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ЦИВИЛИЗАЦИОННЫЙ АНАЛИЗ: ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ СЛУЧАЯ БЕЛАРУСИ

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CIVIZATIONAL ANALYSIS: CASE STUDY OF BELARUS

Цель статьи — применить цивилизационный подход к анализу развития независимой Республики Беларусь. Сначала автор описывает теоретическую схему анализа советской модели модернити, предложенную Й. Арнасоном. Затем эта схема применяется для сравнения основных культурных и структурных характеристик современного белорусского государства с его советским предшественником. В заключение автор утверждает, что Беларусь скорее может рассматриваться как государство советского типа, чем постсоветское.

The article aims to apply civilizational approach to the analysis of development that took place in the Republic of Belarus independent since 1991. First, the author defines the appropriate frame for the analysis of the Soviet model of modernity constructed by J. Arnason. Second, this frame is applied to contemporary Belarus in order to compare its major cultural and structural features with the features of the Soviet system. The author concludes that Belarus can still be called a Soviet-model state rather than a post-Soviet one.

Ключевые слова: Беларусь, цивилизационный анализ, сравнительный анализ, множественные модерности, советская модерность.

Keywords: Belarus, civilizational analysis, comparative analysis, multiple modernities, Soviet modernity.

Introductory remarks

After the breakdown of the Soviet Empire (as it was called in the West) there was almost no more interest among the western scholars to the topic of ` and to particular countries ruled by so called “communist regimes”. Before the fall, some scholars had long predicted it (e.g. Brzezinski 1970). When it happened, this fact put an end to much of the attractiveness of the topic and the complex reasons of its fall rest widely unexplained. Only a few western authors did conduct careful analysis of the reasons for

this failure, some even tried to research what happened with the post-soviet countries that appeared on a political map after the Soviet collapse (Genov 2010; Therborn 2001).

However, only J. Arnason (Arnason 1993) made a deep theoretical interpretation of what happened to the Soviet civilization, or, rather, to the alternative model of modernity in regard to its Western alternative (Arnason 1993: IX). Later he applied his frame of civilizational analysis to other communist countries and their development after the Soviet system fell down (Arnason 2000). In all cases, Arnason's research on communist and post-communist development was very successful and allowed to present these countries as part of the civilizational process, not as its temporary and undesirable deviation. What is the core of Arnason's argumentation?

Civilizational approach

Civilizational methodology and its implications for comparative historical studies are broadly discussed nowadays in the social sciences, from the origins of this approach (Mauss, Durkheim, Weber) to a growing interest in the 1980s (Eisenstadt, Elias, Nelson) to present days (Arjomand, Tiryakian). Arnason's contribution to this field is probably the most significant one as he elaborates theory and methodology for civilizational analysis and then applies them to comparison of several particular models of modernity (especially non-Western ones).

The key elements of Arnason's theoretical framework of historical-comparative research, according to Spohn (Spohn 2011: 25), are the following: "Arnason takes three main avenues for the development of a theory of civilization and methodology of civilizational analysis: (1) the problematic of civilization in the singular and plural; (2) the relationships between the structural and cultural dimensions in the constitution and dynamics of civilizations; and (3) the connection of the civilizational dynamics within modernity or the problem of one or many modernities in a globalizing world." In choosing these core elements, Arnason, states (as well as Eisenstadt), that there is a plurality of modernities in contemporary global world, and their relationships are complex, so that there is no single model to take as normative one.

This approach was fully developed by Arnason in his book "Civilizations in Dispute" (Arnason 2003). The book includes six thematic foci of civilizational analysis and three domains of civilizational formations. Thematic foci represent the basic levels of the formation of civilizations, i.e. a combination of cultural, institutional and social levels over time and across space. Briefly, these thematic foci include (1) cultural premises of civilizational formations; (2) institutional structures and dynamics as channels for the unfolding of cultural meanings; (3) multi-civilizational field or inter-civilizational environment of civilizational formation; (4) crystallization of cultural, institutional and inter-civilizational structures and formation of a family of societies; (5) reproduction of constructed multi-societal groups over time; (6) formation of this multi-societal groups as a spatial-regional configuration. Accordingly, the three domains include the economic sphere of wealth, the political sphere of power, and the cultural sphere of meaning.

