

# On a Place in Time

Sidenotes on “Time Is Out of Joint...”

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This essay is a comment on Larisa Deriglazova’s article “*Time Is Out of Joint*”: *EU and Russia in Quest of Themselves in Time* published above. This chiefly explains the way this text is structured, which might otherwise look somewhat odd. Larisa Deriglazova’s article, which served both as the reason and occasion for writing this essay, deals with two different topics: **firstly**, memory politics discourse in Russia and in the European Union over the last decades, and, **secondly**, problems of modernization—from the state of affairs proper to differences in understanding the essence of modernization. The latter, in fact, allowed the author to merge the two topics. In fact, memory politics itself is presented, first and

foremost, with regard to modernization, its successes and/or failures, its one-sidedness or, on the contrary, its ability to transform society, synchronize it, and/or create “islands of modernity” in the middle of the space that remains in a different time.

### **THINGS “SOVIET” IN MEMORY POLITICS**

Larisa Deriglazova sees the turn to “all Soviet” in Russia’s memory politics as a rejection of the previous program. This understanding, in my opinion, is questionable, to say the least. Russia after 1991 faced the problem of creating a relatively unified historical narrative. And here let me immediately rule out the utopian option of a radical break with the past, that is, presenting Russia as a “young country” with history starting in 1991 (or 1990 if the countdown is to begin with the Declaration of State Sovereignty of the RSFSR, adopted by the First Congress of RSFSR People’s Deputies on June 12, 1990) and presenting the entire past as prehistory. If we consider narratives about communities relevant to actual Russia but outside of the immediate continuum, we will see only three main options left; they have been implicated in historical politics, albeit to varying degrees.

*First*, the “anti-Communist” vision, which basically insists on continuity with Imperial Russia and conceptualizes the “Soviet age” (Lewin, 2008; Schlögel, 2021) as a deviation from the “natural” and/or “proper” course of history.<sup>1</sup> Everything that was “positive” in the USSR is presented as something that materialized “not because of, but in spite of” or, at best, “neutrally,” as a result of the general order of things, unrelated to the Soviet regime itself.

*Second*, the “Soviet” vision of Russia as a reincarnation of the Soviet Union. For obvious reasons, it was not relevant in the 1990s, and will remain generally unacceptable in the future, for it is impossible to completely detach the USSR from this or that version of the Socialist agenda, while the new order asserts itself

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<sup>1</sup> A variety of conceptualizations is possible—from “naturalness” as conformity with the universal to conformity with something that is “one’s own,” to the “general nature of things” or to the “nature” of this particular historical object.

as fundamentally capitalist, whatever its shades. Moreover, in this case a strong revanchist zeal is inevitable: in this interpretation, Russia would have emerged as the surviving wreckage of the former superpower.

*Third*, the conceptualization of “Soviet” as a specific historical form, contrasted to both the Russian Empire and modern Russia, but precisely as a very special historical form, one of the stages of integral history. The restorationist/revolutionary component is not inevitably predominant here. It is present only as one of the variants that is weakened by being included in a long history with ever-changing borders, regimes, and aspirations. Depending on the specific moment, certain episodes of the past are emphasized, and its duration offers a wide range of such episodes. The most “highlighted” pictures of the recent past (“living memory”) lose their unambiguous correlation with the Soviet period by being placed against the preceding (pre-Soviet) and subsequent (modern Russia) periods.

The latter variant was embodied in such symbolic developments as the comeback, in 2000, of the Soviet anthem with a new text, written by none other than Sergei Mikhalkov, one of the authors of the first version of the anthem to the music of Boris Alexandrov. At the same time, the coat of arms, an unmistakable allusion to the Russian Empire, and the state flag, largely associated with the White Movement, were preserved. The First World War was actively returned to the memory of the national community. The centenary of the 1917 Revolution was celebrated in a subdued, deliberately neutral manner, while the celebrations commemorating the centenary of the end of the Civil War had an unambiguous let-by-gones-be-by-gones connotation to herald the reconciliation of the once warring parties. In other words, emphasis was placed on the memory of the common tragic past, without winners and losers in this or that historical period. Perhaps, the most striking assertion of the continuity of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and modern Russia was the ceremony of hoisting three banners on the embankment of Lakhta Center in St. Petersburg on June 17, 2023 (RBK, 2023). The Soviet

past was described with such conciliatory adjectives as “complex,” “contradictory” and “ambiguous.”<sup>2</sup>

