

Russia 21 – Challenge for the West

Erickson Lecture, 24th April 2013 – Dr Lilia Shevtsova

Distinguished Chair,
Members of Professor Erickson's family,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a privilege and a great pleasure for me to be invited to the University of Edinburgh and have the opportunity to discuss with you one of the most difficult and dramatic topics – the Russian trajectory and what it could mean for the West.

My Russian colleagues who preceded me with their Erickson Lecture have already mentioned Russian affinities toward Scotland. They told Edinburgh how popular Walter Scott and Robert Burns are in Russia; they talked about the role of Patrick Gordon, Barclay de Tolly and other military leaders of Scottish descent in building the Russian Empire. I will point out two other Scottish “factors” that are of particular importance to me. The first is that of Andrew Carnegie, who lent his name to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace where I work. Carnegie's life clearly demonstrates how an individual can make his fortunes work for the public good. The second factor that interests me is the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish tradition of self-government. Russia will turn a new page in its history books when, in addition to love for Walter Scott, we Russians will take an interest in how the Scottish Parliament works, and when our billionaires will endow their country with their wealth. Meanwhile, Russia is still struggling to move on to the next page. Russian society is trying painfully to part with the past, and this will be the topic for our discussion today.

For me personally, Russia presents an analytical ‘Trap’ that has ruined so many experts' reputations. On the one hand, one could admit the scope of Russia's impact on global developments. Of course, this impact is more limited now than during the Soviet period, but it still is formidable and even more threatening due to a new kind of growing unpredictability and uncertainty. The Uncertainty of Trends in this area is replaced by

Uncertainty of Time, which means that the key trends are on the surface, but when they will produce a new reality – if they ever will – is still unclear.

What happens in Russia in the next decade will have an enormous impact on the fate of the UN Security Council and other global institutions, as well as on the system of global security, Europe's energy market and the balance of power in Eurasia. It will also either directly or indirectly affect China's stability and Western civilization's room for maneuvering. Thus, the Euro-Atlantic civilization will have much less of a headache if Russia is part of it. Naturally, Russia's adversarial stance or its decline and disintegration will cause the Western civilization to face new, formidable problems.

The Boston Marathon Bombing has demonstrated how the legacy of the Chechen civil wars, which produced two young people unable to find their place in society, could affect lives and security in a region so distant from Russia and Chechnya! The Boston drama has only proved the existence of the global interconnectedness of which Russia is a part...

Meanwhile, our analytical ability and even our willingness to understand Russian developments, the Russian trajectory and its impact on the outside world, and to foretell the future developments continue to be pretty limited. Thus, both Russian and Western analysts failed to foretell the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In the 1990s, most of them believed that Russia was moving toward democracy, while in fact the opposite was true. In 2000-2002, the majority of observers believed that Putin's Russia had become a new Eldorado of growing well-being and stability; few could predict that the Kremlin would turn to repressions later in Putin's reign and that it would plunge into recession. As late as 2007, few believed that Russia would step up military efforts to counteract the West and that the US would again become Russia's enemy. The list of the events related to Russia that no one has foreseen goes on. The West has paid for its inability to understand and predict with policy failures or policy illusions.

We Russians have made the key contribution to the misunderstanding of the Russian reality by creating numerous clichés and myths. Some of us discussing Russia would present a picture of a strong state with a sense of global responsibility. Others would talk about a society unprepared for civilized life. Others still would discuss the Russian awakening and the imminent victory of the liberal democracy. Meanwhile, the

Russian landscape is much more contradictory – Russia continues to search for its new destiny. The only certainty is that Russia's current system is exhausting itself, but no one can say when Russia will transform itself, what the price of this transformation will be, and who will be its main subject and driving force.

So, what will Russia represent in the near future? I will refer to the historian Arnold Toynbee to answer this question. He analyzed the rise and fall of civilizations through their responses to the challenges they faced. Toynbee has proven that these challenges served as major catalysts for progress. Civilizations perish when they fail to adequately respond to new challenges. If we look at Russia through Toynbee's eyes, we see that the greatest challenge for Russia is Russia itself: the country's history reveals painstaking attempts to abandon the traditional form of political organization in which the state suppresses its citizens' rights. The State in Russia still dominates over the individual. But Russia also poses a challenge to Western civilization. It tests the West's resolve to follow its own principles and defend them from being imitated or discredited.

For the greater part of the 20th century, Russia in its Soviet incarnation was the main alternative to Western civilization. But the Soviet Union lost its battle with the West and vanished off the political map. At that time it seemed that the West could breathe a sigh of relief, since it no longer had global adversaries. However, it soon became evident that the fall of the USSR had presented the West with an even greater challenge than its confrontation with world communism did. First of all, the loss of an ideological alternative deprived the liberal civilization of an external stimulus to its improvement. Second, the Russian Matrix – that is the personalized power system fueled by the imperial aspirations – was able to survive by rejecting communism and discovered a mechanism of using the West to further its agenda. I want to repeat: the Soviet Union survived by confronting the West. Russia survives by imitating Western principles.

The Kremlin's survival mechanism is pretty complicated and represents the perfection of the Art. The Russian Matrix has been surviving through the imitation of democratic institutions, integrating the Russian elite into Western society and protecting the country from Western influences.

The West, which failed to foresee the threat of being undermined from within, has essentially become an effective money laundering device for the Russian corruption class. Mikhail Khodorkovsky was first to point out that raw materials and corruption had become Russia's two largest export items.

