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**Alikber Alikberov:**

**“When we study the East and the West, we think first of our country”.**

**PART 2**



*Why can Russia’s strategic pivot to the East be metaphorically compared to the fact that we have been standing on one leg all this time and now we are standing on two? What should be done to avoid misunderstandings due to differences in mentality when implementing major state trade and economic projects between Russia, Asia and Africa? Answers to these and other questions can be found in the second part of our interview with Alikber Alikberov, Doctor of Historical Sciences, Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences.*

*– Alikber Kalabekovich, the East, with its ancient traditions, exquisite culture and special philosophy of life, has always been something mysterious and inexplicable for Western countries. Do you agree with the idea that there is a kind of confrontation between the East and the West, with schemes of their opposition?*

– Philosophers, and not just philosophers, are very fond of this subject. Do you remember Kipling? East is east, and west is west, and never the twain shall meet. It is indeed a very deep subject, despite its apparent lightness. Another problematic issue here, much more relevant to us, is Russia's place between East and West. Some insist that Russia's place is in Europe, that we are an integral part of it, extending the space of European culture to the Far East. Others, like Alexander Blok, are sure that "yes, we are Scythians, yes, we are Asians" and there is nothing to be ashamed of. Others claim that we are a unique Eurasian country. From my point of view, each of these views has its own reasons. There can be no linear comparisons here, because both the East and the West are very complex cultures, deeply syncretic, with their own historical differences.

We know that in the Caliphate there was the division of labour, manufacturing, craft and trade guilds, but the first bourgeois revolutions took place in Europe. But without ancient Greek culture and philosophy, there would be no Islamic philosophy. After all, the creative legacy of the famous Ibn Sina (Avicenna) is in many ways the development of Aristotle's ideas. East and West are not about confrontation but complementarity, a relay race of cultures. If there had been no Mongol conquest of the Caliphate, the first bourgeois revolutions would have taken place in the Middle East. And without the Crusades in the East, of course, there would have been no Gothic culture in the West. Although history has no subjunctive mood, we do know that communication between East and West has created bizarre symbioses and new syntheses. Russia has also created its own unique synthesis of cultures based on Russian culture. I like the idea of a state civilisation, which was included in Russia's foreign policy concept last year. Every great culture creates a civilisation that attracts other cultures. In the same way, Russia has become a state of civilisation, or as our Chinese colleagues put it, a state of civilisation.

*– Russia has gone through different stages in its development: monarchical, post-Soviet, and now modern capitalist. The political forms may change, but the civilisational core and values, which are partly determined by religion, remain...*

–We do not contrast tradition and modernisation as Western science does. There is no linear dependency. A number of modern Eastern countries successfully combine both tradition and

innovation. Russia has three traditional religions – Russian Orthodoxy, Russian Islam and Buddhism. We have also managed to create our own unique historical synthesis of cultures on the basis of Russian culture, which is European in origin and content. In building a civic community, we have been able to rise above ethnic and religious differences. Of course, diversity is a richness that expands the space of choice, and the operational space of choice today is mainly in the global East and the global South.

– ***But if there is a unity in diversity, the result is much better?***

– Someone once said that every nation has its own folk instruments. Can you play Wagner with balalaikas? No. You would need a symphony orchestra that would include not only the balalaika but also the flute, the French horn, the timpani, the cello... The symphony of indivisible unity, as the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin said, is always diversity, because there is no complete fusion, no absorption of one culture by another. It is important for us to achieve the unity of diversity while preserving its richness, that is the important task. And by understanding the peculiarities and specifics of the East, we are also engaged in self-discovery.

Russia is the largest country in the world, and Russian culture is European in its origins and parameters. But Russia as a state is Eurasian, in fact three quarters of its territory is in Asia. It is foolish and inappropriate to view Asia through the prism of hopelessly outdated templates and stereotypes. Today, the Chinese are producing cars that accelerate to 100 kilometres in a matter of seconds and cost an order of magnitude less than European cars with the same features. Is this a sign of backwardness? In today's emerging polycentric world, it is a competitive advantage. And it will only grow. Firstly, because strategies are changing. Look at the dynamics of growth: in the West it is almost a horizontal line, while the East is showing increasing dynamism in various sectors of the economy.