Deriglazova characterizes the EU’s memory policy as a kind of unity. Meanwhile, it has long been noted by many scholars (among Russian authors who deserve to be mentioned is, first of all, Alexei Miller, who has devoted many works and public speeches to this issue (Miller and Efremenko, 2020; Lapin and Miller, 2021)) that even a most generalized description cannot avoid noting the fundamental disagreement between the memory policies of Western and Eastern European countries. Although both focus on victims and are similar in terms of vocabulary, a closer look reveals a fundamental contradiction between them. For the former, it is a memory of victims, injustices and tragedies, whose perpetrators turned out to be the very community that acted as a community of remembrance. For the latter, the victim is community itself, which does not do justice (at least the justice of memory) but seeks justice from history and/or from its neighbors. Incidentally, this is partly the point made by Aleida Assmann, whose recent work Deriglazova used as the starting point of her study. Assmann emphasizes the dissatisfaction with memory culture and the tension that increasingly grows from treating history as a source of grievances, from legitimizing one’s own claims by switching from the narrative of heroes to the narrative of victims that have the right to make claims against the world and, above all, against specific Others (Assmann, 2016).

Another significant aspect that cannot be ignored is the impossibility of direct expression (and, consequently, direct comparison) of the memory politics in the EU countries (especially in the new member-states) and Russia. In fact, the author of the article herself mentions this, noting the difference in perspectives but not dwelling on it at

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<sup>2</sup> I should note in passing that over the past year and a half there has been a significant shift in this field, primarily due to the elimination or significant reduction in the public space of other centers for commemorating the Soviet past. This applies first and foremost to the activities of Memorial.\* The shift towards a “state-centered” dimension, which Deriglazova refers to in her article, has become noticeable recently not so much because of the change in the state forms of commemoration, but because of the transformation of the public space, with whose participants (now absent or weakened) the state forms of commemoration previously interacted. —\**The organization was recognized in Russia as a foreign agent and liquidated by court decision.*

length. For the relatively new states of the European Union, a significant prospect, which in many respects is a “prosthesis” of the image of the future, is the solidity of European integration, the achievement/reproduction of behavioral models and modes of judgment that are close to the leading members of the European community. It is noteworthy (and quite expected as well) that an emphatic indication of one’s own “Europeanness” is characteristic of the periphery of the Union. Importantly, belonging to Europe is emphasized here not in the sense of political, legal or economic unity, but primarily as separation from the Others, which inconspicuously brings to mind the opposition between ancient Greeks and “barbarians.”

It is clear that Russia’s memorial policy cannot be organized in this way, because even in time of Russia’s closest interaction with the European Union no one envisioned its inclusion in the European community. The supranational level is possible here primarily as a universal level rather than as a reference to an intermediate-level community (or, in the case of the Russian World, Russian-speaking or, if one recalls the largely extinct realities of the post-Soviet space, as a community whose core and semantic center should once again be in Russia).

## **MODERNIZATION**

Discussing modernization, especially in comparative terms, is naturally difficult, because the subject matter is multifaceted and ambiguous. To begin with, the very concept of modernization is a great problem. Therefore, I will briefly note only a few points, just to show the obstacles and possible guidelines for further discussion, where literally every twist and turn of thought deserves a separate detailed analysis.

First of all, let me remind you that Russia takes credit for staging the first modernization experiment (usually described as Peter the Great’s reforms). Throughout the 19th century, Russia’s example served for the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and Japan as proof that it is possible to successfully implement such a program and achieve the goals set in this way. In the 20th century, the Soviet Union, as the author of the second industrial modernization breakthrough, also served as an example for many other countries to follow.

