

The West Doesn't Understand Russians

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The sanctions that the West has imposed on Russia bring to mind the long-forgotten factor of national character. Back in the time of political grandmasters Otto von Bismarck and Klemens von Metternich, diplomats always took that into consideration. However, modern politicians operate at a much lower level, and their moves on the "grand chess board" are far more primitive by comparison.

Like their predecessors, they consider economic interests important, but considerations of national character strike them as totally irrelevant in the modern world. As a result, they make many missteps and blunders that only worsen the situation.

The West has long tried to understand the Russian character. For example, observers have argued that the Russian people prefer a strong centralized state more than personal liberties. Some even point to a certain "Moscow psychological type" characterized by tough resilience, conservatism and a world view shaped by Russian Orthodox beliefs and a penchant for monarchist government.

This is a controversial theory, not least because it completely ignores Russia's historical

experience with democracy. Russians have elected princes, tsars and presidents. Russian lands have been convulsed by three revolutions and numerous uprisings driven by an intense desire for freedom. It is therefore somewhat unfounded to argue that Russians love or value freedom less than others.

Just the same, some elements of this theory are close to the mark. In order to hold and defend Russia's vast territory — from the Baltic region to the Pacific Ocean — Russians have needed a strong state and a strong leader, and they had to exhibit an "exceptional resilience" in their own lives. Over the centuries, those conditions for survival have shaped the Russian character.

If God were to transplant the Russian people to some small Western European country, it is entirely possible they would prefer a parliamentary form of government with strong presidential powers and would feel quite comfortable within the framework of the European Union.

Russians love to criticize themselves, the authorities and their hulking, clumsy state, but they hate it when outsiders do it. Perhaps that is wrong: Maybe outsiders are naturally more objective. But right or wrong, that's how they are, and what Russians hate most of all is when foreign powers pressure them with force. That is the best way to mobilize Russians, to compel them to unite in order to fight off the opponent.

And finally, while Westerners are accustomed to operating within the framework of clearly defined laws, Russians are more attuned to the idea of justice. That is why most Russians care little about arguments that Moscow annexed Crimea in violation of international law.

Russian diplomats and politicians, by virtue of their job descriptions, are prepared to debate that issue, but the overwhelming majority of Russians would simply assert that the annexation restored historical justice. Like Cicero, they hold that whatever is most fair is also most right.

This is why the sanctions are so ineffective against the Russian character and mentality. If the aim of the sanctions is to force Russia to change its domestic and foreign policy, they will not succeed. If the aim is to weaken President Vladimir Putin's position at home, they will also fail. Only when the Russian people themselves decide that they are fed up with Putin will his rule come to an end — but not before, and not due to any pressure from the West.

What's more, a recent survey by the Levada Center found that while in September 60 percent of Russians felt affected by the sanctions, only 47 percent felt that way by November. Interestingly, 80 percent of respondents also noted the sharp rise in prices and the worsening of Russia's economy in recent years. Isn't that strange? Don't these people get it?

Actually, it is the West that doesn't get it. Russians take it all in stride: "Yes, life has become more difficult," they say, "but we will survive." It is nothing new for Russians to have to tighten their belts and ride out the problems with a few extra bags of potatoes and an extra jar or two of pickles from their dacha gardens.

A popular anecdote holds that a foreigner walking along Moscow's freezing, snow-covered streets happened upon a boy delightedly eating an ice-cream cone. "Now I see that these people really are invincible," the foreigner remarks. You get the idea.

Of course, I am not trying to prove that Russians are perfect or that they are always right. I am suggesting that Western politicians should remember what their predecessors of old knew — namely, that whether it wants to or not, the West must find a way to co-exist on this planet with Russia and the Russian character. The sky is blue, water is wet, Russia is huge, and Russians are what they are.

That is why the wise Bismarck warned his compatriots: "God forbid, no 'Drang nach Osten!'" — that is, no expansion to the east toward Slavic lands. Today's leaders would do well to remember that sage advice offered by the grandfather of German diplomacy.

Even if sanctions succeed in weakening Russia, they will fail to achieve their primary goals. What's more, they cause a great deal of hardship on those who impose them. I seriously doubt that European voters will want to re-elect leaders who cut them off from the lucrative Russian market and launched a new version of the Cold War.

The only solution is to reach a compromise. Russians are strong-willed and full of character, but they do not want unnecessary troubles. If they have to, they can endure great difficulty, but Russians are not masochists.

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