

## **The Geopolitical Role of Orthodox Russia within a Planetary Context - A Hellenic Perspective?**

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With the fall of the Soviet Union, the ideological background of the Security Council of the United Nations underwent a change. Russia replaced Soviet Union and, hence, the “political death” of the cornerstone of the Socialist Block gave its place to a, then, politically weak and fragile post-socialist giant. In order to survive materially, Russia had to make as quick as possible questionable and extremely painful political economic reforms. In order to survive spiritually, it dived into its spiritually rich Christian Orthodox past founding the moral values serving its self-understanding and self-identification, values and principles which were for many centuries characteristic of its deeper culture and tradition. Thus, in the Security Council of the United Nations, between the Western World as represented permanently by the U.S.A., the UK and France as well as the Orient as represented permanently by China, sat Orthodox Russia.

Dialogue presupposes that the participants in its process are dealt equally. The theses articulated by a participant in the process of dialogue may be both interesting and beneficial and the respective intentions may be sacred or even holy. However, up to now, the international arena has not managed to overcome the state of a primitive international community. Frankly speaking, the world appears to be more complex and violent than the hyper-idealistic structures taught arrogantly by many international law professors. In fact, in this very international arena, the capacity of persuasion of each state depends on its power - mainly economic and military - as well as on its capability to make use of this power in order to implement its will. If we see now the states as agents of specific values from this somehow cynical but realistic perspective, then Russia is at the level of macrocosmos the *de facto* representative of the Orthodox voice.

Interestingly, at the micro-level Russia offered and offers a picture of a country where various ethnic groups, representatives of different

nationalities and confessions have co-existed for millennia. It also portrays the image of a state, where smaller nations and nationalities that at some stage of their history lost (or never had) their own written languages allied with a larger civilisation while preserving their own national cultures, faiths, languages and traditions.<sup>1</sup> By being inhabited by more than a hundred and seventy different ethnic groups and indigenous peoples, Russia is in essence an image of the world as it enshrines enormous cultural and ethnic diversity.<sup>2</sup>

Orthodoxy has, hence, a strong international agent which at the same time values, experiences and recognizes cultural diversity.

It is to be born in mind from the outset, that there appears to be a considerable amount of consistency with respect to this orthodox pattern of thought, especially in constellations where the West decided to intervene to foreign territories.

Indeed, in this context, we should be reminded that the NATO bombings in Serbia in 1999 and the subsequent interventions in Afghanistan and in Iraq have neither been endorsed nor been viewed as legal by the Russian Federation. The legitimacy of these operations performed in a unilateral “do it alone” fashion by the U.S.A. and its allies is more than questionable. These interventions have alarmed the rest of the world that values such as democracy, liberty and human rights as well as the inherent right of the states to self-defense do also constitute products which under the skillful advertisement have been exported forcefully in order to cover effectively hidden geostrategic objectives. On the other hand, at the level of Ideology, Russia’s critical position strengthened its international image. It revealed its denial to trade whatsoever “values” on the world market and to forcefully penetrate into traditional Muslim regions in a Crusader fashion in order to destabilize them.

Recognition of cultural diversity and values faces, however, limits. Civilizational identity of respective states should not be ignored and violated by the exercise of whatsoever practices. Once the radical form of Islam replaced the traditional non-radical islamic values of the of

Chechens backed by the aspiration to establish an Islamic Republic in the North Caucasus and to initiate a military Jihad by having recourse to terrorist methods, Russia retaliated effectively and restored its inner peace by means of military coercion.<sup>3</sup> Reflecting this internal conflict to the aforementioned interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan initiated by the West, two comments appear necessary. Firstly, Russia defended the sanctity of its borders and did not initiate Holy Wars several thousands of kilometers far away from its territory. Secondly, the region of Chechnya has been rebuilt, while Afghanistan is a narco-state and Iraq's peace has not been restored. In the final analysis, to the extent that radical Islam can be instrumentalized and used as a weapon, Orthodox Russia has the capacity and the know-how to retaliate. After all, mainly the West appears to fight against or to support radical Islamic tendencies pursuant to its geopolitical priorities, just as it does now in the case of Syria.

