

The Cultural Underbelly of Russian Repression

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August 12, 2013

The  **Moscow Times**

Former Czech Republic President Vaclav Havel taught us that power in the "post-totalitarian" system is not truly about tanks, police batons or physical force. Power lies in all of us. One regime's ideology can offer "human beings the illusion of an identity, of dignity and of morality while making it easier for them to part with them."

These are prophetic words for Russia. Recent crackdowns on gay rights have gained attention in global media, most prominently focusing on laws banning same-sex adoptions and the promotion of "nontraditional sexual relations" in public, effectively criminalizing the dignity and sheer existence of gay Russians.

Ultrationalist gangs are now posting sham personal ads on gay Russian social networks to lure them into a meeting and videotape how they terrorize their victims. The most viral video shows a gang of young neofascist bullies torturing a 15-year-old victim for 20 minutes, topping it off by spraying him with urine.

Whether or not the Russian ultranationalist groups are connected to the government, the state thrives in a climate of hate where citizens themselves divide the population into friends and enemies based on its moral criteria. Its legitimacy grows stronger when it doesn't have to do all the repression itself.

As people voluntarily buy into the state's homophobic agenda on sheer emotional impulse, it becomes easier for the state to get away with more profound abuses of civil rights. This is exactly the strategy it needs in times of growing social unrest. Criminal gangs, bloody protests, public outings, street show trials and the inaction of authorities to stop any of it are part of Havel's lesson. They demonstrate precisely how unnecessary police batons are when you have freewheeling prejudice and hate to bolster a vicious regime.

The myth of President Vladimir Putin has long rested on recreating Russian identity in the wake of a tumultuous transition in the '90s. It rests on forgetting an emasculated Russia under former President Boris Yeltsin, rebuild a new confident imperial powerhouse, revive conservative traditions and create a bulwark against social instability. The arguments of the gang of bullies toward the 15-year-old victim in the video go along this macho theme, sending a strong message to all of Russia's gays: "We are sportsmen, and we are strong. Why aren't you like this? Why are you a disgrace to our country?"

There was a similar phenomenon during the Soviet Union, where colleagues and neighbors put each other on trial for "un-Soviet" behavior. We can also recall posters during the rule of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, shaming people into appropriate Soviet sex relations, labor discipline, child-rearing habits and upstanding moral behavior.

Where is Russia heading with this latest round of blatant disregard for human beings that is cynically cloaked as "civic education?" Is Russia truly following a unique conservative path? Is Russian repression a cultural phenomenon?

For three centuries, thinkers have speculated about the civilizational specificity of Russia's historical path to progress. From Slavophiles to populists and Marxists, revolutionaries and reactionaries alike have proclaimed unique panoptic schemes for the future development of the empire and country.

U.S. author and political scientist Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" identifies possible unifiers in these strands of thought, broadly characterizing Russian political identity as "separate from Western Christendom as a result of its Byzantine parentage, distinct religion, 200 years of Tatar rule, bureaucratic despotism, and limited exposure to the Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment and other Central Western experiences."

Unsurprisingly, the central theme dominating contemporary Russian governance is its centuries-long deficit in liberty. The country's determined political path is often deemed culturally illiberal, serving as an endless excuse to stamp out human individuality and dignity.

We must confront the myth of Russian exceptionalism in the midst of ratcheting rights abuses. There is not a single group of people in the world whose primary cultural trait is political authoritarianism, and Russian culture should not be perverted in this manner. As the Russian regime has managed to transition in time from one form of national chauvinism to another, it faces the only option possible to the country's real development. It can either

respect individual liberty and decriminalize institutions that unleash human creativity in the marketplace of ideas, or it can continue to try to legitimize its abuse of humanity and perpetuate a state of real social and civil paralysis.

It is not difficult to guess which road it will take. A thug on the throne will never make a self-defeating decision. To eliminate an abusive power, one must look rather toward people whose hearts and minds are ready to embrace a culture of liberty. The fewer people who are willing to accept the vicious ideas surrounding the center of power, the less legitimate that center becomes.

If Havel's post-totalitarian system is a habit of mind, so is liberalism. One can choose to remain quiet and passive, or one can choose to act as a free person. This is often the hardest choice to make. The best way the world can help is to show its solidarity with Russians who march confidently in the face of hatred and repression, for these brave people will allow the world to witness the stirrings of social change.

The idea of liberty has a human heart. It is too powerful to be stopped.

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