

## UNCOMFORTABLE MOMENTS OF SOVIET HISTORY IN RUSSIA'S CURRENT POLICY: IS THERE ROOM FOR THE INJURED NORTH CAUCASUS NATIONS?

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October 30 is the Day Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repressions in the post-Soviet space. Former Soviet Socialist Republics have different attitudes toward and solutions to the issues of the painful past. Russia's rhetoric regarding the USSR is arguably the most cautious, especially when discussions about the past touch upon Caucasus issues. Foreign observers usually limit their analyses of Russia and the Caucasus to the discussion of the Russia-Georgia relations incorporating South Ossetia, Abkhazia or Chechnya issues. On the other hand, the range of topics related to the Caucasus as a geopolitically and ethnically problematic knot may also cast light on minority ethnic groups of the Caucasus which are outshone by news dealing with larger Caucasus ethnic groups. Thus nations like the Cherkess and the Balkars are left on the periphery of the information space.

The present article addresses the issue of historical memory and the deportation of nations during the World War II and in the post-war years, which is just as relevant for Lithuania. The relation between the historical truth and Russia's politics is common not only to the Caucasus, but also to the Baltic States, Poland or other societies that have witnessed Soviet tanks. On the other hand, the situation of the nations brought together under the RSSFR is rather specific. Escalation of their issues is a matter of Russia itself, since these nations are denied equal opportunities in getting into the great narrative of Russia's history; they hardly get into the field of international relations except for instances when Georgia makes attempts at advocating their interests, or a Western state takes a sporadic interest in their affairs.

Escalation of the latter topic is unambiguously related to Russia's standpoint: the extent to which this trajectory of memory is relevant or threatening the present, and what other opportunities there are for historical truth other than the truth construed by the Kremlin administration. This question is also gaining momentum in the context of the increasing marginalisation of ethnic groups. For example, as Russia celebrated National Unity Day on November 4, Russian March, a rally that has already been organized for several years, took place and mobilised from five to seven thousand participants. The rally abounded with posters and slogans, which were explicitly hostile toward people from the Caucasus residing in Russia, and emphasized that Russia is to be ruled by Russians.

### 1. Exiles and genocide in Stalin's time

Stalin's policy of exiles ("relocations") affected the Caucasus to a particularly great degree. For example, in 1944, almost the entire Balkar ethnic group (about 37 thousand people) was deported to

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan or Omsk Oblast in Siberia. A similar fate befell the Karachai, Chechens, Ingush, Crimean Tatars, Meskhetai Turks and Kalmyks. One should also mention the secret massacre of the Circassians exercised on Stalin's orders in 1942. In fact, the Circassians had been pushed out of the Black Sea Region for over 150 years.

During the Soviet era, the experience of these nations – *deportation* and *genocide* – was in sharp contrast with the principle of the “flourishing of nations“ pursued at the time following Leninist national policy. According to this principle, the Soviet system was the most favourable medium for the expansion of national cultures. Miscellaneous institutions and posts, such as national committees, the People's Friendship Institute, etc. were established with a view to sustain national diversity and illustrate the internationalism of Soviet society. Under these conditions, it was not only the Russians who were provided an opportunity to cherish their culture, but also some of the so-called title nations. Generally, however, the trajectories of assimilation, russification and turning a blind eye to national issues were rather distinct throughout the entire Soviet era until Mikhail Gorbachev launched perestroika.

## 2. Current trends in Kremlin policy

In terms of the present-day situation, the Soviet heritage is apparent. The People's Friendship Institute still operates as its function is to manifest Russia's proclaimed multiculturalism although there is less room for the accounts of the smaller Caucasus nations. The threat to Russian authorities is clear: Russia is wary of promoting national identities of the North Caucasus nations, as this step would further destabilize the already instable region. There is no need to speak only about threats of terrorism or military conflicts, since *prestige* matters are also to be found in the sphere of interests. Consider, for example, the Sochi 2014 Olympic Games: Russia's aspiration to shine in public is overshadowed by an apparent obstacle: the Circassians may use the opportunity to break out in the same public space about the genocide of their nation and the historical land in Sochi itself.

