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## The Past and Present of the Russian National Idea

**Key words:** *Russia, national idea, sobornost', public service advertisement.*

**Annotation:** *New results of research on the issue of Russian national unity, which has a significant historical past, are introduced in this paper. A major issue is the analysis of the Russian philosophical discourse evolution and its connections to the values of Russian Orthodox Christianity, together with principles of civil liability and Russian national traditions and customs. Since the problem of conveying this idea to the general public by means of mass media is itself a major issue, social advertising is recognised as a workable tool for the task. Proposing ideas, based on moral and national values gradually from the "bottom" of society is seen a much more efficient way of propaganda, than introducing these ideas from the Kremlin.*

The relevance of the topic is closely related to the concept of the national idea proposed by President Vladimir Putin at the Valdai International Discussion Club in September of 2013. His speech was yet another attempt to formulate the ideology of contemporary Russia. An earlier attempt had been made in 2007 in a message from the President to the Federal Assembly (10).

The speech became a major discussion topic for the public in Russian and abroad concerning the newly proposed Russian national idea and the chances of its implementation (2). The government decided it would be best to construct a foundation from traditional Christian and moral values for the new idea instead of forcing it from above. Throughout history it has become evident that an idea can only be effectively implemented if it is built on grounds of century-old traditions (9). Therefore, a loud statement can become a reality only when the true sources of the *Russian national idea* have been revealed. This is a search through time, which should consider the experience of the Russian Empire, the Revolution of 1917, the Soviet Era, and modern Russia in order to find a way for the new idea to be able to function today.

Historically it was the Russian Orthodox Church together with the multitudes of Russian writers and poets, painters and architects of Imperial Russia who not only laid the foundations of the spiritual unity of the nation, but also largely influenced the basic principles of an ideal unity. This idea was based on the principles of collectivism and comradeship and was defined by the Russian term *sobornost'*. The ideal can be retraced to the main essence of

Russian national character, expressed in the concept of collegiality. The idea of Claude Lévi-Strauss that the principle of collective wisdom and collective action, which is seen as mutual respect is the only principle that shall help people live together and build a harmonious future are indicative in this respect (5). Ideas of the collective spirit and friendly cooperation are share a common concept with the *Russian idea*, which is a complex spiritual formation. Its main element is the principle of *sobornost'* unity – recognised as an ideal unit of social life.

A *sobornoe* or unified state is based on the principle of harmony existing between spiritual and secular authorities, which harmonises the activities of both sides for the benefit of the spiritual life of society. In these terms N. P. Ogarev wrote, “*There are two true pledges: one is that accepted by all men born – the protection of one’s people from all foe and bloodshed. This pledged may be deemed as natural by origin (secular – S.P., A.G.). The other pledge is voluntary. If one gives a vow to God (spiritual – S.P., A.G.) – whether it is as simple as going to church or assisting a brother in misfortune – and does not fulfill it, then it is a sin. You’ve made an oath, so keep this promise*” (6, p. 181,95).

This demonstrates that the foundation of the *sobornoe* state model lie in the pursuit of one truth, which incorporates mercy and orthodoxy. In this sense, *sobornost'* is meant to transform the public consciousness of the Russian people; longing for them to live “like human beings” or “in the proper way”. In these terms it is necessary for the state to establish a proper environment, which would enable the moral feelings of each individual to be the main guide of his or her social behavior. However, these principles are often understood as the universal being more significant than separate and the spiritual as being more elevated than the material; collective values and goals are considered to be superior to the individual. This misunderstanding of the whole idea results in the naysayers considering these principles idealistic and unattainable. “*Only a great challenge, a mission of grand historical importance, or a catastrophe (Times of Trouble) bring relief and meaning to life and generate constructive effort. In other words, Russian society can be integrated and mobilized through universal projects that convey idealist, collectivist, and imperial tunes*” (16).

It is possible to actualise this project in modern Russia. The foundation for it is the Russian mentality with its denial of individualism, sense of justice, self-sacrifice, the priority of spiritual values, sense of collectivism, idea of “holiness” as a cultural value (4, p.246), spirituality mobilisation, collectivism, communitarianism, pursuit of collective work (1, p.1430) , the quest for justice from the standpoint of serving the people and the state, as well as “universal humanity”. All these features are symbiotically interrelated between one another and suggest the need for improving public relations and communications in all creative aspects of public life.

