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‘USSR 2.0’ or a ‘Normal European Country’? – Socio-Political Visions of Russia’s ‘Children of Transition’ Exemplified by Two Russian Youth Organizations in Perm/Urals

Results of an Analysis of the Russian Discourse Concerning the Conflict around the GULAG-Museum “Perm-36”

Introduction:

In 2014 the famous GULAG-museum Perm-36 in the Perm region, the only Russian memorial site on the territory of a former labour camp was nationalized. After the dismissal of the former management, representatives of a non-governmental organization, the conception of the memorial museum distinctly changed under the direction of the local minister of culture. Instead of commemoration of the victims of soviet repressions and the appreciation of their suffering the new management proclaimed an objective presentation of the history of the soviet penal system as the museum’s main goal.

The process of the museum’s nationalization and the change of its concept were broadly discussed in the regional and Russia-wide media, as well as abroad.

Research question and goal:

My research was directed by the interest for the regional Permian and Russian national discourse relating to the changes in the museum’s conception and legal form. Which topoi are to be found in the discussion? What arguments are there, which the supporters and the opponents of the changes refer to? What does this tell us about Russian memorial culture relating to the soviet repressions and present memorial politics of the Russian state?

Theoretical and methodological approach:

The discourse analysis was conducted on the basis of Achim Landwehr’s approach to “Historical Discourse Analysis” with regard to current theories of “Memory Culture” (Erl, Assmann, Cambridge Team “Memory at War”). Articles in official media, private blogs, comments on Facebook and the interviews with representatives of the conflict parties were subject to a content analysis in order to identify the topoi of the discourse and the structures of argumentation.

Results:

The analysis of compiled press and blog articles and of the interviews conducted to the following results:

- Though the extremely contentious debate was held on a nationwide level, only a small group of Russians showed interest in this debate and an even smaller part took an active stand.
- The partakers came from different scopes of the Russian society: former employees of the soviet penal system participated in the debate as well as former prisoners and members of the soviet dissident movement. In addition, members of the Russian Communist Party, representatives of Russian civil so-

society, officers of regional and federal Russian governmental structures and many journalists took part in the discussion.

- The participants included three generations: people, in the age of retirement, people between the age of 40 and 60, and younger adults between 20 and 40 years of age, who can be “children of transition”.
- This discourse was totally polarized in regard to all three generations; there were either supporters or opponents of the changes in the museum. Even journalists, reporting on different events during the process of the nationalization expressed their opinion at least “between the lines”.
- The topoi of the debate clearly showed that the main concern of the participants was not only related to the conception of a provincial Russian museum, but to an assumed shift within the socio-political sphere in Russia as a whole, for which the nationalization was interpreted as a symptom of the same.
- Both sides argued that the educational and political implications of the refused conception of the museum will lead to a national catastrophe, whereas the preferred conception will help the society to “recover”. So both sides agreed that the society is “ill”, but fundamentally disagreed on the supposed root of that illness and the proposed “cure”.
- The respective proposed diagnosis and cure is based on the interpretations of the soviet past and the supposed mistakes that were made in the process of transition to the present Russian state.

The “children of transition” as participants of the “Perm-36” discourse:

As mentioned above, the debate relating to the changes in the museum “Perm-36” was not only guided within the population of the generations, who had experienced the Soviet Union as studying or working adults, but also within the “children of transition”, who only have recollections of the soviet society from the perspective of their kindergarten or primary school experiences. In part the younger generation seemed even more passionate within the debate.

Representatives of two local organizations of young adults actively expressed their opinions about the events by writing articles in blogs, in press media, by writing comments on Facebook and by organizing public discussions, street meetings and by collecting signatures. One is called “Youth Memorial”, the other one “Essence of Time” (Sut’ vremeni in Russian). Both organizations are branches of Russia-wide organizations, in which representatives of the older generations participate as well.

