

Russia Won't Be Rushed by the West (Op-Ed)

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The West's attitude toward Russia is strongly reminiscent of the relationship between Russia's "leading" intelligentsia and its ordinary citizens. The more "progressive" group has mixed feelings of fear and misunderstanding as to why all of its diatribes on good behavior seem to fall on deaf ears.

If the Russian people were little children, the West could remove "fear" from that list. However, they are not little children, and they can get very angry at times with both the "leading" intelligentsia at home and with the West. That's the truth. But it is also true that these highbrow "mentors" often provoke that anger — something neither Russia's pro-Western intelligentsia nor the West itself is willing to recognize.

As a result, the same pattern repeats for centuries. Countries that consider themselves more civilized attempt to instruct and reason with their "stubborn" Russian student, and finally throw up their hands in anger and frustration. Pro-Western Russians like to explain this phenomenon with the Biblical parable about "dividing the sheep from the goats" — with

the implication that Russia is an incorrigible "goat."

To avoid getting so impatient and angry with Russia, outsiders should try to understand what makes Russians tick. That seems unlikely to happen.

But it could: this is not rocket science, after all. World leaders need to finally understand and take into account the fact that countries and peoples are not only different, but also live in different historical contexts: Western Europeans in one, Afghans in another and Papuans in a third.

It is both foolish and counterproductive to forcibly drag someone out of feudalism or tribal society into socialism — as Vladimir Lenin so doggedly attempted in Central Asia — or to try to impose democracy on Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan, as the United States has done with Bolshevik-like zeal.

The 19th-century Russian revolutionary Andrei Zhelyabov once lamented that history moves too slowly and needs pushing along. Of course, he meant to push it in the direction he saw fit. It is an unpleasant comparison, but many pro-Western Russian intellectuals and the West itself are doing about the same thing as Zhelyabov by insisting on trying to speed up Russian history. It won't work.

Of course, Russians differ from Papuans and Afghans, but like them, they live in their own historical context. Every fruit ripens at its own pace, and many factors play a role in that process.

The West often accuses Russia of failing to abandon its imperial ambitions. Even assuming that is true, how long and painful a process was it for other countries to abandon theirs? For example, how long did Britain hold onto its imperial ambitions, and did it ever completely get over them? Apparently not, judging from the conflicts over the Falkland Islands and Gibraltar.

And digging a little deeper, what about Britain's attitude toward India? The British clung tenaciously to the colony, spilling rivers of blood in that foreign land. How many years did it take British "patriots" to finally relax enough to relinquish all claims over India?

How long did it take France to outlive its imperial ambitions? Maybe some people have forgotten, but it was the French themselves and not Muslim terrorists who tried to kill former French President Charles de Gaulle for his decision to withdraw from Algeria. And how long did the Spanish Empire rue the loss of its overseas colonies?

The question is why Russia, a country that experienced the tumultuous collapse of both the Russian and Soviet empires in a single century, should somehow navigate this complex and painful period of transition in a breathless sprint. Is it simply because some Western politicians and domestic liberals cannot wait?

Just give it some time and the U.S. will give up its imperialist and missionary dreams of world leadership with roughly the same degree of agony and reluctance.

Or consider another example, the so-called "progress" to which many in the West ascribe almost magical powers, but that actually conceals both good and evil. It is not necessarily

obscurantist to be wary of such progress when morality lags behind technology. After all, progress has brought the world not only new drugs to fight off illness and disease, but also nuclear, biological and chemical weapons — not to mention many controversial moral "innovations."

It is axiomatic that we cannot stop progress, but that does not automatically mean everyone must like it in all its forms. Those reservations did not arise today: such wariness is a universal phenomenon. To quote Spanish author Miguel de Unamuno, one of the founders of existentialism:

"In reality, only we, those who are more or less justly called intellectuals, a few public figures, constantly rant about the revival of Spain. But the people, or those whom we, in contrast to ourselves, refer to with the catch-all term of 'the populous' — i.e. the masses, ordinary folk or, as the Greeks put it, the 'idiotas' (ignoramuses), Plato's 'rabble' — remain silent. For them, all this talk is like the dull sound of falling rain ...

"Can it be that the conscious citizen of a great nation lives more at peace with himself than a peasant in some forgotten village? Damn this science, trade, manufacturing — everything that gives us progress, if it so intoxicates us that we are unable to hear the voice of eternal wisdom as it repeats *vanitas vanitatum* (vanity of vanities)!"

"How ignorant are the pundits who believe they know so much more than the ordinary people ... The body knows more than all the physiologists that treat wounds, and the people, the body social, know much more than the sociologists that emerged from among them ... Is it right, as the Germans suggest, to sacrifice the people so that they become part of the civilized nations?"

Now substitute the word "Russia" for "Spain" in the above text and read it again. In other words, history shows that someone has always been ahead of others on the path — but on the path to where? Who can answer that?

It is not necessary to agree with everything Unamuno said here, but it is worthwhile to reflect on his words. This essay was written in 1898 and, of course, Spain has changed a great deal since then. And yet, even with the passage of all those years, the process remains incomplete: the Civil War, Franco, the monarchy, Basques, and now Catalonia.

Russia will ripen when it ripens. And it will become whichever tasty fruit it alone chooses — and not some artificial "homunculus" contrived in a Western test tube.

In short, stop trying to instruct Russians and prodding them to meet others' expectations. Russia has just one healer and helper — time.

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