This reminder is not just a reference to the past. It is important for understanding the current options for carrying out modernization and the essence of modernization strategies, because it implies not only external experience but also the internal experience of modernization, vast and diversified.<sup>3</sup>

It is noteworthy that the author constructs a dichotomy of political and technical modernization (without a clear correlation with the dichotomy of liberal and conservative models of modernization appearing in the final section), which stand out as options for the new, post-communist EU countries and Russia, respectively. However straightforward this comparison might be, it seems accurate in the Russian case, since the European “integration” option suggested movement along the lines of political modernization with tangible restrictions on technical modernization. This was very well seen in Russia’s failed deal to purchase Opel in 2009. For Russia, the deal was important first and foremost as possible access to new technologies and their development, rather than the acquisition of ready-made products and solutions.

By the turn of the 2000-2010s, technological modernization, carried out in cooperation with the European partners, had hit the ceiling. Any further action would have been confrontational. On Russia’s part there were attempts to remove these limitations, while the opposite side was adamant to preserve and maintain the existing state of affairs. This situation, which emerged virtually in no time, clearly made political modernization unattractive for Russia, as it turned out to be an effective means of influencing the country’s policies from outside and a tool for blocking technological modernization.

This raises another question—the attractiveness of the proposed priority of political modernization over the technological one. For Russia, this would be tantamount to giving up efforts to strengthen its own position and agreeing to join the existing system of relations as a younger brother. Such a position is attractive to groups that primarily benefit from inclusion, those for whom the position of agents of

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, at least half of Russian 19th-century literature was devoted to this theme, including the well-known problem of the “gap” between “educated society” and “the people.”

Western influence is advantageous, who establish appropriate standards for themselves and in their own space (in the old days this was called “compradorism”). But for everyone else (for example, residents of cities with a population of under one million) it remains unclear: What does this prospect really offer and why can it be so tempting? And most importantly, this position does not promise any future for Russia, except for the suggestion (relevant until the end of the 2000s and completely irrelevant after 2022) of extending this “status quo” indefinitely, like a never-ending lunch break. This consequently implies that the challenges of the large space, the diverse contexts in which Russia is involved beyond its relations with the European Union, will also be frozen and immobilized (or, synonymously, doomed to endless repetition of the same thing over and over again).

Incidentally, the current conflict, which has acquired a radically new severity and acuteness since February 2022, is defined by some authors as “the completion of Peter the Great’s project,” a “divorce with Europe,” etc. (Concept, 2023, para. 5; Concept, 2023, para. 5). Yet one of the internal consequences in the medium and long term (provided the march of events does not take a catastrophic turn) may be the easing (if not total lifting) of the neurotic tension associated with the assertion/denial of one’s “Europeanness.” Yuri Lotman, for example, considered that a characteristic and stable feature of Russian culture is not only its binary nature, but also the outwardliness of the sacral center, whereby various historical changes, such as the regular change of signs (positive/negative) associated with the cultural concepts of ‘East’ and ‘West,’ cause no change to the structure itself. Where previously the “East” (for Vladimir-Suzdalian Rus or Muscovy, geographically it was rather the southwest, Jerusalem) was perceived as a place of light, it was then replaced by the “West,” which used to be represented as the realm of the dead and a place of extinction (in ancient cultural geography, the Elysian Fields, the islands of the blessed, were located in the extreme west, beyond the Pillars of Hercules).

By abandoning the gripping desire to become part of “Europe,” which, precisely due to its imaginary nature, makes such an aspiration unrealistic, a “divorce” with Europe opens up an opportunity for actual

Europeanization. But not in the sense of coming closer to and/or fitting in with the idea of the very best in the ideology of the European Union, but in concrete practices, ways of organizing the surrounding living space, and, above all, in the realization of much of what is available as shared and common with what is perceived as “European.”

The problem that the author implicitly brings up relates to the very essence of the notion of modernization: Does it mean an approximation to a certain normative state (in the case of the post-communist newly-admitted EU member-countries this comes first), or does modernization mean the solution of one’s own tasks, the achievement of one’s own goals, which cannot be achieved by means of simple reproduction or extensive growth of what already exists, but implies innovation in various respects, including as a successful response to changes in the world around us?