This broad and complex theoretical approach was empirically proved by Arnason in his analysis of several modernities, including the Soviet type described as a form of

imperial modernization that had a potential to solve many problems but failed under the unfavorable combination of internal and external conditions in 1991. As long as the Soviet model existed, there was a competition between this model and a Western one in many aspects and forms, including the Cold War. Nevertheless, it was not the Cold War or any other particular factor that pushed the downfall of the Soviet model, but rather a combination of forces and factors.

Soviet system as a model of modernity

A distinguishing feature of Arnason's analysis of communism is treating it as a part of the modernization process. As Spohn (Spohn 2010: 32) notes, from a Western-centric perspective, communist form of modernization and its legacies are not viewed as an alternative to Western modernization, while from a civilizational perspective developed by Arnason, it was a kind of civilizational response to Western hegemony.

The Soviet system was the first one interpreted by Arnason in many details among the communist models. He demonstrated (Arnason 1993: 25–55) complexities and heterogeneity of Soviet system's background, including both Tsarist Russian Empire and pro-Western modernization strategy since Peter the Great. Soviet institutional structure was also shown to have some continuity with the previous structures, such as, for instance, lack of democratic institutions. This approach has been capable to disclose the role of geopolitical constellations and inter-civilizational relations, the relationship between nationalisms of the Soviet center and peripheries, and other cultural and political aspects of the Soviet model.

In order to use this approach in further analysis of Belarus, I briefly summarize the most important statements based on civilizational analysis of Soviet system.

There always existed several types of modernity that made it possible to talk about "multiple modernities" (Multiple Modernities 2002). None of the existing modernities should thus be a normative model for others. All modernities follow their own trajectories.

The Soviet model of communism was not a "deviation from the civilizational mainstream", but another model of modernity, as compared to the Western one. Arnason calls this model "defunct", or "dramatic", or "self-destructive", but in all cases it is a different model of modernity that followed some common ideas and lines of modern development (rationalism, belief in science, etc.).

"Soviet model can be seen as inherently and permanently crisis-prone, although the impact and direction of the disruptive factors depend on historical circumstances" (Arnason 2000: 76) It means that this type of modernity was not free from contradictions from its beginning to its end; the results of crisis management in every particular period of time depended on many factors, including the quality of managers among others.

Failure of Soviet model of modernity was a result of both internal and external factors. In other cases, with other variants of the communist model, the composition of these internal and external factors was different; therefore, such models have been able to survive longer, especially when they combine some features from the outside and combined the Party's role with market economy (China).

The role of contingencies is crucial to the development of any version of modernity. In the case of the Soviet model it was dramatic: coincidence of several factors (e.g., weakness of the elite, strong pressure from the West) brought it to destruction in 1991.

Under other conditions it might have survived longer. There was no “iron determinism” in the downfall of the Soviet model of modernity because this model still kept some potential for further development, and therefore, could be kept alive under other conditions.

Belarus as a paradoxical Soviet model

The major point of this article is that, from civilizational approach, Belarus can be interpreted as a version of Soviet model that has survived, although it has changed its self-representation in a new historical situation from Soviet to uncertain (neither Soviet nor Western). For this purpose, we compare three major characteristics of the two selected societies (Belarusian and Soviet ones) to disclose their similarities.

We start with the analysis of Belarus stressing the idea that, under some conditions, the Soviet model could exist longer. In our view, the Republic of Belarus is a splinter of the Soviet civilization that survived as an independent state after the USSR’s failure, due to a combination of factors, i.e. due to historical contingency. Moreover, the Republic of Belarus has existed as a remnant of communism for more than twenty years now exactly due to historical contingency. This phenomenon could be repeated in another country as well if it had favorable conditions for survival of the Soviet model, and some flexibility to adopt the proper external innovations. As long as Belarus could make it, the Soviet model survived in it. However, should the conditions change (as happened in Belarus in 2011) this version of communism may find itself at a risk of failure.

