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Editorial correspondence & manuscripts should be sent to: Dr. Andreas Umland, c/o DAAD, German Embassy, vul. Bohdana Khmel'nitskoho 25, UA-01901 Kyiv, Ukraine. e-mail: umland@stanfordalumni.org

Business correspondence & review copy requests should be sent to: *ibidem* Press, Leuschnerstr. 40, 30457 Hannover, Germany; tel.: +49 511 2622200; fax: +49 511 2622201; spps@ibidem.eu.

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TOWARDS A NEW RUSSIAN WORK CULTURE

Can Western Companies and
Expatriates Change Russian Society?

With a foreword by Elena N. Danilova

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Foreword to the English edition

This book was first published in Russian in 2015, when Russia was already in isolation because of the international political environment and the conflict in Ukraine. The issues raised in the book are more than ever relevant for our country. The authors emphasize the fact that Russian culture has never developed in isolation (even in Soviet times). One cannot but agree with them that "today, when yet again Russia and the West are clashing in competition, the question about the role of foreigners and everything foreign in Russia's civilizational 'leaps' throughout its history up to the technological breakthrough of the twentieth century is once again on the agenda. The path Russia takes in the twenty-first century largely depends on the answer to this question." And Russia is currently facing new challenges triggered by international competition and global processes.

This book is thought-provoking and useful for readers interested in Russia and in cultural and historical studies. I would like to highlight some of its strong points.

The book is implicitly placed in the context of disputes on the national culture, which have been an integral part of the intellectual and spiritual life of the Russian intelligentsia over centuries. Details thereof are provided in different chapters of the book. Debates and reflections on the Russian culture and foreign influence and, accordingly, ways of Russia's development have become a tradition since the times of Peter the Great. Some people suggested limiting foreign influence. For example, in his article *Love for the Motherland and National Pride*, Russian historian Nikolay Karamzin acknowledged the educational role of foreign teachers and tutors, but repeatedly proposed replacing them with Russians. He wrote, "A foreigner will never understand our national character and, consequently, cannot adapt to it in education. Foreigners very rarely do us justice. We treat them kindly and reward them, and they, once having crossed the border to Courland, mock or berate us <...> and publish absurdities about Russians." Karamzin concluded this idea as follows: "A nation, like an individual, initially al-

ways imitates, but eventually should become *oneself*."¹ Many philosophers tried to find an answer to the "eternal" Russian question—to change by directly adopting features of another culture, primarily the Western, more modernized one, or to change remaining oneself? However, what does "remaining oneself" mean? All nations have their own identity, but in Russia it is also a question of how Russia's place is seen in relation to the West and the East. Nikolai Berdyaev, the famous Russian philosopher and publicist of the early twentieth century, believed that "Only recognition of Russia's antinomy, its terrific inconsistency, can help solving the mystery of the Russian soul."² In his work *The Fate of Russia* he wrote, "Russia cannot identify itself as the East and oppose itself to the West. Russia must also perceive itself as the West, the East-West, the uniter of the two worlds and not the divider."³ The authors discourse about the Russian culture more or less in the same spirit.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, debates about the national work culture are not so much of an existential or cultural nature; rather, they focus on economic performance, thus acquiring a practical aspect. Discussions center on the capacity and features of the work culture that either facilitate or hamper Russia's economic development, and on the possibility of changing them in a market environment. Primarily, this concerns the Soviet legacy. A crisis of the labor activity is assumed to be one of the reasons that necessitated perestroika. Its essence was the alienation of labor, when its sense-making function was lost for the absolute majority of the workforce. Therefore, no radical reform in the country is possible without a change in the attitude to work. The real effectiveness of any economic activity is determined by the way it impacts the attitude to work. The main focus was to be made on eradicating the Soviet legacy in the sphere of labor, namely low motivation and low performance. The reformers pinned their hopes mainly on the American market development model, with Russia often compared to Latin America and the emerging markets of Southeast Asia and China.

1 N.M. Karamzin. *Selected Writings in Two Volumes*. Foreword by P. Berkov and G. Makogonenko. M. — L. Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1964. p. 287.

2 N. Berdyaev. *The Fate of Russia*. M.: Sovetskiy Pisatel'. 1990. p. 10.

3 *Ibid*, p. 28.

Little was said about the Western European models with highly developed social security systems.

According to researchers E. Shershnyova and Yu. Feldhoff,⁴ it is insufficient to simply oppose the Soviet system and the market economy in order to understand the behavior and work motivation of an individual in a society undergoing structural reforms. One must be aware of the national culture, historical traditions, and the basic values of Russian mentality. Can we directly adopt the experience of successful organizations that fully belong to other cultures or combine elements of different cultures in companies or firms? These issues are particularly important in modern Russia, at a time when market reforms and restructuring of the economy are under way.

