

HUNTINGTON'S “CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS” AND RUSSIA

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THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Harvard Professor Samuel P. Huntington's well-known theory on the culturally rooted clash of civilizations has retained its topicality since it was first launched in 1993. For example, many in the Muslim world viewed the globalization process as a largely Western, if not American, phenomenon, which helped spark a growing resurgence of religion in politics and ideology. This in turn paved the way for the Iranian revolution of 1979 and a series of terrorist attacks on Western states in the 1980-90s. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the USA were later countered by extensive US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq,

which further widened the rift between the Muslim world and the West. Indeed, US President G.W. Bush clearly viewed the war on terrorism in civilizational terms.¹ The unresolved Israeli-Palestinian issue, the apparent failure of Western democratization efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq and the so-called 'Arab spring' in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, where local democrats and reformists have been overpowered by religious parties, military leaders and/or regional clans, can also be interpreted as more recent evidence of civilizational differences.

RUSSIA AND EUROPE

When Huntington's theory was published in 1993, it attracted considerable attention in Russia for a number of reasons, not least because the theory dealt extensively with Russia and its role in the world. First, Huntington was seen as preferable to his US colleagues, Francis Fukuyama and Zbigniew Brzezinski, both of whom had allegedly preached the final victory of the liberal democratic West following the disintegration of communism and the Soviet bloc. Fukuyama and Brzezinski were also believed to be spokespersons for the notion that Russia had become a client of the West rather than its partner.

In contrast, Huntington's view of the world as divided into civilizations seemed to confirm the Russian view of the world as multipolar, with Russia as one of its poles, rather than the view of a unipolar world dominated by the US. The multipolar view became a key tenet in Russia's foreign policy in the mid-1990s. In addition, Huntington saw Russia as vacillating between a European and a Eurasian orientation. In Huntington's view, Russia's outdated economy, its crumbling army and decreasing population left it too weak to hold its

own against a booming China, a 'blazing' Islam and a united West. He thus urged Russia to choose closer cooperation with the West over closer alignment with the Confucian-Muslim bloc. Huntington in turn urged the West to treat Russia as the leader of the Orthodox bloc and to recognize the legitimacy of Russian security interests at its southern borders.² Indeed, Huntington went so far as to criticize the West for applying double standards in Russia's case (by condemning Russian interventions) and warned against continued Western interference in alien "civilization zones."³

Liberal-minded Russians were greatly disturbed by Huntington's conclusion that Russia could never become truly European, but more conservative-minded Russians were pleased that the Iron Curtain had been replaced with a Velvet Curtain of culture. Moreover, Huntington's emphasis on the role of religion and his notion of an Orthodox civilization led by Russia was especially attractive to the Russian church and its spokesmen.⁴

THE RUSSIAN CIVILIZATION

Russian interest in Huntington can further be explained by the growth of Russian nationalism together with the revival of the Orthodox Church in the 1980s as belief in Communist ideology dissipated. Since Vladimir Putin became president in 2000, he has consistently promoted Russian patriotism, the role of the church, and the importance of the armed forces as a means of strengthening state power and safeguarding Russia's claim to great power status in world politics. Furthermore, Russia's recent economic recovery, mainly the result of high world market prices for energy exports, has boosted the self-confidence of the country's political leadership. Western criticisms of Russian restrictions on democratic and human rights have clashed with Russia's policy of portraying itself as a sovereign democracy. More recently, such criticisms have been countered by the argument that Russia has a unique civilization all its own, which follows its own distinct traditions. Along these lines, President

Putin views many Western states as posing a serious challenge to Russia's identity. He has argued that such states have rejected their roots as well as their Christian values, for example on the issue of sexual identities.⁵

In order to promote the Russian language at home and abroad, President Putin established the Russkii Mir foundation in 2007, which publishes a glossy journal dedicated to "Russia and the Russian civilization." According to current state doctrine, Russian foreign policy aims, among other things, to defend the rights and interests of its citizens and compatriots within as well as beyond Russian borders and to strengthen the position of the Russian language abroad.⁶ To the extent that this leads to clashes with neighboring states, for example the Baltic countries, it is quite in line with Huntington's theory.

THE MUSLIM ISSUE

Although Huntington's work dealt extensively with the Muslim world, he paid little attention to its diversity, for example the conflict between Shia and Sunni, or to the effects of Muslim migration on Europe. Both of these intra-civilizational problems have intensified since Huntington launched his theory in 1993. Pushed by growing poverty and safety fears, over 20 million Muslims have moved or fled to affluent states in Europe. Once settled in these states, many Muslim immigrants are forced to deal with a great deal of suspicion as well as growing anti-immigrant sentiment, which has led to riots and calls for expulsion in many European states.

Russia differs from Western Europe in that it has a sizeable share of indigenous Muslim peoples, 20 million or about one seventh of the total population—a share which is growing. In foreign policy, Russia has used this fact as a way to become an observer in the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Since Soviet times, Russia has tried to boost its influence in the Muslim/Arab world in opposition to the imperialist and interventionist West, nowadays by defending the regimes in Iran and Syria. Some extreme Russian nationalists have even advocated an alliance with the Muslim world

against the West. Such an eventuality, however, would certainly upset Huntington.