The former German Chancellor Schröder, the former Finnish Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen, as well as a host of other high-ranking Western politicians including even former NATO General Secretaries, have sat on the boards of directors of Russian state enterprises; Western analysts have participated in Kremlin-sponsored forums; Russia has financed leading Western think tanks. These and other methods of influencing the West have facilitated the legitimizing of the Kremlin regime and its quest for external resources.

A unique form of state has emerged in Russia. It can be described as a Nuclear-Petro State, whose policy is to simultaneously be with the West, inside the West and against the West. However, as it eventually turned out, the "half-open window" model – that is the model that allowed limited pluralism and open borders – did not guarantee the survival of the Russian Matrix. Widespread electoral fraud provoked the public outcry of late 2011, forcing the regime to look for another survival mechanism. The regime has stopped pretending and playing at democracy. The promised modernization was discarded in 2012 in favor of selective repressions grounded in church fundamentalism and witch-hunts. The West – primarily the United States – as the enemy, has become the basic factor for the consolidation of society, just as it was in the Soviet era. Thus, the Kremlin's last foreign policy slogan "We are just like the West" has been replaced with the rhetoric of "the unique Russian way".

Of course, let's avoid oversimplification. The new model of survival of the Russian Matrix does not mean it is prepared to confront the West. The Kremlin does not seek to turn Russia into North Korea. After all, the Russian élite has too many vested interests in the developed Western democracies. Rather, the Russian élite is trying to continue to cooperate with the West on its own terms. The Kremlin's main demand is "Don't meddle!" Thus, it wants the West to accept the concept of complete sovereignty, which would mean that the West would not concern itself with other countries' internal affairs. This critical demand, which is also supported by China, reflects the Kremlin's

attempts to protect itself from any possible outside influence. The emphasis on complete sovereignty amounts to the rejection of the European Convention on Human Rights, which takes human rights violations out of the realm of exclusive state sovereignty. The Kremlin also demands that the post-Soviet space be recognized as Russia's "sphere of interests". This demand implies a return to the times when the world was divided among large powers. Today the West finds itself in a predicament. Its internal problems do not allow it to focus on Russia. The West is unable to contemplate creating a new normative model of foreign policy. Western countries are tempted to accede to the Kremlin's demand. This creates an unfavorable external climate for transforming Russia and also continues to discredit Western norms.

What is the most likely scenario in Russia's political development under these circumstances? We are witnessing the crisis of Putin's current regime. This is illustrated by the fact that the Kremlin has begun to suppress the opposition and curb civic activism. But the leadership crisis does not automatically lead to a crisis of the personalized power system – the Russian Matrix – it still has some capacity to survive. Accordingly, the system is capable of reproducing itself through regime change, i.e. through a new leader taking power. So far, an alternative to the personalized power system has not emerged in Russia.

We should be aware of the fact that public discontent runs ahead of formal efforts to create political opposition. What is the end result of this factor? A social explosion and a revolution. In other words, the events may spin out of control. From this perspective, it behooves us to remember Alexis de Tocqueville's warning that the regime which arises in the course of revolution may turn out to be much worse than the one that preceded it.

In any event, although many uncertainties about Russia's immediate development remain, its main trend is quite clear – the system can still survive but it has entered a stage of decay. The system lacks historical perspective. It has no future if it loses the support of the most dynamic minority. Ironically, self-destructive mechanisms are currently at work in Russia. Whatever the regime does to survive ends up weakening it. The Kremlin's war on corruption reveals that the regime is not ready to purge its higher echelons. This fact further undermines the public support for the Kremlin. Eliminating channels for self-expression prompts the people to take to the streets and fuels protest.

The Kremlin increasingly resembles a sealed bunker surrounded by a moat and completely isolated from the outside world. One cannot help but wonder whether its inhabitants still retain some semblance of sanity and whether they are able to understand what is going on outside of their bunker's walls. When the head of state dons a white coat and takes to the sky as a chief crane while the state is struggling with a huge backlog of unsolved problems, one becomes really concerned about the adequacy of the current regime...

The next five to ten years will be crucial for Russia. We will see how prepared the country is for the transition to a state based on the rule of law and what price it will pay for this transition. Meanwhile, we are observing a unique situation. In the early 20th century, Russia's population was not ready for freedom. In the early 21st century, it is the elite that seems unprepared to embrace change. However, Russian society is ready for the new rules of the game now – if indeed such rules are offered to it. Indeed, I am not going to idealize Russian society. It has never been a real democracy; it does not have the habit of self-organization, and it has not yet learned to think of itself as a nation of citizens. It still is easy to disorient. But for people without a tradition of political freedom, Russians have picked up new values very quickly. On the whole, the total proportion of respondents who are ready to choose the modernist answer to basic questions of how society has to be organized is around sixty per cent.

Russia is facing one more problem. Some liberals and other pro-Western segments fear the people more than the authorities and thus are inclined to look for a new czar. Left-wing and nationalist segments, on the other hand, are more open to the democratic rules of the game. Will the liberals stop fearing political struggle? This is yet another challenge for Russia. Stagnation and crisis in the West pose an additional problem for Russia. There have never been any instances of successful democratic transformation while the West remained idle or passive.

No matter which path Russia will embark upon, it will have a critical impact on the entire Eurasian region. China, which is approaching its challenge streak, will also be impacted upon by the developments in Russia. Finally, we don't know how Russia's trajectory will influence the Western civilization. Will it foster a renaissance of the West? Or the West will use the changes in Russia as a pretext for focusing on its own problems?

We don't know the answers to many of these questions. But it's time to start thinking about them. Otherwise, we may again wind up understanding the events after they had already occurred.