Spirituality involves the ability of the individual to stretch one’s activity beyond personal pursuits and individual existence, to set and implement goals and objectives. These actions should not only be related to improving the individual’s welfare, but above all bent on the improvement of public relations and communications in all aspects of public life.

Collectivism in its initial and mobile state is determined by a low population density and the degree of interrelation with other ethnic groups living on the same territory. On one hand, these conditions could not generate a “narrow-ethnic” collectivism, intended to unite around a purely ethnic idea (e.g.: German Nazism). On the other hand, collectivism had been

an important aspect of survival for the Russian people, who simply wouldn't exist as a single nation today without some form of unity.

“Universal humanity” is defined by the ability to achieve a common understanding between one people and another ethnic group. This includes accepting the ideas and values of the strangers. It would have been impossible to establish a unified state, economic and military system without the cooperation of all ethnic groups and nations, which inhabited a common territory.

All the aforementioned characteristics of the Russian mentality can be joined to formulate its essence as a constant strive for unity, which in its turn evolves into a sense of patriotism (8, p.283).

This understanding of the society and community, collective spirit, and camaraderie is interrelated with the “Russian idea”, which is a complex spiritual identity. The principle of *sobornost'* and similar forms of unity as a traditional trait of Russian national character and an ideal establishment of public life is considered to be the key element in this doctrine (7, p.126). The principle of *sobornost'* (or cooperation) between the people and their government, provides a foundation for various forms of social partnership between business and society, supports of all forms of property, guaranteeing its protection to all subjects, whose interests lie within the unity of the Russian nation, as well as a market economy under state control and strategic planning.

Political and civil rights (freedom of belief, freedom of assembly, freedom of press, the right to establish political parties and organisations) and their protection from the encroachments of individuals, institutions, and organisations are guaranteed by the *sobornost'* of the state. However, there are limitations – individual civil rights may not oppose traditional spiritual and moral values along with the interests of other citizens and the whole nation.

Right in a state exercising *sobornost'* proposes common rules of behaviour for all of its citizens without exception and the compliance of the whole complex of legal acts to the national idea – national priorities and national values, i.e. the official ideology of the state. The law must show respect for national heritage and history, focusing on the future at the same time – taking into consideration the legitimate interests of the present and future generations. The fundamental point of the legal system within the state is a clear and reasonable means of explaining the people their civil rights and responsibilities. Legal acts in a *sobornoe* state of law are meant to protect the rights of the Russian indivisible nation, individual rights of its citizens, and to encourage the fulfillment of civil responsibility and duty. The establishment of such a state requires a kind of “symphony” in the relationships between religion confessions, the society, and the government. This would include consistency and interaction on a large scale, i.e. the right of the Russian Orthodox Church and other traditional religious groups (e.g.: Muslims and Buddhists) to participate in the solution of socially significant problems, in all spheres of social life, and the right to evaluate the government. At the same time, the *sobornoe* state does not authorise total control over personal life, individual convictions, and relations with other people, opposing the destruction of personal, family, or public morality, religious persecutions, the violation of the people's cultural and spiritual identity, and threats to life.

The implementation of a modern *sobornost'* project in modern Russia would require the state to return to traditional Russian Orthodox Christian values. They are designated to

become a cornerstone for a new state ideology – upon which the entire political, economic, and social establishment shall be built upon. In the following process of Russian statehood formation they shall become the new national values.

It is important to note that before 1917 the national values were considered to be dominated by Count S. S. Uvarov's famous triad "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationhood (*narodnost'*)" (16, p.18). In this brief formula each word includes a plurality of meanings. In the modern political and social environment, Uvarov's summary can be interpreted as "Spirituality (or morality), Sovereignty, and Nationhood" and seen as the essence of the national idea. Let's briefly describe these moral components of the national idea.

Spirituality as a fundamental element of the national idea reveals the need for the individual and society, as a whole, to always pursue morality and ethics in all activities.

