

Peculiarities of Formation of Youth Extremism in Post-Soviet Russia¹.

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Abstract

The article is dedicated to the study of a number of factors significantly influencing the formation of extremism among young people in the present-day Russia. The focus is on the study of the theoretical and legal aspects of the problem.

Introduction

Many researches consider the appearance of youth extremism through the prism of social and political transformations in transient communities. Thus, P. Sztompka calls the collapse of the post-socialist states a kind of revolution leading to the establishment of new norms and systems of value in the society. But such changes, in his opinion, result in a gradual withdrawal of a person from the authoritarian model (Sztompka, 1996). Mostly, such changes influence the youth as a less formed social group. One should also consider Sztompka's approach to modernisation of transient communities. He offers the concept of 'false modernisation' in regard to transient countries, meaning the incongruent, disharmonic, internally contradictory combination of three elements: modern features in individual areas of public life; traditional, pre-modernist characteristics in many other areas, and all the things which people dressed in elegant clothes to imitate the modern Western reality (Sztompka, 1996). This definition can be applied to Russia of the 1990s, when a number of social and political tendencies was hindering the country's development. One of the major problems was mostly psychological: it was necessary to resolutely finish with the past ideological paradigm. All these factors led to complex processes in the country which influenced the youth negatively. The authoritarian person within the boundaries of the whole society has been preserved and transformed, and the youth as well became its carrier. In fact, the classic transient process, not revolutionary changes, was taking place (Henderson, 1997).

Often during this period political elites of different levels use the nationalist ideology in order to establish their control over the masses. Nationalism is a strong ideological basis for formation of a new social and political system. This strategy was successfully used in Czechoslovakia and former Yugoslavia (in Eastern Europe). The federation in Czechoslovakia ended peacefully in 1993, whereas Yugoslavia collapsed violently. Polish, Czech, and Hungarian elites realised variations of this strategy known as "return to Europe". Despite the absence of nationalist discourse on the federal elite level, in Russia in the beginning of the 1990s there emerged a number of movements basing on nationalism and appealing to youth groups, among others.

Because of the society's apathy, characteristic for transient regimes (the present-day Russia is such), some social groups start searching for new identities. The youth, too, is searching for its identity, because this is the group most committed to searching and borrowing everything new, be it a lifestyle or an ideological platform. As some experts point out, during serious social changes, the youth oftener and oftener ask questions about happiness, purpose of life. The answers to these questions are given by their agemates and social and religious movements (Beck, 2000). Thus, in the youth's search for identity there is the charge that can explode during complex social and political period of the country's development, leading to escalation of conflicts in the society.

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The formation of extremism among youth in the given country is influenced by external factors as well. The most important of these factors is globalisation. During transition, a society is absorbing external cultural norms and procedures. But, being absorbed, these procedures change and configure for a new social and political reality. In this situation, the role of social and political institutions acting as a filter for the processes which can influence the society negatively is significantly increasing.

The identity of the modern Russian youth is unstable. It is mostly dependent on the individual's specific social and cultural conditions of formation and is especially acute then the individual reaches the age of 18. In this period a young man is especially prone to ideological impact. This problem becomes all the more serious when we take into consideration that in his changing, an individual can change the social space around himself. This can lead to change of large social groups and even whole classes. Such situation is characteristic for the "liquid modernity", i.e., transition from the industrial society to the post-industrial one. For an individual, it is especially important to change his identity before it loses its value to other people surrounding him (Bauman, 2002).

As Bourdieu has pointed out, formation of a new state comes along with formation of a field of power understood as a playing space. Inside this space, the owners of capital are struggling for power over the state, i.e. over the state capital giving power over different types of capital and their replenishment" (Bourdieu, 1999). Here we can remember J. Huizinga and his "instinct for play". He noted that "culture begins its existence as a kind of a sublimated instinct for play" (Huizinga, 1998), elements of ritual and festive competitions, continuing along with the development of institutions and remaining forever on some level. He gives to everyday life a special quality which reminds most of play. Huizinga defines this quality as puerilism, i.e. a state of the whole society, when it stops to prepare children for adult life and becomes like teens. It is obvious that the features of puerilism are more characteristic for transient political systems and concern mostly youth, who quickly absorb the features of a new reality, but cannot process them, because the society cannot ensure their adjustment to these changes. A reaction to his can be the development of a false identity under the influence of mass-media, for example². As we know, during the complex period of coming of age a young man is mostly influenced by his family.