How can we prove that contemporary Belarus follows the Soviet model? On the level of officially declared goals, Belarus looks differently. First of all, it does not consider itself as “a response to the West” and even less probably — to Russia or other post-Soviet states that openly selected a way out of communism. Officially, in the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus (1994/1996/2004), there is no clear connection between the civilizational type of the Republic of Belarus and its predecessor, Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic. Belarus is defined as “unitary democratic social state governed by the rule of law” (Constitution, chapter 1), in which “personality is a major value and a goal of society and the state”. There is no reference to the Soviet legacy, as well as no evaluation of this legacy. However, comparative analysis of Belarus and the Soviet model may prove their identity in principle.

The transformation of the Soviet Belarus to the independent Republic of Belarus was a kind of paradox: the new state was by its nature nourished by a Soviet version of modernity, but a step back from it in civilizational development because Belarus has immortalized (at least tried to) the features of the Soviet command economy and various political restrictions. Belarus cannot adopt the features of more successful types because any changes may put an end of its very existence in its current condition.

Soviet economic system was totally guided by central planning. There was one center, Moscow. The Soviet government issued all economic indicators, distributed them to the regions, and then demanded their fulfillment at all costs. Such economy was able to survive even during the time of isolation of the Soviet Union in the global world, as it had enough resources (and ignored mass hunger or mass mortality as inevitable in class struggle). Unlike Soviet economy, Belarusian economy cannot exist

in economic isolation. For one thing, it needs natural resources for production and markets for its products, because Belarusian market is too narrow and its production system was built as part of a huge Soviet economy. As long as Russia maintained its allied politics towards Belarus of low-price oil supply and buying Belarusian goods regardless of their quality, Belarusian economy grew and looked as a rather successful one. When Russia changed its attitude and increased the oil prices significantly (though still below market price), Belarusian economy, totally dependent on oil and gas, almost collapsed. Soviet-like modernization of Belarusian economy does not work any more: technologies have gone out of date, large state enterprises are non-effective, and the rate of foreign direct investments is extremely low. Belarus has imitated some economic reforms, but the state still owns more than 80 % of the property.

To conclude, the Belarusian state does not have workable economic mechanisms of control or stimulation of labor productivity; it relies upon state regulation and sanctions instead. In fact, it repeats the Soviet experience of total economic control, which does not work under new global conditions. Additionally, as Belarusian state cannot use non-economic mechanisms similar to those in the Soviet Union (like GULAG, on the one hand, and communist ideals of free labor, on the other), the results of state control are poor. Citizens of Belarus, like citizens of Greece, are not ready to “work more and receive less”. During the last decades a level of consumption in Belarus increased several times (Shavel 2007), new class of small entrepreneurs was formed, while enthusiasm and idealism of the masses have increasingly grown weaker. Most people want to keep a good standard of living because the global media-imposed Western model of consumption has changed Belarusian “mentality”: instead of class consciousness there has grown consumer consciousness.

China comes to mind, when looking for similar conflicts of interest elsewhere among the communist regimes. When China found itself in a harsh economic situation, Chinese leaders radically changed the economic management and let market mechanisms replace the previous communist ones that had failed. The result was impressive, and China has been able to combine market economy with the one-party rule. Belarus took another way that is currently threatening to bring the country to a dead-end.

In terms of political power, Belarus has changed the Soviet one-party rule system to a personal rule: instead of the communist party it is president of Belarus who makes all decisions in all spheres of society. (This kind of development has been rather popular among successors of the Soviet state. For instance, in Kazakhstan the current President has been in power since 1989, while in Azerbaijan the current President, although representing a party, replaced his deceased father.) The nature of this power is similar to the Soviet system under Stalin; political practice partly imitates Stalin’s system as well. It seems that a historical contingency again helped to prolong the charismatic political system and not develop a party system. According to Weberian historical approach, this type of power is common for communism (Weber 1978: 154). However, according to him, it is not stable and therefore can exist only for a short period of time.

The whole idea of Belarusian “communism” was based on the support from peasantry with their “natural”, i.e. Soviet-born, desires for social justice, equal redistribution and other non-capitalistic values of this type also described by Weber.

