

In Favour of an Urban Policy in Russia

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Among the most important problems related to Russia's development, which are considered in depth in various kinds of forum and the media, both here and in the west, there is, however, an almost total absence of such a crucial strategic topic as working out an urban policy. In the meantime the crises that Russia is continually facing as it undergoes reforms are caused by the disparity between the tasks that have to be completed and the stage of civilization we are at. In order to fast forward to another level we have only the strategic role of the cities, in particular the largest of them, to guide us. Without real cities with a developed urban culture no effective solution can be found to the problems we are up against, whether they are economic, cultural, social or human rights issues.

As is well known, the concepts of 'city-dweller' and 'citizen' are based on the Latin idea expressed by the word *civitas*. Understandably all western nations achieved civil societies through city democracy. The medieval European saying 'the air of the city sets you free' expressed the democratic essence of cities as human communities. Indeed the social milieu of towns and the progress of urbanization laid the foundations for a whole culture that supported the development of universal standards of justice and the spiritual values of world civilization. This is why it is so important to put forward the cities' problems positively in the context of national strategy. In this connection, the conservative provincial/village pressure that Russia's periphery often brings to bear on the central areas, including the capital, may jeopardize social reform projects, since it strengthens the social base of the 'nationalist/patriotic' electorate.

It is unacceptable that, in the nationwide programmes currently being drawn up, the cities are not only neglected as centres of genuine social life but are generally not even mentioned. Indeed for seventy years, in all significant Party and state documents, there were sections dealing with the distribution of the 'means of production' over the country, identifying those towns to be developed and those whose expansion was to be held back. The very term 'urbanization', with reference to 'socialist' society, was banned until the end of the 1960s.

Of course it is not a matter of returning to diktat methods for assessing and solving highly complex problems of social and territorial reorganization from the perspective of this or that dogmatic state ideology. But this very fact, which gives great political importance to the organization of human living space and ways of living in this environment, cannot be ignored. Dismissing it, disregarding the influence living conditions have on crucial problems in different localities, turns any strategic plan into a new utopia and compromises it.

We should emphasize in particular the need for drawing up urban programmes to be a public process with discussions and debates. It is impossible to forget the lively political

atmosphere of discussions about the human habitat that took place in this country in the 1930s. Since then town planning and construction technology have accumulated considerable experience of developing concepts and applying research, and this includes the area of urban policy. The exploitation of this experience will make it possible to retain ideas and approaches to the organization of urban structures and, just as importantly, will help us avoid the repeated 'brainwaves' and 'reinventions of the wheel' that have occurred more than once during our history's periods of sudden transition.

It is extremely important to avoid the mistakes that were made at the start of the reforms and to eschew the use of 'code' in the programme documents in order to make them accessible to ordinary people. We should ascertain how well prepared the group is that is considering these programmes. Indeed national objectives and interests depend crucially on people perceiving their interests in the place where they live. The most complex visions are to be found among those who live in large cities, because they have advanced further in those relationships that underpin civilization. We shall not rapidly turn into a western country in every respect, but it is absolutely essential to include in the programme documents a reference to the westward and not eastward looking direction of our development.

Stressing that we belong to western civilization does not in any way mean a rejection of the specificities of our history and the geopolitical, territorial, ethnic, climatic, etc. peculiarities of our evolution. However, we must set our faces, and this is what the urban development model assumes, against the search for a 'third way' peculiar to us ('Moscow is the third Rome') imposed on Russia from what is called 'above'. We must grasp the fact that the contemporary societies developed in the west are above all, regardless of their national peculiarities, societies with a high level of urban development. It is only on this condition that one can guarantee dignified and egalitarian relations with one's partners. And this is why the most important characteristic is the state of urban societies whose interactions are a basis for achieving national objectives and interests. This is what makes urban policy the most vital part of overall social policy.

In this regard the role of urban policy during the reform period in Russia is far more important than in western Europe, which has long since left behind the medieval city stage. The need to make the most of vast territories, creating a transport and communications infrastructure, transforming a huge number of semi-urban industrial towns into genuine cities, accustoming recent arrivals from the countryside to the norms of urban life in the context of mass migrations should be seen as some of the factors without which it is impossible to apprehend either Russians' quality of life or their maturity, which is needed to sustain the reform of society. It is no accident that the maturity of each society and the quality of life of its citizens are evaluated according to the situation of its cities.

Russia's drama, as is the case throughout the Eurasian region, is that it has not hitherto acquired an awareness of the importance of the surrounding civilization from which events emerge, the environment containing the active social forces as regards urban culture.

We need to wake up to the fact that the instability and tension in Russia, the lack of regard for the law, which in some areas results in armed opposition and terrorist attacks, are entirely and at bottom consequences of the difficulties and contradictions associated with the fact that the country has started to undergo contemporary processes of civilization. The criminalization of society is also a result of the gap between the demands of

contemporary civilization and the norms of the feudal-type tied communities that Russian history has been based on. This is why getting through the crisis situation means travelling the long road of destroying these foundations and constructing new ones capable of sustaining socio-political development.

Urbanization and the in-depth application of urban processes appear to be the most important strategic vehicle for this development. We must set up centres of influence as regards urbanization, focus points where its fundamental potential could be concentrated. Historically the largest cities have been centres of this kind and in this sense it is vitally important to make full use of the administrative and territorial reshaping of the country proposed by the central authorities, which identifies a division into seven federal districts. In order to achieve this it will be necessary to ensure that the important cities of these seven administrative regions do not find themselves in the position of peripheral structures, neglected and squeezed by authority, between village and small town, as was the case throughout the Soviet period.

We should analyse carefully and evaluate the situation and potential of the social environment of the cities as separate entities and of other towns, large and very large, as well as the objectives, whether closely related or less so, that they meet in a given situation. We need to understand the social priorities of their inhabitants and the nature of the differences between them. It is only then that it will be possible to draw up a plan that is organic and not imposed from outside, identifying the interactions that bring areas together in a single urban space. This basic work will also allow us to incorporate in city policy truly 'civilized' focus points.

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(Translated from the Russian into French by Daniel Arapu)

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

French translator's note: The above article should be understood as applying to the specifically Russian context. The opposition between the qualities of cities (progress) and those of villages (soul of the nation) is a constant theme of pre-Communist Russian thought. It was almost the same in pre-Communist Romania and the Ubu-like figure of Ceaucescu, a great town planner, has left us the handsome spectacle of towns transplanted into the countryside and vice versa. And the opposition between East and West is also typically Russian. No one would question the urban planning or even urbanity of the city of Tokyo, etc. Furthermore the world trend is towards urbanization. It is thus not a question of 'yes' or 'no', but 'what kind?'.