Statehood is the unconditional and unrestricted right of the nation to determine its own interests and priorities without having to consider the opinion of the "international community". This includes all domestic politics and the social system – established and conducted in a manner, which most corresponds to national values and morals.

Nationhood is the recognition of the Russian nation itself as a "big family", enrooted in a common debt before their country and bent on serving the national (family) case. It is obvious that in this case the nation needs a sophisticated legal and social organisation – a state in which each individual realises one's responsibility for the whole society, its moral health, and the overall power and indivisibility of the nation.

Thus, the presented triad "Spirituality, Sovereignty, Nationhood" fully reflects the main features of the Russian mentality: spirituality, mobile collectivism, the awareness that one's labour is the highest value, the pursuit of justice from the standpoint of serving the people and the state, as well as "universal humanity".

The most important semantic categories of the *sobornoe* society should become service to the nation; this stretches beyond military and the civil service. A true patriot shall serve his country, no matter whoever he was and whatever he does. Service should become the "core" of each person's soul, the lack of which would be perceived by others as a kind of inferiority and inadequacy. In this respect the work of the enlightened thinker A. N. Radishchev "A Discussion on who a Son of the Fatherland is" is a genuine schoolbook. Radishchev argues, "A man, who is loyal to the righteous pursuit of perfection, must honor one's conscience, love one's nearest, for only by love is love acquired, must fulfill one's duties as his prudence and honesty commands" (11). Radischev noted that there "be no low status in the service done for the Fatherland – serving it, one knows that he is promoting the healthy flow, so to speak, of the state's body blood" (11, p.247). Moreover, a true citizen is not afraid to sacrifice his own life for the salvation of the Fatherland – in other words – he is virtuous. Another defining characteristic of this son of the Fatherland is generosity. "An honourable person is he who has committed his doings to the famous wise and philanthropic qualities, who radiates wisdom and virtue in society" (11, p.248).

In his statements Radischev has revealed standards, which suggested both personal and public improvement specified in service to the homeland, in dignity and honour, integrity, love, and compassion – proclaimed as the virtues of behaviour of the Russian citizen. The philosopher's works prefigured the understanding of *sobornost'* as an antonym of selfishness,

sectarianism, and social divisibility. In many ways they have become the foundation of patriotic organisations, supported by the state.

So, collegiality as an ideal in Russian culture implies the harmony of social norms and ensures its implementation in social institutions. It formulates and brings to life the complex of legal acts, excluding the possibility of belittling the status of other social norms – in particular – the rules of ethics, morality, religion, ideology, customs, traditions, etc. Thus, *sobornost'* as an ideological platform of the national idea lays the foundation of a welfare state. Multinational principles and unity reduce ethnic tension and recognise the inevitable differences between people. These principles will have resulted in consolidating the leading global positions for modern Russia.

In the process of nation's moral treatment the paramount strategic priority is to place the media under public control in order to suppress all forms of destructive activity in public morality. Mass media can become an effective promoting tool for the national idea only when a central regulatory space has been established. Rhetoric (language) strategies should be monitored in order to operate a clearly defined and suitable strategy for targeted purposes.

This problem was first encountered in the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s. New types of media companies started appearing, which in many English-speaking countries are defined as public service announcement (PSA) or community service announcement (CSA). In Italy the term *pubblicità Pubblica* (social advertising) is used. Such information broadcasts in Russia became known as social advertising due to the essence of this new activity, which aimed to draw public attention to problems of society and modified existing models of social behaviour by increasing the society's awareness on designated social issues (13). This explains the source of content and topics of social advertisement, which cover all the main civil and social responsibilities.

L. A. Stepnova argues that education plays a major role in the formation of a complex image of the nation. The following symbols should be included in this image:

- 1) Official symbols of the state (i.e. the flag, the national anthem);
- 2) National heroes and anti-heroes of the past (historical and literary characters), the present (astronauts, athletes, artists, cinema produces, celebrities, etc), and future (in the form of ideals);
- 3) Series of historical events and milestones, etc;
- 4) Household everyday symbolism (14, p. 95).