Basing on the traditional “communism of peasants’ community” combined with the remnants of the Soviet communist ideology implanted into popular consciousness during the Soviet rule, and aggravated by the absence of social groups familiar with capitalism, the political regime has managed to convince the masses of its own outstanding role for the country’s development. The President has always tried to demonstrate in public his personal devotion to “keeping the Belarusian people happy”.

The societal need for order can realized itself in attributing charisma to some people or institutions. In many countries the political elites fulfill this need because the elites are the subjects to accept, interiorize and publicly maintain traditions, be they consolidated or rival. This is not the case with Belarus: all individuals accepted to the power are obliged to obey to the leader. As a result, innovation and creativity in political sphere has become practically impossible. If one of the reasons for the Soviet Union’s downfall was elites’ weakness, then this feature has preserved in Belarus. Otherwise, it seems that favorable external conditions for Belarusian leader are almost over.

Belarusian ideology is the only sphere that differs from the Soviet-style Marxist-Leninist ideology. Although Belarusian ideology (officially — and up to the point — defined in 2004 as “the ideology of Belarusian state”) contains some anti-Western autocratic collectivistic trends typical for Soviet ideology, it abandoned revolutionary elements. There are no mentions of the proletariat, international struggle for communism, or any other rhetoric of a kind. Instead, the rhetoric concentrates on successful development of postindustrial or, even, information society in Belarus. These statements seem to be similar to the utopian elements of theorists of the past including Marxists; otherwise, it unwillingly imitates Orwell’s famous image of communism. In Belarus these statements are officially distributed among the masses in a postmodern manner of simulacra (Baudrillard) with a latent goal to substitute an image of the reality in the eyes of citizens. In fact, there is no significant difference between such an ideology and its Soviet predecessor in its latest decades. Functionally, it fails to mobilize the population to work hard and, currently, cannot even increase the legitimacy of the power system because it is too utopian by nature to be accepted for a long time.

When characterizing the Soviet model, Arnason (Arnason 2000: 88) admitted that it “would seem to exemplify the use of a supposedly all-embracing and conflict-free version of the Enlightenment project”. In our view, this statement is fully applicable to Belarus which seems to present itself simultaneously as a “conflict-free version” of welfare (“social”) state and a utopian “society of social harmony”.

However, in practice, like the Soviet Union itself, Belarus has serious conflicts of three types. First, there is a latent conflict between Belarusian nationalism of peripheral character, on the one hand, and imperial Russian nationalism, as a Soviet heritage, on the other. Belarus’ ambition is to play an independent political role in the international arena, while Russia intends to prove its geopolitical domination in regard to its “smaller brother” and ally in the “Union State of Russia and Belarus”. When Belarus makes a decision that contradicts with Russian national interests, it is always “punished” by economic means.

Second, the conflict refers to the political regime and civil society: there is lack of political balance between them, lack of political representation of oppositional actors in the institutional structure of power and the official public discourse. Freedoms and individual rights are declared but any critical statement toward the government is

prosecuted. These conditions are contrary to the multicultural and pluralist traditions among the population and, prospectively, detrimental to the development of the country. Since the 2010 presidential election such politics seems to be overwhelming, as a result, protests actions have become common.

The third contradiction has recently arisen as a byproduct of the political situation. It is a conflict of interpreting the cultural meaning of the state's major goal. For the majority of citizens, the state should pursue the aim of increasing people's well-being and prosperity for all. For the regime itself, the major goal seems to be its own power and stability of regime itself. Under conditions of economic stability this discrepancy of goals was not visible while currently it also contributes to the exhaustion of Belarusian version of communism and demonstrates its internal deep-rooted problems.

Conclusion

In applying the civilizational analysis to the contemporary Republic of Belarus we have argued that Belarus differs from the Soviet Union on the surface but resembles the Soviet model of modernity by nature. In other words, it is a post-Soviet state which is still Soviet in its version of combining cultural and institutional factors into a single model. Currently under unfavorable conditions, Belarus is under pressure to make a new revision of this model, as a result of which the Soviet modernity will either transform again or fail in this state. Otherwise, under favorable historical conditions, the Soviet model could have survived not only in Belarus, but in any other successor of Soviet modernity.

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