

ROMANTIC TRIANGLE: RUSSIA, TURKEY, AND THE EU

John Laughland



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One of the difficulties in answering your question lies in the fact that the concept of ‘West’ has been greatly distorted and abused particularly in the last twenty years. For example, in Huntington’s book, as you know, he draws a line between West and East along the lines of Catholic and Orthodox Christianity. And in his book he says something absolutely ridiculous, which is that Greece is not part of Western civilization because Greece, of course, is an Orthodox country. Now, it is absolutely unbelievable

that anybody serious or pretending to be serious could say that Greece is not a part of Western civilization because for most Europeans Greece stands as the very foundation of Western civilization.

We now use the word ‘West’ to mean alignment with the foreign policy of America. Well, that’s ridiculous too. In this case, a country may be physically Western in every respect, like France was under General De Gaulle, but not necessarily be completely aligned with the foreign policy of the United States.

Of course, Turkey has been a strong NATO state for a long time, but that doesn’t mean it’s a Western country. It did, of course, under Ataturk have a very strong westernizing government: as we know, Latin script was introduced for the language, the veil was banned, and the country in many respects was westernized. Ataturk was, if you like, a sort of Peter the Great for Turkey. But I think that that was an experiment doomed to failure because we have seen that Islam in Turkey, as in all over the World, has grown stronger and stronger. There are far more people wearing the veil in Turkey now, far more so than there were in the 1970’s. And it was basically an unnatural thing for Ataturk to undertake this project of extreme westernization, and I think that ultimately it’s coming to an end.

For me, the West as a cultural unit, as a world historical body of values and cultures, precisely includes the Eastern and Western parts of the Old Roman Empire. In other words, it precisely includes both Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, the countries of Western Europe and

Russia. And it’s really only, I think, as a result of the Cold War but also as a result of distortions since the Cold War, that the line between East and West has been drawn to separate Eastern Europe from the West; but that is a completely unnatural division in historical terms. It’s a division which only came into being in 1948 and it lasted for about forty years, so it’s not a division line that people should continue, in my view, to use today.

Now you ask me to compare Russia and Turkey, and I obviously think that Russia in the broadest sense is indeed a Western country. But at the same time it’s also obvious that Russia, because it is so big and also because a large part of Russian territory self-evidently is not in the West, can not be easily subsumed to any other civilization and that it really is a sort of civilization unto itself. But, culturally speaking, Russia is after all a Christian country and that for me is the key distinction. **An awful lot of ink has been spilled on the question of westernizers and slavophiles in Russia, but in my view it’s a false debate.** It’s a false debate firstly because all countries have vastly different geographical and geo-ideological tendencies.

I also think it’s a false debate or at least a misleading debate where Turkey is concerned. In Turkey you have essentially two camps: you have the Kemalist camp, comprised of the army and the people who are faithful to the inheritance of Ataturk, who want a strong secular and sovereign state on the one hand, and on the other hand you have their opponents who are the Islamists, who have been in power for nearly ten years

now and who are indeed pro-Western in the literal sense that they want Turkey to join the European Union. But this pro-Westernism when you look more closely is in fact Islamism because the reason why the Islamists in Turkey want to join the European Union is precisely that the European Union demands that the role of the army, the Kemalist elite, the secular sovereign elite of Turkey be reduced. So the westernism, the Western orientation of Turkey, which is pushed mainly by Islamists, is meant precisely to disperse once and for all the inheritance of Atatürk, that is to say to disperse with the secular state.

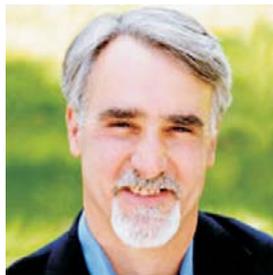
Russia and Turkey have relatively good relations, but they are unlikely to evolve into an anti-western alliance. And I don't think that Russia is being rejected, at least not on the international level. But they are in a very different position from Turkey vis-a-vis the European Union. Russia is not a candidate to join the European Union and so **in some ways, I think, relations with Russia are more healthy.** In Europe, the issue of Turkish candidacy to the European Union has been a sort of nightmare really for European politicians ever since the 1960's when Turkey first asked to join. Basically, the European Union leaders don't want Turkey to be a member but they can't find a way of saying no. And so their relations are very dishonest, distorted really by the whole issue of European membership, which is an absurd proposition, and one that is being pushed forth by the Americans and taken seriously by only some European leaders. But fundamentally it's absurd. It's absurd in economic terms, in civilizational terms, and so on. But nonetheless it's on the table and I think it has introduced tensions unnecessarily.

I do not think that Russia has the same existential need to be labeled 'Western.' As far as I can see, Russia is a relatively self-confident country. I think the situation is different in Turkey not least because of the strange paradoxical reasons I mentioned earlier for Turkey wanting to join the EU.

Since Europe is a cultural reality and there's no doubt that it's a civilizational and cultural reality, then I certainly think that Russia is part of it. Turkey is not part of Europe, it is not part of European civilization. Turkey, of course, throughout the 19th century and before that from the seizure of Constantinople onwards, of course, was a European power in the sense that having seized territories in the Balkans it became a player in the European concert of powers. But it is not a European state in its origins, its origins are from God knows where in Central Asia and the heartland of Turkey is Anatolia, which is not in Europe. ■

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THE VIABILITY OF HYBRID MODELS



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'European' and 'Western' categories are complicated, elusive, and often problematic. In their origins, they refer to the liberal-democratic philosophical and political traditions that, in the modern world, grew from enlightenment roots in Western Europe and later the U.S. Russia was more geographically distant and, geopolitically, faced multiple threats that helped prolong autocratic rule and complicated liberal reforms. Culturally, the westernizer-slavophile division showed many Russian intellectuals' doubts about the 'Western model' and belief that Russian civilization was fundamentally hostile to liberal, free-market development.

The 70-year communist 'experiment' was in most respects a great tragedy for Russia, as most Russian intellectuals seem to agree. And many 'neo-Westernizers' in Russia expected that by simply adopting Western-style institutions Russia could quickly make up for a 'lost century' of development.

Yet the failures of 'shock therapy' reforms in the 1990s after the collapse of communism showed that **culture matters as much as political and economic institutions. Western models could not be imported wholesale and function effectively**

overnight. On the contrary, they often backfired when planted in soil conditioned by decades of elite corruption and popular disillusion under a centralized, stifling, one-party, state-controlled political and economic system.

Yet culture is not immutable or eternally unchanging. It does change, however slowly, and it must change if Russia is to evolve from a state-dominated, resource-exporting, deeply corrupt 'third world model' economy into a more dynamic, innovative, high-tech economy that can remain competitive and grow prosperous in the future. Russia has no choice but to become more 'Western' in this respect.

Isolation and autarky are no longer viable options in a globalized world. But neither is one in which a single 'Western' political-economic model is appropriate for all. China, Turkey, India, and hopefully Russia show that various 'hybrid' model – systems adapted to their individual historical and cultural traditions, yet each liberalizing in important and adaptive ways – are equally viable in the 21st century. ■