Taken together, these symbolic formations form a set of common values and social meanings that characterise the spirit of an age, its mentality and mindsets. Social symbols are created in the depths of social thought, which reproduce the ideas, beliefs, values relevant to the motivational and cognitive tendencies of mass consciousness. Thereby they serve as a foundation for the positive image of the nation. The image of a country is based on its national ideas and includes the entire complex of socio-cultural systems, social role models and rules that provide guidance in society. The formation of these symbols is the top priority of the state.

The presence of a national idea and its support among the people in the form of cognitive perception can transform the national consciousness of the Russian people. It can demonstrate such national qualities as uniqueness, courage, and determination. The national idea is firmly linked to the country's self-identification. A historical example is the world of

ancient Greeks, where “heroic mythologising” was used to instill a sense of dignity and personal association to the great traditions of the city-states. These mythological scenarios – meant to be broadcasted to the populous – were adopted to fit various situations; depending on the desired historical context and in relation to certain cases, the myths were transformed to adopt for specific requirements of the time.

Russian mythologems include the famous “Moscow as being the Third Rome”, “Tsardom of Orthodox Christianity”, and the “Bastion of World Communism” postulates. According to I. Ya. Rozhkov and V. G. Kismereshkin the currently rough draft image of Russia’s ideology can be express in the following words, “A Eurasian nation rich in resources, rapidly developing, and unique in its culture, worthy of understanding, respect, and fruitful cooperation” (12, p.364).

This formula is based on the national idea and corresponds with “we” from the philosophy of S. L. Frank. The Russian worldview is internally united around “we”, in which lies the foundation of its essential spirit (3, p.33-79). According to the “we” philosophy personality reveals itself during communication with other persons. This assists self-expression and enriches the individual with outside knowledge. In this case personality becomes part of society, as does society, which now acquires a personality. The enhancement of the individual contributes to the improvement of society, which in its turn improves the individual.

This new national idea along with the corresponding philosophy should be actively incorporated into the social environment in order to assist the self-education of Russians, for them to gain their national identity. The concept will contribute to the progress of Russia, providing insight into the Russian character and steps, which are being taken by the country and its institutions abroad. One of the main tasks of social advertising is to create a favorable image of Russia, which is aimed at establishing necessary and appropriate social norms, morals, etc.

One of the main ways to broadcast an image of Russia is through opinion leaders. They should be the prime targeted audience of advertisement and mass communications. Therefore, it is essential to form partnerships with professional organisations, mass media, influential political and public figures, celebrities, Russian diasporas abroad, emphasising attention on the youth. It is evident that century-old concepts of “the great Russian way”, “the hegemony of the West”, and “threat from the East” continue to influence the Russian nation. Such ideas are now expressed in academic theories and of international relations strategies. Based on them, a system of negative expectations from foreign threats has been developed in order to maintain internal stability. However, Andrei P. Tsygankov and Pavel A. Tsygankov argue that “Although Russian realists borrow many conceptual tools from Western, particularly American, IR; they are driven primarily by Russian concerns and used these tools creatively” (15, p.673).

To achieve any significant effect the image of the country and the national idea should be clearly and accurately described, formulating its values and motives for development. In this sense the Russian philosophy, history, and innovative communication technologies should be rallied to design a fitting social advertising insight. It is equally important to study the experience of foreign countries in order to adapt to the new international context, and to articulate national interests in accordance with historical and social development.

One of the top priorities of the Russian government is the creation of a positive image of Russia. It is extremely important to understand that such concepts as “nation”, “national interest”, and “national idea” were open to different interpretations and meanings; their meanings cannot be borrowed from other societies and languages, they should not be determined by the structure of the international system, or ruling elites (15, p.664) . It is assumed that this image must be formulated by the society on its own. In this aspect it is necessary to give all members of society – especially the academic and creative class – an opportunity to publicly discuss on the image of future Russia and what values should become the bricks and mortar of the new society. This would be a total contrast to the previous “national ideas”, which have been imposed from above instead of being constructed from the foundation. The results are expected to promote an integrated image of the state with an attractive and positive brand name – “Russia”.

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