Historian Aurimas Švedas has pointed out that the formation of the state identity of present-day Russia is largely based on juggling. Thus, since 1999, as the optimistic rhetoric about the past, present and future has gained momentum, “state patriotism” is fostered; however, there is some room left to appease Washington or Brussels by imitating openness toward historical truth and acknowledging certain facts (e.g. the Katyn massacre or occasional Dmitry Medvedev's negative rhetoric on Stalinism issues). “State patriotism” is buttressed by the concept of “sovereign democracy” first used by Kremlin ideologist Vladislav Surkov. Sovereign democracy subordinates nationalist movements in pursuit of objectives of the central authorities, thereby selecting optimistic scenarios of the past and present and expressing the view of a distinctive application of democratic principles. Under these circumstances, Russia's agenda incorporates all Soviet and military achievements, while the negative experience is attributed to the collapsed predecessor. It is notable that, while Russia does not assume the responsibility for the harm inflicted during the Soviet time, its political figureheads avoid recognizing USSR “sins” even in their rhetoric. Thus, for instance, exiles of Lithuanians and the Polish Katyn case are primarily perceived as the crimes of another regime. Nevertheless, there is already room to start talking about these crimes. In the case of the Caucasus ethnic groups, however, the present geopolitical sphere prevails, due to which the pluralism debate on the past events is kept to a minimum. This situation manifests the disbelief of the adherents of Russia's new ideological trend that a more open discussion would be mutually beneficial. Hopes of Russian liberal intelligentsia (e.g.

journalist Irina Lagunina of the Radio Liberty) that the way to democracy passes through the recognition of sensitive issues are explicitly ignored and viewed as mere acknowledgement of one's weakness. They are reminded of Boris Yeltsin times, when the world derided Russia and the country itself faced a political and ideological crisis, while oligarchs and competing states took full advantage of the situation.

### 3. Growth of Russian nationalism as a response to inability to acknowledge one's past

It is not accidental that Yevguenia Liozina, a human rights defender exploring the post-traumatic experience of (post-)totalitarian societies, points out that Russia's current nationalism originates as a response to the state's inability to acknowledge its past. Liozina is echoed by Russian sociologist Boris Dubin who notes that it is not only the authorities that want to see exclusively the *history of triumph*, but also approximately two thirds of Russia's citizens who are not inclined to speak about the past guilt. Russian nationalist organisations are even more radical. Although the projections of nationalist layers of society and Russian authorities do not always coincide, triumph-oriented patriotism is recurrent in both mediums.

It has to be pointed out that in pursuit of "state patriotism", the Kremlin succeeds in mobilising representatives of creative industries and intelligentsia. In his latest movies, the director Nikita Mikhalkov has become one of the main authors implementing the trajectory of *triumphant Russia*, while Soviet dissident Gleb Pavlovskiy has become Kremlin's political strategist. After Vladimir Putin had come into power, the famous dissident writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, author of "The GULAG Archipelago", supported the new political trajectory until his death in 2008 (as witnessed, for example, in his interview to the newspaper "Moscow News" in April 2006) and regarded Putin's predecessor Yeltsin as a ruler who had humiliated Russia's image in the world.

It is obvious that, alongside geopolitical interests, there is a strong imperial *trajectory of honour and prestige* that has permeated not only the prevailing political layer, but also part of intellectuals and cultural actors. By relying on the latter's support, power representatives succeed in mobilising broader layers of society more easily. It may be maintained that, given its current political field, Russia has no possibilities for a consistent and multi-faceted reconsideration of the historical moments of its past, especially if this history has to do with ethnic groups residing in the Russian Federation.

So what is left?

### 4. Making use of *ad hoc* situations and expert discussions

According to Russian cultural scientist Vladimir Kolotayev, Russia has not formulated a clear standpoint on the Stalin epoch as it neither appreciates it, nor condemns it. Kolotayev emphasizes that there is fear that by rejecting Stalin, Russia would also have to deny its victory and the only positive things throughout the Soviet era would be the Russian ballet and Yuri Gagarin. It is obvious that, resorting to the latter examples rather than victorious rituals, the authorities will have a much harder time mobilising their "state patriotism". The arising ambiguity is of no benefit to other post-Soviet republics either, as they seek the harm inflicted during the Soviet times to be recognized. On the other hand, the situation should not be interpreted as a commitment to unconditional acknowledgment of

Stalin's authority. Bearing in mind individual trajectories of Soviet history and capitalizing on Russia's moderate rhetoric, it is possible to diminish this ambiguity to one's own advantage.