The organization “Memorial” was founded in the years of the Gorbachev Perestroika. It focuses on recording and publicising the Soviet Union’s totalitarian, but it also monitors human rights in Russia and other post-Soviet states. The main objectives are described as follows: the promotion of mature civil society and democracy based on the rule of law and thus aiming to prevent a return to totalitarianism, assisting formation of public consciousness based on the values of democracy and law, to get rid of totalitarian patterns, and to firmly establish human rights in practical politics and in public life, the promotion of the revelation of the truth about the historical past and perpetuate the memory of the vic-

tims of political repression exercised by totalitarian regimes.¹ The Perm branch of “Memorial” consisted of two sections: the one, by which former victims of political repressions are organized and the Youth organization.

Due to the threatening stigmatization by the “Foreign Agent law” in the beginning of 2016, the youth organisation of “Memorial” doesn’t exist as an autonomous organization any more. Its main objective is to train the sense of civil responsibility by organizing volunteer work, for example in households of former victims of soviet repressions, on the sites of former labour camps and NKVD-prisons and arranging international youth exchange to then contribute to the commemoration of the victims of totalitarian regimes. The participants of these programmes are mostly students in the age between 17 and 30.

The other organization, „Essence of Time”, founded in 2011, is directed by Sergey Kurginyan, a political analyst. The organization’s objective is to establish a “Soviet Union 2.0” on the territory of Russia which is based on new principles by acknowledging the mistakes of the past. The manifesto² of the organization declares that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a great tragedy. The ascertainment of what was responsible for the USSR's fall is considered a key step in this process. Whereas the organization characterizes itself as “leftist” and “anti-fascist”, their conception of the “Soviet Union 2.0” describes the country as a nationalist and conservative one. The society should stick to extremely conservative values in the cultural sphere by promoting an exclusively affirmative historiography and art and by preferring the patriarchal model of the family.

The Perm branch of the organization is run by a group of young university graduates between the ages of 25 and 35, who publish a monthly journal and actively publicize their opinions on their website in sections called “Political War”, “Cultural Front”, “Historical Dignity”, “Parent Resistance” and “Russian way”.

The analysis of the expressed opinions on both sides of the debate led to the following results:

The participants of the volunteer programs of the “Youth Memorial” define themselves as part of the European globalized youth, with whom they are intensively connected via Facebook and other social networks. They share the values of the democratic youth of EU, and to their inner image they share a common European future and they do not feel, that they differ from them in any aspects. The majority I had contact with had studied at universities abroad and/or had served in volunteer services in the EU or respectively planned to do that. Their central values can be defined as “Self-realization” within the frame-work of Human Rights. Thus their main wish for Russia’s future is that Russia develops into a “normal” European democratic state, which provides the individual with opportunities to achieve “Self-realization”. On this account the Maidan revolution in Ukraine is highly appreciated and serves as a collective utopia for Russia, whereas the war in Donbass is considered as a criminal act, committed by Russia.

¹ <http://www.memo.ru/eng/about/charter.htm>

² <https://eot.su/manifest>

In their relation to the Russian and Soviet history the conviction predominates, that Russia was always a European country which shares the European developmental direction from despotism to democracy, but is lagging behind. From their point of view the European political structures are a model for Russia. To establish them, it would be necessary that Russia comes to terms with its despotic and totalitarian past by acknowledging and honouring its millions of victims. By following the German model Russia should officially repent of its murderous aggression in relation to states, the Russian Empire and Soviet Union had forced under its colonial domination. So their understanding of civic education is that of providing the public with information and awareness campaigns surrounding the “difficult past”. The “other” is represented by people, who stick to the “glorious” Soviet past in a nostalgic manner and prefer authoritarian structures in society and state. This “other” may be represented even by their parents and relatives. Having come in contact with young Russians, Tatars, Bashkirs and Jews, I could not notice any national differences between their ways of thinking.