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International economic institutions as IMF and WB have been established upon the capitalistic economic concept. From the economic order established after the WWII Russia – then the Soviet Union - was automatically excluded. Now, it is difficult to change the rules of the game, since is a common topos that there are incentives for those who create a system to establish legally institutional rigidity in order to make permanent the gains from a frozen past situation. It is, thus, no coincidence that reform processes of the given institutions constitute interesting topics for academic surveys, conferences and publications but not for real action. In this context, it is worth citing the criticism on the dominant economic order raised by Pope *Francis* :<sup>4</sup>

*“ .... some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system. Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting .... ”*

Today, it is more than apparent that to gain profits, seemingly from thin air, has become an attractive activity throughout the globe.<sup>5</sup> In turn, criticizing the ideology of the current economic and financial order *Vladimir Yakunin* has vividly pointed out that :<sup>6</sup>

“ ... roguery and speculation have today been built up as a worldwide phenomenon, a fundamental manifestation of the degradation of values in the contemporary world, rather than of just the present-day “champion” of this sport—the American Federal Reserve System (FRS). ... ”

At the macro-level, BRICS appear to be the wind of change against the still prevailing ideology in the current financial and economic order. The leaders of BRICS who gathered in the city of Fortaleza in Brazil for their 6<sup>th</sup> annual summit on July 15<sup>th</sup>, announced the establishment of two financial institutions: the New Development Bank (NDB) to finance infrastructure and “sustainable development” projects and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), to tide over members in financial difficulties.<sup>7</sup> Russian President *Vladimir Putin* highlighted the setting up of the NDB and CRA, noting that they would help not only BRICS countries themselves, but also many other developing countries.<sup>8</sup> However, it should be noted that apart from to the establishment of new financial institutions, BRICS should initiate the creation of a judicial organ, thus influencing the development of international law towards balance and justice. Quite often, concurring jurisdictions and judicial opposition may bring balance to a system which is - although yet ruthlessly shaken - denying every change with respect to its monolithic and oligarchic constellation oriented to globalization as initiated by elite clubs. Arguably, to a certain extent, BRICS framework carries the hopes for a New International Economic Order as elaborated in the 60s and 70s in the United Nations by developing states which demanded the recognition of their right to independently realize their own plans for economic development and exploitation of their natural resources.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, in order to provide for an alternative economic paradigm within BRICS, Russia had to experience the devastating effects of the neo-liberal reforms of the 90s. To begin with, these reforms

devastated the living standards of much of the Russian population. In fact, in the collective memory of the Russian population it is acknowledged that the effects of the “shock therapy” applied in Russia were worse than the effects of the Second World War. Moreover, during these reforms Russia’s key industries such as oil, metallurgy, mining and engineering, became mostly private. The vast majority of these enterprises were privatized at incredibly low prices and with significant benefits to insiders.<sup>10</sup> A fair amount of statistics show that privatization of the national champions and a concentration of wealth in the hands of the few well-connected individuals, has not been accepted as legitimate or fair by a large part of the population.<sup>11</sup> Admittedly, one of the main problems concerning these reforms was the fact that they were applied without taking into account the given social and cultural context, what in terms of the transaction cost economics of *Oliver Williamson* constitute the social embeddedness.<sup>12</sup>

Be that as it may, at the level of interpersonal-ideology, the Russian Orthodox culture offers a further valuable weapon against the currently dominant neoliberal trend since it is tolerant and humane towards economic poverty and misfortune.<sup>13</sup> Poverty within the Russian culture is not a sign of exclusion or rejection. In fact, the most important duty of the Orthodox-Christian is the support of those who are weak and live in poverty. One should be reminded of the fact that In the Russian-Christian society, material support and welfare is separated from personal success and activities. In the final analysis, in the past, the consolidation of distributional practices within the Russian peasant community/society (“*obschina*”) occurred through the Orthodox-Christianity.<sup>14</sup>