The obvious advantage of the book is the manner of investigating work culture in association with foreign influence. The authors do not limit themselves to comparisons with the Soviet past, but extend their analysis to a broader historical context of Russia's development.

The authors' treatment of the issue and subject matter of work culture is noteworthy. The book is distinguished by its approach at the convergence of the *civilizational and modernization paradigms*. It is important to bear in mind that the modernization approach implying universal linear development culminating in a market economy and liberal democracy has been dominant in Russian sociological and economic literature since the late 1980s. Neoliberal economists were the principal promoters of this approach. For example, such terms as "catch-up modernization" and "delayed modernization" are often used to characterize Russia. The culture of the developed West serves as a model of modernity. Culture is evaluated based on a logical dichotomy—qualities resembling Western ones are labeled as features of modernization, and those differing are considered to be non-modernized. The simplified logic is such: the one with progressive features shall win the competition race; therefore, it is necessary to discard and transform those cultural traits that do not meet the requirements of modern development. The view that the Russian work culture is a factor hampering economic

4 E. L. Shershnyova, Yu. Feldhoff, *Kultura Truda v Protsesse Sotsialno-Ekonomicheskikh Preobrazovaniy: Opyt Empiricheskogo Issledovaniya na Promyshlennykh Predpriyatiyakh Rossii (Work Culture at the Time of Social and Economic Change: An Attempt of Empirical Research at Russia's Industrial Enterprises)*, St. Petersburg, Petropolis, 1999 (in Russian).

success is quite widespread in domestic literature. However, this book demonstrates that there can be no simple and one-dimensional solutions to the extremely complex issues of extensive social transformations, such as the changes that Russia has been experiencing since the late 1980s. In contrast to the modernization paradigm assuming a universal unilinear path of development, the book proposes a multi-component vision of work culture development. It offers the readers a fresh perspective—how to modernize the work culture within a particular civilizational model, how to enrich it without undermining. The authors consider the national work culture—a basic element of reforms—in two ways: as a phenomenon resistant to external institutional and cultural impact, but at the same time capable of changing under their influence.

Although the authors do not depart from the logic of modernization theories, they rather focus on attempting to identify converging factors, those areas where the cultures can enrich and complement each other within one civilizational model. The authors suggest distinguishing a culture's sustainable characteristics determined by civilizational factors and to regard them as such in order to avoid mistakes "common for reformers when they try to eradicate qualities indigenous for a national culture and introduce instead some 'proper' qualities, generally, of 'western' origin."

Chapter one, *Competition of cultures in the newest international division of labor*, gives an idea about different civilizational models of integrating into the international division of labor. The authors provide historical examples of various countries "dropping out" of the universal path of development, examples of successful economies that combine the advantages of national institutional and cultural foundations with globalization trends.

Chapter two, *Foreign professionals (expatriates) in national economies*, contains a review of the academic literature on the subject. Although it does not exhaust the entire field of research, it gives the readers an understanding of current theories and methodologies and provides an update on studies addressing cross-cultural interaction. The growing rate of cross-cultural exchanges triggered by globalization necessitates a study of the role that foreign professionals (expatriates) play in national economies throughout the world. The authors place

emphasis on foreign professionals (expatriates) as a relatively new and understudied driver of sociocultural and socio-economic modernization. The basic premise is the assertion that expatriates are agents of modernization, and, respectively, play a positive role in economic development. Special attention is given to professionals engaged in different sectors of the economy in various countries; the mixed issues of their integration and performance are considered.

Chapter three, *External and internal origins of the Russian work culture*, analyzes the specifics of the Russian work culture. The authors suggest considering culture as a derivative of internal civilizational factors (national geo-cultural/symbolic environment) and the external influences resulting from interaction with social actors of foreign (primarily Western) origin, which the authors believe modernize the work culture. Russia's history knows several periods of so-called modernization leaps. It was then that the role of foreigners was particularly significant.

The role of foreigners in Russia is placed in a historical context. Chapter four, *The role of foreign and foreigners in Russian state-building*, provides a historical background and analyzes the role of expatriates throughout Russia's long history and over the recent decades. It identifies periods when the areas of influence of foreign ideas and foreign specialists (foreigners in government, science, industry, and the army) expanded and contracted. The authors actually formulated their understanding of the mechanisms shaping a culture as "assimilating and digesting" (I would add "in practice"—ED) foreign (mostly "Western") values, which is an integral part of sustainable Russian development.

Chapter five, *Demand of the Russian economy for foreign human capital*, substantiates the need for foreign professionals, which actually always exists everywhere, especially in an increasingly competitive environment during the transition of economies to innovative development. The chapter provides examples of innovative potential and competitiveness of selected Russian companies and firms in the world market. It also estimates the effects of the ongoing "brain drain" in the post-Soviet period. Professionals from Western countries are considered here as bearers of a higher culture of production, technology, and research. However, the authors distinguish various functional tasks that the expatriates perform within the national economy. They note that the

expatriate structure, which existed until now, served to control foreign capital invested in Russia rather than promote the modernization of the Russian economy, thus "servicing" the existing economic system. Today, the Russian society needs the expatriates as much as it also requires a change in their functional structure.