– ***Russia is between two worlds and in a good way we need to develop our domestic market to be more sustainable...***

– We study the experience of the East in order to use it for the development of our country. We study the demographic dynamics of different countries, also because we have problems to solve at home. We are studying the culture of the East in order to use its achievements. Let me give you a small example. We drink Chinese tea, which is different from the usual “English” tea. China has a very special attitude to tea culture. When you taste real tea, you begin to understand the difference, to get real pleasure from a tonic drink, to recognise imitations and fakes. The real cognition of the East is to know and accept the values of the

East in all their diversity. In this case we are also enriched, the quality of our life changes, or the way of life changes for the better.

In world-system theory, the West saw itself as the centre of the world system and the USSR as its semi-periphery. After the collapse of the USSR, the West wrote us off to the periphery, to a large group of developing countries, where we found ourselves completely powerless. All these years Russia has been trying to fit into the Western model of globalisation on the terms of the West, which considered itself the winner of the Cold War. Conditions were dictated to us that did not suit the people at all. As a result, disparities and imbalances appeared: people's salaries were Asian, while prices were quite Western, and even more expensive than in the West. Now, however, Eastern brands have replaced Western brands in Russia and prices have become quite acceptable. At the moment it is impossible to assess the full extent of the changes and transformations. Until new logistical routes are developed and all the nuances are worked out, there will be some difficulties. But the strategic turn to the East is a wise, correct and well-considered step that balances the Western vector of our relations, which has traditionally not developed much better. It is also an absolutely objective move. I would compare it to the fact that we have been standing on one leg all this time and now we are standing on both. Of course, it is necessary to develop our own domestic East, first and foremost the Far East. As an Orientalist, I am very positive about our prospects in this direction, but only if we invest in ourselves. Import substitution should not be a short-term exercise, an emergency plugging of holes.

***– It has to be long-term, strategic, so that we have the opportunity to have a sustainable development ...***

– Absolutely. And we can only rely on ourselves. Russian industrial enterprises that use our energy resources have competitive advantages. We should use them and create cooperation on our own territory. That is why, when we study the East and the West, we think first and foremost of our own country.

***– The development of trade and economic relations between Russia and the countries of Asia and Africa requires major government projects. To some extent, they can be hampered by a lack of understanding or misunderstanding of each other's mentality and market. This is where your Institute can provide invaluable assistance. Do participants in such projects turn to you for such help?***

– You know, very few. Of course, we have conducted trainings for some large state organisations, mainly for management staff. Commercial companies rarely apply. And for good reason. I know several examples when the signing of major projects, including

communication projects, was disrupted at the last moment. At first glance, it seems to be due to trifles, ignorance of the elementary norms of foreign partners' culture. For example, the head of a Chinese company invited Russian partners to his home to finalise a deal in an informal atmosphere. The head of the company, instead of letting the host go through, went through himself, forgetting to take off his shoes. At this point, the negotiations ended, of course, with nothing...

There are things you should know. It is a system of non-verbal signs that signals whether you are a "friend" or "foe". And if you're a foe, they don't want to do business with you. Not because they don't like you, but because dealing with a foe is dangerous. You can expect anything from a foe.

In fact, what I am talking about are elementary things, and it is not so difficult to learn them. They have to do with seemingly trivial things. But when one learns and understands them, one's attitude changes. And there is nothing wrong with respecting another person's culture. I'll tell you even more. Do you remember who Lermontov called Caucasians?

*– Russian officers who, having found themselves in service there, learnt the culture and traditions of the peoples living there.*

– And the locals saw them as their own and trusted them. They trusted them because they knew what they could and could not do. It was through them that the Russian Empire communicated and Russian culture entered these regions. And today we need such "Caucasians" in quotes – Russian officers or interpreters, guides of our culture.

We are ready to organise courses, we have specialists of the highest level. I am convinced that this is very important for communication if we want to work in this direction in the long term. We do not need to learn from our mistakes when there are people who can show and tell us everything. The subject is relevant and important.

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*To be continued...*

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