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I have said in other fora that, today, the image of Russia is somehow frozen and not promoted even in those states, where the soil is fruitful.<sup>15</sup> Often, Russia is presented by Western media either as an enemy image or as an old heavy and fearful giant, a sort of a dreadful shadow. After relinquishing propaganda presenting Russia as responsible for the crash of Malaysia Airways’ Boeing 777 in eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, Western media remained suddenly silent. Moreover, they appear to have forgotten that there is Resolution 2166 of the Security Council of the

United Nations providing for an international, transparent and accountable investigation of the matter.<sup>16</sup> Regrettably, a similar attitude was followed by with respect to the Ukrainian crisis when crimes against civilians, mainly of orthodox confession, and hate speeches performed by radicals and extremists with neo-nazi tendencies remained out of critique. Europe should avoid the inclination to identify itself in contrast and in opposition to Russia. The West should also avoid applying double-standards as regards Human Rights and moral values pursuant to its respective geopolitical interests and priorities. It is historically undisputed that neither Europe nor Russia would have existed as they are if the one had not the other.

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But let's take the Balkan region and specially Hellas as an example for the need for a new paradigm-shift.

Hellas is now under the obligation to implement measures and to borrow money under the terms dictated by European Union and the International Monetary Fond. At the same time, the reforms and help packages implemented do feature very questionable results. Greek public debt averaged just under 104% of its gross domestic product (GDP) during 1994-2009 and reached 148.3% in 2010, the year when the Hellenic Republic asked the EU for help.<sup>17</sup> The dictated policy of austerity seems to have made the situation considerably worse. Indeed, according to Eurostat, in 2013 Greek public debt reached 175.1% of GDP.<sup>18</sup> When Greece asked for help in 2010, the unemployment rate was at 12.6%. In June 2014 the unemployment rate was according to Eurostat at 27 %.<sup>19</sup> Over 44 percent of the Greek population had an income below the poverty line in 2013 according to estimates by the Public Policy Analysis Group of the Athens University of Economics and Business.<sup>20</sup> In addition, pursuant to the results of a report carried out jointly by UNICEF and Athens University under the title, "The State of Children in Greece 2013" approximately 597.000 children are currently living in poverty.<sup>21</sup> Since 2010, confirmed suicide rates are skyrocketing in a country where the number of people taking their own life used to be particularly low.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, fiscal austerity, higher unemployment rates and negative economic growth lead to significant increases in overall

suicide rates in Hellas.<sup>23</sup> The use of anti-depressive drugs is also on the rise. There is no need to use stats in order to prove the self-evident: The measures and policies applied serve the implementation of economic theory reflecting free market principles without taking into account the effects of those measures upon the population and the human toll to be paid. It is, hence, justified to claim just as Argentina did before the World Bank Investment Tribunals that the severity of economic crisis and the situation emanating from the dictated policies amounts to a situation tantamount of war or is similar to a military occupation.<sup>24</sup>

Illegal migration mainly from regions endorsing fundamentalist forms of Islam changes the demographic map of Greece. It is no secret that the latter can be used as a Trojan horse to hurt a nation from within. Neither NATO nor EU appear willing to secure the Hellenic borders given the fact that at the same time Greek forces lack the competence to take decisive measures since such competence is conferred to international bodies. Moreover, an amalgam of populism and propaganda is surrounding the deals concerning the exploitation of Greek natural resources such as Oil and Gas, whereas at the same time the deal with Russia with respect to South-Stream pipeline has been erased from the political discussion. The Greek government, once again decided to serve the interest of NATO in order to injure the geopolitical role of Russia in the Mediterranean region, a strategy of considerable priority for NATO and the U.S.A. A similar scenario is followed with respect to the market of weapons. Again, Western producers of weapons and intransparent procedures are uncritically preferred to Russian supply-proposals as regards weaponry and equipment of the Hellenic Armed Forces. In reality, this policy came to the expense of Greek taxpayers and national geo-economic interests.