The Muslim world, in contrast, views Russia as part of the Christian West, albeit a second-rate one. They have watched the growth of Russian nationalism and witnessed Russia's treatment of its Muslim minorities in a number of cases.⁷ In the 1990s, for example, Russia fought two bloody wars against Islam-inspired separatists in Chechnya, wars that both sides (and Huntington) often viewed in civilizational terms. These wars, in conjunction with influence from Arab states, have contributed to the growth of Muslim fundamentalism in the whole North Caucasus region, especially in Russia's Dagestan region. In recent years religious awareness has also grown among Muslims living in Russia's Volga region.⁸

Additionally and similar to the West, millions of Muslim refugees and job-seekers, legal and illegal, have moved from the former Soviet republics, mainly in Central Asia, but also the Russian North Caucasus, to major cities in Russia in order to find work in the construction and service sectors. About 11.3 million foreigners are estimated to live in Russia, making Russia the largest immigrant country in the world next to the US.

In Russia, as in other countries, these migrants are often met with suspicion or hostility, particularly by young Russian nationalists. Often, the police do little or nothing to stop attacks on migrants. In October 2013, these attacks culminated in a nasty pogrom in the Moscow suburb of Biriulevo. As a result, 1200 migrants were expelled from the country. In the following month, there were "Russian marches" in over a hundred Russian cities, with participants chanting slogans such as "Russia for the Russians."⁹ In the preceding local elections in Moscow, both the incumbent mayor, Sergei Sobianin, and the opposition candidate, Aleksei Navalnyi, called for the introduction of visas for Central Asians. The notorious "liberal democrat", Vladimir Zhirinovskii, also proposed that North Caucasus be cordoned off from the rest of the Russian Federation

with barbed wire and that stricter measures be imposed to reduce the birthrate of Muslims in the region.

However, adopting tougher measures against (Muslim) migrants from Central Asia as many Russian nationalists would clash with Putin's ambition to deepen and expand the current Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan into a Eurasian Economic Union. Such a union is intended to serve as a counterweight to the EU and to secure Russia's position as a great power. Restricting the free movement of Russian Muslim citizens living in North Caucasus would violate their fundamental civil rights and further alienate them from Russia.

MULTICULTURAL RUSSIA

Apparently in response to the worsening migration conflict in Russia, Putin created a special Presidential Council for Inter-Ethnic Relations in 2012. This council consisted chiefly of stakeholders from civil society and expert communities and was tasked with formulating a new ethnic strategy for Russia.¹⁰ President Medvedev subsequently praised what he termed 'the Russian form of multiculturalism,' which was to be promoted through civil integration and "all-Russia patriotism".¹¹ Likewise, President Putin recently excoriated the European form of multiculturalism for continuing to "pay for the colonial past" and failing to successfully integrate foreign languages or cultures.

In contrast, Putin praised Russian/Soviet multiculturalism, alleging that not even the smallest ethnic group has disappeared, and all of them have retained their internal autonomy and cultural identity. He also claimed that different cultures in Russia have a unique experience of mutual influence, enrichment and respect, and he labelled Russia a *state-civilization*, reinforced by the Russian people and culture in the first place.¹² A curious example is the fact that Moscow has tolerated the introduction of Islamic legislation in Chechnya under President Ramzan Kadyrov, apparently on the condition that Kadyrov obey the Federal President's authority.

Obviously worried by the events at Biriulevo, President Putin condemned on the one hand illegal immigration at a meeting of the Council for Interethnic relations in October 2013 in Ufa. On the one hand, he called

for more efforts to integrate migrants, on the other wanted better monitoring of and more research on interethnic problems. The latter should be carried out in every region in dialogue with civil society institutions and ethnic and cultural associations.¹³

However, as the well-known professor Emil Pain at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow noted, the institutions of civil society in Russia are extremely weak by international standards. Under this method of policy making the participation of the expert community and the general public in its shaping and implementation is very limited and the risk of counterproductive political decisions is very high. In addition, parties barred from real political participation and without real responsibility for implementation are very prone to populism, as one also sees in Western Europe. At the same time, Pain believes that Russia's movement away from multicultural division to multicultural integration is an inevitable strategic reality, since Russia, too, has embarked on a path of modernization and innovation¹⁴ It can in any case be noted that since the publication of Pain's article on this question in 2011, the situation has deteriorated with more restrictions on Russian NGOs and increasing numbers of ethnic clashes.

In conclusion, if one agrees with Huntington and Islam expert Alexey Malashenko that the polarization of civilizations has become a dominant trend in the world today as globalization proceeds, then we can only conclude that Russia will never move out of this 'communal apartment' (shared by many families).

According to Malashenko, we must therefore learn to live with the cultural differences and work to overcome the problems through the use of mutual persuasion and conciliation.¹⁵

However, one may also disagree with Huntington and blame his theory for exaggerating the influence of distinct cultural values on the one hand and minimizing the power of universal values and interests on the other¹⁶. One might further argue that most people in so-called civilizations, irrespective of culture and

religion, share a yearning for peace, prosperity and freedom from oppression as well as a basic respect for life.

These noble principles, which are laid down in the charters of the United Nations and other international organizations and are binding on their members, can best be achieved through dialogue, cooperation and integration both among states and between groups inside states. Whether we agree with Huntington or not, the recipes for peace and development are similar for Russia as well as other states.

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