The remaining three chapters are devoted to the findings of the empirical research conducted by the authors. These chapters are based on a survey of Russian and foreign employees of companies operating in the Russian market. The authors focused on highly skilled foreign specialists working alongside Russian professionals. They applied various sociological techniques, both quantitative and qualitative. The result is a rather extensive picture of the interaction of Russian and foreign work cultures.

The book stands out from other studies on work culture by its methodological approach, which is especially noteworthy. It attempts to steer the discussion on interpreting work culture towards *disclosing the essence and practices* underlying the so-called cultural values, and this adds methodological value to the study. The applied methodology suggests abandoning cultural stereotypes and stereotypical reactions, and appealing instead to the essence revealed in particular practical situations and circumstances. The authors quite rightly note that "interaction with representatives of other cultures became part of the production process involving specific business practices rather than abstract romanticized values, forcing people to overcome daily their long-term habits and stereotypes, because the company's performance was at stake, and, respectively, the assessment of their own input." This also explains why the authors turn to such an understudied topic as foreign employees (expatriates).

The findings of the research based on in-depth interviews with Russian and foreign professionals are presented in Chapter six, *Social criteria for evaluating the role of foreign professionals in Russian society*. The chapter considers different types of foreign employees in terms of their impact on the development of the national work culture. The authors attempt to identify the ideological principles of the contemporary expatriates' activity in Russia, and to highlight among them groups with a fundamentally different potential impact on the development of Russian companies. Two criteria are used to distinguish different types

of foreign professionals with different "utility" for Russian companies. The first criterion is the nature of integration of foreign professionals into the Russian society; the second—their perception of the Russian society.

Chapter seven, *The cultural distance between Russian and foreign professionals*, analyzes cultural differences in groups of jointly working Russian and foreign professionals based on their survey conducted under a formalized program using the CVSCALE international methodology. The authors measure the cultural differences in multinational teams in Russia, and analyze cultural diversity in comparison with the aggregate national cultural profile of both Russians and expatriates.

Chapter eight, *Effectiveness of business and cultural exchange in the segment of highly skilled labor*, presents the nontrivial empirical research findings. The authors identified the qualities that hamper or promote the effective work of the team or the enterprise in general and those qualities that were not common for foreign/Russian professionals but emerged in the process of working alongside Russian/foreign colleagues. They revealed the areas of tension between Russian and foreign professionals, highlighting at the same time that both parties mutually evaluate many of each other's business qualities as positive and worth adopting. The study identified three basic ways in which foreign professionals perceive the Russian society.

As was already mentioned, a sufficient number of studies has appeared where labor values and motivation are generally addressed in the logic of modernization theories and compared directly with western culture values. The "mirror" analysis proposed in the book focuses on the mutual evaluation of each other's business skills by Russian and foreign professionals working in multinational teams, and the cross-cultural adoptions resulting from such joint work. This allows seeing the features of Russian workers as evaluated and perceived by foreigners—as in a mirror. Indeed, as we see from the interviews, expatriates triggered certain important changes at the level of work teams. The interviews demonstrate that "foreigners engaged in different sectors of the Russian labor market helped Russian employees not only find out what 'Western-style' working and thinking means, but also acquire hands-on experience. Some lessons the Russians appreciated, some rejected, and in certain cases the expatriates themselves had some-

thing to learn." This method highlights the ambiguity and inconsistency of Russian work culture features (when such features have reverse sides, which can manifest themselves either negatively or positively, depending on the actual circumstances) and allows identifying areas of beneficial adoptions.

Chapter eight also addresses the features of the so-called "invariant core of the Russian business culture." On the basis of empirical and literary evidence, the authors demonstrate the ambivalent nature of the main features that form the core of the Russian work culture. Following Berdyaev's line of thought, the authors conclude, "Duality, the ability to combine polar qualities is, perhaps, an independent and long observed sustainable feature of the Russian culture."

The book is a brilliant example of scientific reflection on the pressing issues of Russia's development. Besides contributing substantially to the knowledge of the Russian work culture, it stimulates the readers to reflect on the issues raised. The book will undoubtedly be useful for researchers, specialists, experts in culture studies, politicians, sociologists, managers, and economists, as well as everyone who is interested in the complex issues of the development of Russia and its work culture in an increasingly competitive environment. The appended research techniques greatly enhance the practical methodological value of the book.

Dr. Elena N. Danilova,
Head of the Center for Theoretical Studies and History of Sociology,
Institute of Sociology, Russian Academy of Sciences
Member of the Executive Committee
of the European Sociological Association