

Universal Values and the East-West dispute in the Russian War against Ukraine

After the dismantling of the Communist ideology during the Perestroika period and the following break down of the Soviet Union in 1991 the intellectual and political elites in Russia were extremely sceptical about any state-sponsored political ideology and about the very idea that certain moral and political ideas and principles could have an universal significance beyond particular pragmatic contexts where they were so far applied. Such a scepticism was, in part, a heritage of the Marxist and Leninist ideology, which always emphasised the contextual and pragmatic character of its claims, and, in other part, it was a consequence of the rejection of this very ideology, which was no longer useful in the new political situation.

I can remember only a very short period during Perestroika when the press and some political actors of the time following Andrei Sakharov and Mikhail Gorbachev discussed universal “all-human” (общечеловеческие) values and political principles as a viable alternative to the official Communist ideology, which emphasised the dependence of all political ideas on the social class (where a bearer of these ideas belongs). First post-Soviet governments were again more pragmatic and stressed a need to “join the civilised world” via importing best economical and (at the second place) political know-how, which was supposed to transform Russia into a prosperous society. The opponents of this new politics described it as “Western-oriented” and proposed some version of the “Eastern” alternative. This pragmatic turn revived the old 19th century disputes between the adherents of the “European way” (Европейский путь) for the future Russia (западники) and the adherents of the “Eurasianism” (евразийство) or some other non-Western alternative. The most radical political writers like Alexandre Dugin, who remained marginal in the 1990s but became quite influential more recently, insisted on the alleged uniqueness of Russian civilisation that made its past and future history incomparable with any other national history. Such disputes went along with the rise of various schools of political engineering (политтехнологии) which in the 1990s and 2000s became a popular and well-paid intellectual profession. Any talk of the universal human and the universal moral and political values, however defined, in this new political context appeared naive and overtly idealistic.

The lack of any serious discussion on political ideas and values seen through the universal “all-human” perspective in the Post-Soviet Russia increased the importance of geopolitical thinking in the policy-making and prepared the political conditions, which made Russian military offensive against Ukraine and other neighbouring countries more likely. Indeed, the scepticism and relativism with respect to the very notion of universal moral and political principle left the ruling class in Russia - as well as a significant part of the population - with the conviction that the only thing that really counts in the internal and the international politics is a brute military force. That became the universal principle of Russian politics, after all.

In my talk I'll try to answer the question of what the Russian intellectual community can do in order to improve the present poor situation.