In my opinion, it is more correct to put the question in the context of the above-cited work of Mikhail Davydov (Davydov, 2022, p. 13)—about the need for political modernization, without which technical modernization “hits the ceiling” and eventually collapses due to growing inconsistency. The main difficulty is that the European institutions of liberal-democratic consensus, the very model of political participation that has been effective and convincing since the 1960s and looked triumphant at the end of the 20th century, is now in a deep crisis. Whereas the transfer of this model to new EU member-states and the sustainability of the new system, as the author herself notes, is supported by external control and the tangible benefits of membership, what could and can fulfill a similar role in the case of Russia? The question of political modernization becomes radically more complex, as it implies not only a response to external challenges, but also the establishment of institutions adequate to domestic demands.

The previous historical experience of Russian modernization provides complex examples of this kind. Let us remember that the successful modernization of the 18th century and the first third of the 19th century, including political modernization (the establishment of nobility as a corporation, urban governments, estates courts, and the formation of the bureaucratic corps in the first half of the 19th century),



turned out to be a dead end. Russia missed the turn in European development in the 1830s-1840s, continuing to follow the previous logic. As a result, a few decades later, its regime, which in the 1820s seemed to be developing successfully, proved to be archaic and in need of fundamental transformation. This required a major breakthrough in the 1890s, followed by a growing contradiction between the booming economy and the public sphere and the political regime, which since the 1880s had been actively trying to defend itself by asserting a unique nature, a specific essence of “autocracy,” in contrast to the absolutist regimes in the rest of Europe.

This takes us back, following the author (which demonstrates that the model of discussion she has chosen is not accidental), to the issues of memory politics and the comprehension of the past. While one of the key characteristics of modernity is its special temporality, its thrust towards an open future and its emphasis on innovation, the author’s emphasis on the absence of an image of the future within the framework of “European” modernization takes on special significance against this background. The future becomes identical to normalization, a point where “normal existence” will finally set in, stable institutions will eventually take shape, and life will follow a peaceful routine day in day out. This sort of “Taoist” ideal of exit from history comes into conflict with the very existence in modernity, which moves towards individual choices and individual groups that realize themselves in the freest possible way. On the flip side we find tensions of memory politics in Eastern Europe, where the past—or, more precisely, memory (that is, what belongs to the present)—became the subject matter of political struggle. And it is noteworthy that in today’s Russian debates about the past the role of memory politics has rapidly diminished, at least for the time being. The current lines of demarcation and redefinition no longer require a reference to the past—the return of history sends memory politics into the background.

### **IN LIEU OF CONCLUSION**

To formulate the main methodological disagreement, I would reduce my notes to the remark that the author compares the incomparable:

reality and the ideal. In her reflections on the European Union she discusses not the reality, but the outlined goals and formulated ideals, whereas in the case of Russia she speaks of the real state of affairs.

I must immediately note that the question is not how pleasant or antipathetic, or ideologically close or distant the resulting picture is. The main thing is that the objects of consideration are on different planes.

It would be much more interesting, for example, to try to compare different ideals. However, a reasonable objection arises here (from which I think the methodological strangeness of the original text stems in many respects). In the case of Russia, this “ideal” position is not only constantly changing, but at any given moment in time it is represented by visions that are not just diverse, but also fundamentally incompatible. A neutral onlooker gets into an unusual situation. He either arbitrarily creates some kind of consistent picture by picking statements and actions that make it possible to construct a coherent image. Or he finds an empirical diversity in which it is impossible to distinguish something decisively predominant, and thus he is left with no choice other than to either construct a meta-image that reiterates the displaced/removed in empirical formulas, or to try to deal not with a set of statements, but with tendencies/trends.

And finally, the underlying assumption is that by and large it is all about arbitrarily chosen policies. The way I see it, (and I have tried to show this briefly with the example of things “Soviet” in memory politics) arbitrariness is at least rather limited. History is made in a series of concrete decisions, with chance and coincidence running the show. The very frame and circumstances not only determine the repertoire of possible roles and the set of moves, but in the long run they are often capable of smoothing out, if not canceling, the “eventuality” of an event. This, alas, does not apply to specific human destinies but has power over what is far longer than an individual human life.

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