

CULTURAL DIVERSITY VS. GLOBALISATION

Bakhyt Kenjeev



BAKHYT KENJEEV — a poet and novelist. He has been awarded many literary prizes. Since 1992, he has been living and working in Canada and the USA. His work is regularly included in Russian publications.

■ *The institutions and values that only recently seemed to be unshakable, such as multiculturalism, for example, are now subjects of controversy. Does the policy of multiculturalism have a future?*

The terms ‘multiculturalism’, in addition to ‘political correctness’, did not quite fit into Russian realities. From the very beginning, they were uttered with a deal of resentment. However, the truth is that ‘multiculturalism’ also sounds rather awkward in English. During the time that I worked at a Canadian radio station, I preferred to use the term ‘cultural diversity’ instead.

It just occurred to me now that the Penal Code of the USSR, while stipulating severe punishment for carrying cold arms all over the land, made an exception for the people of the Caucasus, for whom a dagger was an essen-

tial attribute of their national costume. This exception didn’t scaring anyone, did it? It appears that, just like Molière’s protagonist, we have been speaking prose our whole lives! I suppose that **cultural diversity in the modern world is inevitable, as it is a necessary counterbalance to globalisation**, which unfortunately, quite often leads to the averaging-out and vulgarisation of the cultural landscape. Certainly, we should know when enough is enough and that we shouldn’t encourage cannibalism and human sacrifices, for instance.

■ *Are there any political measures still available for Europe to be able to deal with huge numbers of illegal migrants or is it moving towards a situation when the authorities of European countries will have to resort to the use of force?*

As a person with strong liberal convictions, I would certainly like to see Europe accommodating all sorts of refugees – political, economic, and others. But, alas! Europe’s capacity for that is not without its limits, while its humane laws with regard to refugees have not taken into account such a huge and sudden influx of people. I recall how the USA, in spite of its radical anti-discrimination policies, at some point started to chase away ships that were carrying Cuban refugees and sent them back to where they came from (however, those who managed to reach Florida were still granted refugee status). There are certain difficulties. For example, the large-scale deportation of immigrants according to their national identity (as was recently the case with respect to Gypsies in France) perhaps does more damage than the level of advantages that can be had from such measures. Everyone should have the right to

a fair trial, according to the constitutions of all civilised countries.

■ *What policy can be expected to become a viable alternative to multiculturalism if its current reincarnation has actually failed?*

I do not think that the policy of cultural diversity has actually failed. It was successfully implemented in Canada, for example. It’s quite a different issue that there should be reasonable limits to it. The basic values of the land inhabited by minorities shouldn’t be neglected. Let’s look at France, for instance, where they have outlawed the *hijab*. It’s a fact that, for the majority of countries worldwide, such a sack with wholes for the eyes is seen as an insult to womanhood. By the way, this law was adopted in Turkey as far back as the 1920s; correct me if I am wrong. A few years back, Ontario Muslims also requested the establishment of *Sharia* courts. The parliament unanimously (which is very rare) voted against it. It is noteworthy that the most active opponent of the *Sharia* initiative at that time happened to be a Muslim woman Member of Parliament. In other words, cultural diversity should be promoted within certain limits. We can say that it is good to encourage Friday, Saturday or Sunday schools for national minorities, but, at the same time, state-funded education should be provided in the official language (or at least one of them).

■ *In the modern world, we have many mechanisms for protecting minorities. What are the available mechanisms for the multiple situations that are now arising in the ‘unstable’ regions of the world?*

It is my view that minority protection measures were condi-

tioned with the intention to compensate for historical injustice. For a long time, humanity had only worked in the interests of the majorities. It is clear that **some minorities occasionally assume that they are deprived of their proper share of the communal pie, quite contrary to the general opinion within a given society.** Nevertheless, this fact is unlikely to cause major trouble. Wheelchair ramps and elevators for disabled persons have put a heavy financial load on society comparable to that of the protection of the indigenous culture of small nations. At the same time, people tend to ignore such an essential fact in that the bureaucracy and army expenditures are many-fold greater.

Do men (a virtual majority, because they are, in fact, a minority) need protection from women or children? I think that it is noble for a majority to protect minorities. It is an established fact that classrooms with disabled students manifest improved discipline and academ-

ic progress. The scale of assistance to minorities should, of course, remain within reasonable limits. But let's not forget that, in civilised countries, no constitution postulates ranking its populace as first and second-class citizens.

■ *It is fashionable today to criticise political correctness and say that this particular policy style had failed. Don't you think that, perhaps, political correctness itself needs to be treated with political correctness? Can the fact that a gay parade was allowed to occur in Moscow be regarded as a sign that we are moving along the path of the progressive countries of the West?*

I think that political correctness is merely refinement institutionalised (a courtesy, if you wish). **Russians do not call Ukrainians *khokhly* or call Estonians *chukhontsy*, at least in public! That is all there is to political correctness.** It is true that it has not fared well on our soil. During the election campaign in

the USA, our newspapers referred to Barak Obama as a 'negro presidential candidate of the USA'. However, things are not as hopeless as they seem, for Medvedev is not called an 'undersized president' (the two definitions are, however, equivalent, of course). This means that we do observe minimal political courtesy. Then, of course, you can teach a fool to bow with grace and he would fall flat on his face. That sort of courtesy ad absurdum, which Tatiana Tolstaya amply mocked, is already a thing of the past and merits no additional parody (Americans had a great laugh about this in due time.)

What's the problem with a gay parade? I decidedly refuse to understand why it should worry anyone? The state has no reason for admission to citizen's bedrooms and no citizens are allowed into private bedrooms uninvited. So what's the fuss? ■

Alexander Pavlov exclusively for the Yaroslavl Forum

IN THE HOPE OF THE THIRD GENERATION



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I think it is too soon to say that multiculturalism has failed. But if it has failed or is not working as well as could otherwise be hoped, the problem is that there is no good alternative. Assimilation takes time, and forced assimilation is bound to fail. Segregation within a country or segregation into separate nations is not realistic and probably also objectionable on moral grounds. It does make sense, of course, to encourage immigrants to learn the language of their new country – but here too, it is probably difficult to force them to do so.

I do not think there are reasons to claim that multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism lead to the loss of social trust and alienation between people. There are

numerous studies on this issue – for example, Robert Putnam's. I agree with Putnam only for the short-run period. The long experience in the United States with immigrant communities is that they tend to separate themselves during the early years, but that second and third generation people gradually become assimilated. **What seems a failure now may not stay a failure.**

I think that majorities tend to have majority power and do not need that much protection. If anything, they tend not to care too much for minorities and even suppress them (such as in the case of Northern Ireland until the 1970s, Cyprus in the 1960s, and Malaysia). In democracies, majorities have the power to force their will. ■