From a cultural context, if one looks at the European map ignoring the national borders, then she/he realizes that Hellas appears to be closer to Russia than to Western Europe due to the common Christian Orthodox tradition. From a financial perspective, an investment portfolio should have various assets in order to avoid risks stemming from the dependency of one certain asset. Hence, the servile monolithic geo-economic orientation of Hellas towards West runs counter to this very

principle. How will you survive on the international arena when you play the game of those who set the rules and share the profits? Moreover, in our neighborhood, sovereign territorial rights are put into question almost every day. From a defensive perspective, common military including naval exercises from the North of the Aegean Sea till Cyprus between the Orthodox states of Russia, Hellas, Serbia and Bulgaria might give persuasive answers to the power politics that put established international law in question. At the same, the volume of the voices acting in the North of Hellas which use the Islamic faith as a means for destabilization and political mobilization of disintegrative forces in the region - as it has been done previously in Russia by the activities of Islamic funds and missionaries in the area of Caucasus - will be tuned lower.

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To summarize: The global mission of Orthodox-Russia in the international arena reads as follows:

- (1) To form a characteristic example of what the so-called principle unity in diversity without sacrificing its civilizational identity in the name of multiculturalism.
- (2) To be the primary promoter of Orthodox spiritual values.
- (3) To be a *de facto* leader of Orthodox states and an initiator of a geopolitical coalition of states upon the Christian-Orthodox geostrategic platform.
- (4) To be a citadel towards to the current worldwide threat of international Islamic terrorism.
- (5) To constitute a balancing power and stabilizer of the World system and international law.
- (6) To be a decisive factor towards the creation of new institutional settings aiming at substituting the old and outdated institutions which do not reflect the dynamics of the current multi-polar world.
- (7) As member of the BRICS, to offer a civilized response to the current established neoliberal economic trend, a trend which, regrettably, favors specific oligarchic groups at the expense of other nations.
- (8) To offer an alternative paradigm for harmonious and humane economic development.

To this purpose, an ecumenical symbol is needed. In analogy to the Vatican, one might dare to think of performing research as regards the limits, possibilities and potential of an Autonomous Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople under the aegis of Orthodox Russia with the vision to serve the principle of justice and not unjust laws and jurisprudence coined to serve dictated interests.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Yakunin, Political Tectonics of the World Today (Shifting Trends), World Affairs, Vol. 17 (2013), 10, 22.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.; Report by Alvaro Gil-Robles, Commissioner for Human Rights, Strasbourg, 20 April 2005, CommDH (2005) 2, p. 41-42, available at <https://wcd.coe.int/com.instranet.InstraServlet?Index=no&command=com.instranet.CmdBlobGet&InstranetImage=319771&SecMode=1&DocId=831882&Usage=2> (last visited 16-09-2014).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Domitilla, Sagramoso, Violence and Conflict in the Russian North Caucasus, International Affairs (2007), 681, 697 *et seq.*; Richard, Sakwa, The Clash of Regionalisms and Caucasian Conflicts, Europe-Asia Studies (2011), 467, 478.

<sup>4</sup> See the entire passage in: Aaron Blake, Pope Francis denounces ‘trickle-down’ economics, The Washington Post, November 26, 2013 available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2013/11/26/pope-francis-denounces-trickle-down-economics/> (last visited 16-09-2014).

<sup>5</sup> Yakunin, *supra* note 1, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Yakunin, *supra* note 1, 14.

<sup>7</sup> The BRICS bank. An acronym with capital. (Setting up rivals to the IMF and World Bank is easier than running them), The Economist, 19-07-2014, available at <http://www.economist.com/node/21607851/print> (last visited 16-09-2014).

<sup>8</sup> KG/XINHUA, The leader of the countries laid out the designs of the New Development Bank (BRICS forges stronger economic partnership), New Europe online, 16.07.2014, available at <http://www.neurope.eu/article/brics-forges-stronger-economic-partnership> (last visited 16-09-2014).

