratic rule became the organic part of Russian political culture (“Muscovite matrix”) and that is why it is not easy to overcome the core of its social order. Social capital of Russians matches this form of governance and resulting inefficiency and backwardness of the country demand the spread of influence through satellite neighboring states that constitutes protecting belt.

The wide hole in it made Russia rulers to challenge the West in order to raise their chances to survive in the new environment where the Russian people's see the permanent and rising danger to their cultural foundations.

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