The members of “Essence of Time” on the other hand define themselves as young patriotic Russians. Their main goal is to conserve the collective Russian “self-determination” by preventing Russia from surrendering to the political and cultural domination of the USA, which are – being run by exclusive (jewish) elites – perceived as a fascist country. In order to achieve this, they aim to strengthen traditional values of the Russian society like the patriarchal family, non-elitist collectivism, affirmative art and readiness of the individual to sacrifice oneself for the welfare of the collective and the nation. Although relating to cultural questions in a deeply conservative manner, they use modern media like social networks and internet blogs to reach supporters, but their internet activities are much more directed towards the regional community rather than those of the “Memorial Youth”. Few of them have Facebook “friends” from abroad.

Their understanding of the Russian and Soviet past is that of a glorious national development, which was defined by military success (The Great Victory) and technical achievements (space travel). Many people died in that process, but that was a justified sacrifice for the benefit of the nation. Civic education should support the development of a patriotic attitude towards the fatherland and the readiness for self-sacrifice.

In their perception the “other” is represented by two spheres: first the present Western societies, which have lost their original humanistic values under the reigns of the fascist US and are now obsessed by decadent values like the marriage of homosexuals and the destruction of the family and other “natural” hierarchies. The Maidan revolution in Kiev is perceived as a jewish-fascist coup d'état, organized by the US government to weaken Russia. Ukraine and its struggle to become a part of the west serves as a fascist anti-utopia, the activists and soldiers in the so called Public republic of Donbass are perceived as role models.

The second “other” is the Russian “liberast” movement that is named as the “fifth column”. Within this image the USA tries to destroy Russia and gain control over it. Especially the members of the “Memorial” Society threaten the society by weakening the Russian self-esteem in context of its

history. The young adults all seem to define themselves as Russians; nobody introduced himself or herself as a member of another nationality.

In this respect we cannot blame the representatives of both groups in total historical amnesia, but it is significant, that each group is concentrated on only one possible perspective on the Russian and Soviet history: either the side of developmental failure or of success.

To understand that rough disunion we have to take into account the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transition to the modern Russian state, which was characterized by harsh economic difficulties.

Todays young adults in Russia were confronted in their childhood-with radical changes in the lives of their parents and grandparents. Many parents lost their work and had to earn money in a totally different sphere, than they were trained for. So e.g. many employees of scientific institutions had to earn additional money by producing and bargaining industrial or farming products. Many of them worked much more than 40 hours a week and the children were left in the care of their grandparents, who lived on little pensions, or they were left in the care of state education institutions or simply the street.

Employees of the so called “Law preserving Structures” were subject to a harsh loss of their authority in public and of their social reputation. Their children were mobbed by classmates and in public. Many families of officers of the soviet army, who were stationed in the former soviet republics, had to leave their homes and begin a new life in Russian towns.

In addition the “children of transition” were subject to an input of a weird ideological mixture. While the state was officially developing democracy in schools, old textbooks from soviet times were used, because there was no money to buy new ones. Also teachers were trained by soviet programmes and were not able to behave in a less authoritarian and more democratic manner. So the “children of transition” in Russia were challenged to find their own way through the ideological diversity they were confronted with from parents, grandparents, relatives, neighbours, teachers and the media. Some of them managed to adapt to modern western values in times of globalization, others developed strong nostalgic feelings for the clear organizational and ideological structures of the Soviet Union, especially when their parents and grandparents spoke of it as a golden past. It might not be surprising, that the leading activist of the Permian “Essence of Time” Pavel Gurianov was raised by his grandparents, who – as he tells in his blog – worked as employees of the Soviet penal system. Maybe because of this complexity some of the Russian “children of transition” chose simplifying patterns of interpretation of their Russian present and past: the western one or the traditional Soviet one.

But we should not forget that these two groups of young people represent only the extreme poles of a larger scale. The majority of the present young people remain in an indifferent attitude towards the socio-political conditions of the Russian society, the Russian past and its future development. So it will be most interesting which one of the given models they will follow, when political and economic pressure in Russia will increase even more.