After the family comes school which gives the person what he had not acquired in his family: socialisation among persons of his own age. It is well-known that imitation is one of the socialisation mechanisms employed in groups of persons of the same age, especially among teens. This process is often unconscious. Imitation of family values is developed even more, as a rule. But in the post-Soviet Russia, we witness a process where mass-media push back the traditional institutes of socialisation. In fact, the people's political conscience and behaviour depend greatly on the information field created by the mass media of this or that country. In this connection, we can quote E. Dennis, who supposes that "mass media are 'forming' our thinking, 'influencing' our opinions and purposes, 'pushes' us towards specific behaviour, for example, voting for a given candidate (Dennis, 1997). Other authors think that the influence of mass media on citizens' behaviour is realised by means of creating a specific public opinion. It is "due to the possibility to give public opinion its generality, mass media have the ability to govern and even manipulate it (Kuzmen, 1996).

We can remember M. Foucault and his understanding of the nonseparability of power from the means it employs to realise its strategies. "There is no gap between the knowledge techniques and power strategies," he said (Foucault, 1996). As a result of the use of discourse practices, images of reality merging information and power are created. The example given shows that reality which does not fit into the habitual or preferable schemes can be distorted and then fully excluded with the help of mass media. Thus, we can note that in the post-Soviet Russia mass media act as a powerful enough source of socialisation and there fore carries a negative function by pushing some young people to deviant actions. These tendencies are much rarer in a stable political system.

Tolerance and intolerance

Speaking of extremism, we should talk about its relation to such concepts as tolerance and intolerance. As we know, the term 'tolerance' comes from the Latin *tolerantia*, meaning "patience, forbearance". Tolerance is a form of social behaviour manifesting itself in a patient, regardful attitude to other opinions and beliefs, to the fact that people can be unlike us in their culture and customs.

² A characteristic example is connected with the Brigade TV show, after which a large number of young people started to imitate the protagonists (bandits). This imitation gradually changed into a number of crimes.

The development of tolerance in society has mostly determined the establishment and further development of democratic regimes in Europe. On the contrary, disturbance and intolerance (both of the society towards the authority and of the authority towards the society) used to be and still is a positive environment for dictators and authoritarian regimes. Intolerance means intensification of bigotry in the society under extremist, often nationalist, slogans. In fact, extremism is the extreme of intolerance.

The first historical form of tolerance was religious tolerance. This principle was established in the Peace of Westphalia of 1648. This treaty laid the grounds for religious equality, in the terms of equalling the rights of Lutherans, Calvinists, and Catholics throughout the territory of Germany. Its articles legally secured the Europeans' idea that it is necessary for individual and common good to recognise another person's beliefs and religion, i.e., to be tolerant towards him. Tolerance as a philosophical category was formulated in connection with the issue of intolerance and was perceived, initially, as an apprehension of the results of the Thirty Years' War, during which the representatives of the conflicting denominations practically exterminated each other.

The famous work of John Locke, *Letters Concerning Toleration*, are an expression of the theory of tolerance. In these letters, he offered a moral rendering of religious tolerance based on rationalism. His ideas, as well as P. Bayle's ideas, served as the basis for building tolerance in Europe. The practice of tolerance in the European countries led to uncontrolled migration from the Third World countries. This led to aggravation of intradenomination problems, but at the same time, contributed to determination of the boundaries of tolerance. Laws were created and mental qualities formed which regulated the tolerance processes. But the very institute of European democracy was seriously threatened by the migrants' intolerance towards the people of the European Union, their reluctance to get assimilated, preservation of rigid traditions and religious customs. This is evidenced by many manifestations of extremisms having religious character or at least religious colour. In foreign countries, these are riots in the suburbs of several cities of France, Germany, and other Western European countries in autumn 2005, winter 1996, 2010. The publication of caricatures depicting Muhammad in Danish and other European newspapers caused significant disturbance among migrants. But we cannot say that these are mass protest, and very often they have no social and political background. The issue is not the presence of the problems, but the ability to solve them. Tolerance is an integral part of a democratic regime, because it helps to develop norms and rules necessary for the existence of this model of social order. Thus, democracy has the right to defend itself when threatened by people showing extreme intolerance³.