In terms of the relations between Russia and other states, occasionally there is room found for a discussion of Soviet crimes. These are *ad hoc* situations rather than Kremlin's consistent standpoint; however, the ability to use the right moment is becoming important for states or ethnic groups which have grievances over the past as they consolidate new boundaries in the sphere of institutionalized memory. It is obvious that after Lech Kaczynski's death and Medvedev's permission to publicize the circumstances of the Katyn massacre, Russia will not return to the period prior Medvedev's move and will not claim innocence of the USSR in this massacre.

A similar opportunity emerged in 2009, when on the eve of the October 30 commemoration, Medvedev made a statement in which he spoke against attempts to justify Stalin's repressions. Statements like this one provide representatives of former Socialist states with an opportunity to raise awareness about the scope and cruelty of Stalin's repressions. It should be acknowledged that Medvedev's rhetoric offers far more opportunities than rhetoric of Prime-Minister Putin, but the essential difference between the two is other than merely structural. Medvedev has not developed a new trajectory with respect to crimes committed during the Soviet regime. Paradoxically, Chinese veterans once greeted Medvedev as a representative of the country which had introduced Stalinism to the world. The difference between Putin's and Medvedev's rhetorics is in that Medvedev's rhetoric comprised not only episodes of the *triumphant history*, but also had room for a discussion of some of the more painful events, even though this discussion was rather instantaneous as it was concurrent with the festive desire to please the West or to lament that it was Russians themselves who had suffered from the Soviet regime the most.

When raising questions of the past it is essential to make use of every *ad hoc* situation. Relevant preparations for this reaction have to be made both at the political and the expert levels. Bearing in mind the antagonism at the political level, involvement of experts and cooperation may prompt a greater change. During the conference and discussion "Jerzy Giedroyc and foreign policy of post-Communist Poland", which was held in Vilnius in October, Arseny Roginsky, a historian and chairman of public council of the human rights group Memorial, emphasized that one should not expect that different states would agree on a single interpretation of the World War II or another problematic issue (thus Estonians or Lithuanians will primarily speak of the occupation at the end of WWII, while Russians will rejoice in the liberation from Nazism). Rather, attempts to listen to the other side and understand their logic would help both sides maintain, at the least, an ongoing dialogue. Sustaining a constant relationship, *ad hoc* statements by Russian leaders made with regard to particular issues may stimulate an agreement on a certain issue and, by means of a common publication, statement, etc. will enable to consolidate this stage. It should be pointed out, however, that *ad hoc* situations are unfavourable for starting cooperation activities and cherishing hopes to implement them, for the environment is subject to change at any time. To achieve the result current collaboration is essential (one might mention in this regard recent discussions between Russia's specialists, for example, the Yuri Levada Analytical Centre and the Memorial community with German representatives that revolve around aspects of Soviet and Nazi activities).

There is no doubt that this situation is beneficial with respect to the Baltic States or Poland. It is much harder though to deal with issues of small ethnic groups of the Caucasus, since their main advocate Georgia is, as both political figureheads and non-governmental experts put it mildly, not

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quite a desirable participant in the discussions with Russia either at the expert or the political levels. The situation might improve should questions regarding Soviet crimes and the black pages of the Soviet regime be raised avoiding a specific perspective (Latvia, Estonia or Poland), and should a holistic attitude to Stalin's repressions be employed, which would create room for processes that took place in the Northern Caucasus.

Perhaps it is naive to expect that in the nearest future, Russia's political figureheads will abandon the triumph-oriented trajectory of "state patriotism" and will not shake their heads if the discussion touches upon the Circassians, Balkars or Chechens. At any rate, there is less room for raising general topics in order to select individual historical facts or choose to ignore them altogether than for solving issues one at a time.