<sup>9</sup> Ignaz Seidl-Hohenveldern, The International Economic Order, in Christian Tomuschat, The UN at Age Fifty, A Legal Perspective, Kluwer, The Hague, 1995, 215, 217 *et seq.*; Fernandez, Janeth Warden, The permanent sovereignty over natural resources: how it has been accommodated within the evolving global economy, available at <http://www.dundee.ac.uk/cepmlp/gateway/?news=27955> (last visited 16-09-2014).

<sup>10</sup> Chernykh, Lucy, Profit or politics? Understanding renationalizations in Russia, Journal of Corporate Finance 17 (2011), 1237–1253, 1239.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Oliver, Williamson, Transaction Cost Economics: How it Works; Where it is Headed, De Economist 146 (1998), 23, 26-27.

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<sup>13</sup> Балабанова Е. С. Особенности российской экономической ментальности, in: Экономические субъекты постсоветской России (институциональный анализ), Под редакцией д.э.н. проф. Р.М. Нуреева, МОСКОВСКИЙ ОБЩЕСТВЕННЫЙ НАУЧНЫЙ ФОНД, Москва, 2003, 2.2.2., 140.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Heretic Thoughts of an Orthodox Co-operation - A Piece of Journalism? [or "Prospects of an orthodox Co-operation centered around Athos"], International Conference, The Holy Mount Athos - the Unique Spiritual and Cultural Heritage of Modern World, Belgrade, 23.06.2013 - 26.06.2013, available at

<http://holy-mount-athos.org/en/speeches-belgrade/203-heretic-thoughts-of-an-orthodox-co-operation> (last visited 16-09-2014).

<sup>16</sup> SC/RES/2166 (2014) Adopted unanimously on 21-07-2014.

<sup>17</sup> European Parliament, News, Greece: Troika success story or a warning against too much austerity?, 29-01-2014 available at

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/content/20140129STO34108/html/Greece-Troika-success-story-or-a-warning-against-too-much-austerity> (last visited 16-09-2014).

<sup>18</sup> <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&language=en&pcode=teina225> (last visited 16-09-2014).

<sup>19</sup> <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&language=en&pcode=teilm020&tableSelect ion=1&plugin=1> (last visited 16-09-2014).

<sup>20</sup> Ekathimerini, Nearly half of incomes below poverty line, 06-01-2014, available at [http://www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/\\_w\\_articles\\_wsite2\\_1\\_06/01/2014\\_534747](http://www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/_w_articles_wsite2_1_06/01/2014_534747) (last visited 16-09-2014).

<sup>21</sup> UNICEF, Η Κατάσταση των Παιδιών στην Ελλάδα 2013, available at <http://www.unicef.gr/uploads/filemanager/PDF/info/children-in-Greece-2013.pdf> (last visited 16-09-2014).

<sup>22</sup> Barbara Hardinghaus/Julia Amalia Heyer, Troubled Times: Wave of Suicides Shocks Greece, 15-08-2012, available at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/economic-crisis-triggers-wave-of-suicides-in-greece-a-850129.html> (last visited 16-09-2014); Harry Papachristou, Suicide attempts increasing in crisis-stricken Greece, 23-11-2012, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/11/23/us-greece-suicides-idUSBRE8AM08H20121123> (last visited 16-09-2014).

<sup>23</sup> Antonakakis, Nikolaos and Collins, Alan, The Impact of Fiscal Austerity on Suicide: On the Empirics of a Modern Greek Tragedy, *Social Science & Medicine*, Vol. 112 (2014), 39 *et seq.*

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., August, Reinisch, Necessity in International Arbitration – An Unnecessary Split of Opinions in Recent ICSID Cases? Comments on CMS v. Argentina and LG&E v. Argentina, *Journal of World Investment and Trade* Vol. 8 (2007), 191 (2009) and the footnotes therein.