The existence of left and right extremism binds it to the character of the political regime very closely. We can specially underline the connection of extremism with authoritarian and totalitarian regimes⁴. Such concepts as state terror and terrorism are especially important in this sense. Thus, many researchers, talking about extremism, single the concepts of extremism, radicalism, and terrorism out. The first two definitions come into contradiction with the law, whereas radicalism does not violate it. But, if we are talking about the Russian legislation concerning terrorism, we can note that terrorist activity is defined very schematically.

Legal framework

But before we go on, we should consider the peculiarities of understanding extremism in Western countries and in Russia. The simplest understanding of extremism is adherence to extreme views and actions. The situation with defining extremism in the 1990s was poorly formalised in the law, which led to a number of grave problems. So beginning from 2001 the legislation started to pay special attention to this problem, which led to the adoption of a law on extremism which many experts called too harsh. In Russia, the main definition of extremism is based on the norms of Law No. 114-ФЗ "On Counteraction of Extremist Activity", according to which, extremist includes not only "the forcible change of the foundations of the constitutional system and the violation of the integrity of the Russian Federation; the subversion of the security of the Russian Federation"⁵, "the abasement of national dignity", but also such actions as "public, knowingly false accusation of an individual holding state office" or the making of mass disturbances, ruffian-like acts, and acts of vandalism, including in the political sphere, as well as financing such activities, hindering lawful actions of the state authorities, election commission, and lawful activity of persons holding offices in the said authorities.

³For more details, see D. Rose's works.

⁴ For more details, see H. Arendt's *The Origin of Totalitarianism*.

⁵ Federal Law of the Russian Federation No. 148-ФЗ dt. 27/07/2006 "On Amendments to Articles 1 and 15 of the Federal Law "On Counteraction of Extremist Activity". [<http://www.rg.ru/2006/07/29/ekstremizm-protivodejstvie-dok.html>].

Besides, responsibility for false accusation of representatives of the Russian state authorities is mentioned specifically. The trouble is that the law gives no clear definition of a "false accusation", which can lead to use of this law as a tool in political fight.

The excessive bulkiness of the Russian definition of this term is obvious. According to this law, an extremist organisation is a public or a religious association, or any other organisation, in relation to which on the grounds provided for by this Federal Law a court of law has adopted the decision concerning the liquidation or the prohibition of its activity in connection with extremism in its functioning. In other words, instead of making the concept clear-cut and concrete, it is blurred with extensive phrases, and any utterance or text criticising the authorities can be subject to this definition. At the same time, one can walk into any bookshop and see a vast number of books proclaiming religious and national intolerance. But for some reasons, the Prosecutor's Office pays no attention to them...

If we turn to the Western experience, we will find no clear definition of extremism there either. The fullest definition of extremism is given in Resolution 1344 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, according to which extremism "is a form of political activity that overtly or covertly rejects the principles of parliamentary democracy"⁶. This also concerns activity aimed at national, religious, and social hatred, and, therefore, at changing the foundations of a democratic state.

Conclusion

Adopting cultural practices is always difficult, especially in such complex situation. But this does not mean that a successful experience cannot be adopted and applied. The society should finally accept responsibility for the country, not shift it to the authorities wishing to secure its well-being by all means possible. Fighting intolerance is impossible if the state itself is intolerant towards its own citizens. And therefore, only development of political culture in the society can put this process into motion. But one of the main dangers for the state on the windy path of cultural development is intolerance which can manifest itself in different forms, but in the end leads to the same sad result.

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⁶ Resolution 1344 (2003) «Threat posed to democracy by extremist parties and movements in Europe»: [<http://assembly.coe.int/main.asp?Link=/documents/adoptedtext/ta03/eres1344.htm>].