

## The West's confusion: origins and implications

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### Abstract

Despite the brief euphoria caused by the demise of the Communist Bloc in the Cold War, the West was finally able to comprehend new threats and challenges to the world order after the end of the Cold War. However, the West was not able to offer effective responses to the specific manifestations of these threats. The main reason for this is the situation, which can be defined 'the West's confusion'. First of all, that is misunderstanding of the importance of West's leadership as a prerequisite for a stable post-cold war world order. The West's leadership has historically been the result of a long process and the interaction of many factors, it is based on a successful model of social development, the core of which is a triad of individualism, the market economy and liberal democracy. Two visions of the West – both as the cultural community and the community of highly developed countries – are interconnected, but in the context of the problems of the contemporary world politics the West is foremost a community of developed democratic countries that has acquired a multifaceted institutionalisation, including in the form of security complexes. Overcoming of the West's confusion implies the harmonisation of values and interests as factors of West's behaviour on the international arena. Regular confusion demonstrated by the West and its unwillingness to take over the leadership and responsibility encourages two major destructive players: China and Russia. The world without the West (as the organising system power) is a world of chaos and disarray, even more dangerous than the world of balance of powers, which led to the two world wars.

**Key words:** West, civilisation, historical sociology, world order, values, interests.

## 1. Introduction. Outlining the problem

At last, the West has realised the threat stemming from Russia and managed to consolidate in response to it. At least such an impression could be gained when one reads through analyses of the Western politicians, experts as well as media reaction towards the poisoning case in Salisbury. The general euphoria on the West's united stance was not damaged by the fact that far from all the EU and NATO countries joined the diplomatic demarche and that simultaneously Germany is continuing to remove final formal obstacles to the construction of the North Stream II. Overall conceptual context addressed as a 'new Cold War', under auspices of which a new confrontation unfolds, also does not interfere with an overall euphoria mood in Europe.

The present conceptual context is the outcome of the key players' perceptions of the basic trends of the world politics and the role they exercise. It is these perceptions that stand out as the decisive factor in their behaviour. Representatives of the West are increasingly concerned with the collapse of the liberal world order (Ikenberry 2008), the 'world without the West' (Barma *et al.*, 2007), while the Kremlin is worried about 'why do we need a world in which there is no Russia?' (Smirnov 2018). It is not surprising that one of the key factors in Russia's behaviour is the perception of the West as of a weak actor unable to act decisively (Spectator 2014).

In due course, Donald Trump's Warsaw speech sparked a lively discussion, which unexpectedly managed to overshadow the alluring personality of the American President. Although the evaluations of the speech ranged from the 'Warsaw Triumph' (Lowry 2017) to 'racial and religious paranoia' (Beinart 2017), it is significant that the White House's current host was able to publicly declare that 'the fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive' (White House 2017) by rejecting political correctness. D. Trump did not just identify the threat, he embedded it with a clear civilisation dimension, which the 'mainstream' politicians either silence or attempt to conceal under the ideological make-up of tolerance. Overall, officials in Brussels, Berlin and Paris even dare to shift the problem of leadership within the West from the academic to the political realm (usually as the consequence of Washington's refusal over this status).

However, under the guise of accusations in racism and neo-colonialism, they adhere to a strict taboo even what regards inclusion of the issue of the West's leadership to the agenda of the world politics. The degree of sensitivity of the racism and nationalism issues (including the civilisation aspect) is evident from Emanuel Macron's response to the question about the 'Marshall Plan for Africa' at the press conference in Hamburg during the last year's G-20 meeting provoked accusations of racism through the civilisation lens (Mitter 2017).

Despite the brief euphoria due to optimistic expectations caused by the triumph of the liberal world order and demise of the Communist Bloc in the Cold War, the representatives of the West could finally observe, comprehend and politically declare new threats and challenges to international peace and security. However, the West was not able to offer effective response to the specific manifestations of these threats: neither the Islamic State issue, which has turned into embodiment of regional conflict, international terrorism and illegal migration; the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction by North Korea; nor the flagrant violation by Russia of the fundamental principles of the international order through aggression against Georgia and Ukraine. Although the US President clearly formulated 'the fundamental issue of our time', he did not name the problem itself, which, in the present author's opinion, can be defined as 'the West's confusion'.

Hence, the purpose of this essay is to reveal the origins and essence of 'the West's confusion' as a factor in modern international relations and discuss its consequences for the world order. The methodology of the present essay is built on the principles of historical sociology. The approach implies that understanding the role of the West in contemporary international relations envisages shedding light on historical origins and societal model, whose conditions its behaviour, to the lesser extent the present essay aims to determine the parameters of the West's strength. The universal and unique features of the Western model, including its influence on the world order, can be clarified through its comparison towards other non-Western models. The application of systemic method allows to focus upon important aspect of the models' comparison, i.e. the degree of internal complicity, homogeneity, on which the character of influence on international relations

depends, first of all, on the ability of constructive participation in establishment of the world order.

## 2. The Janus-faced West: civilisation vs the civilised

In due time, the end of the Cold War exerted a powerful impetus to rethinking of world politics. One of the most influential interpretations of the post-bipolar world was the concept of the 'Clash of Civilizations' (Huntington 1996). Reviewing some of its major points would provide a valuable insight to the idea of the present paper. S. Huntington argues that after the end of the Cold War ideological differences as a factor in international relations and the main source of conflict would be replaced by cultural ones. The latter are divided into two types: those between representatives of various civilisations along the demarcation line and between the leading ('core') states of each civilisation. In addition to these points, the important role in S. Huntington's views should be assigned to the determining the value of Western civilisation as unique rather than universal as well as the attribution of civilisation to the highest form of human existence. To point the West's uniqueness has serious security implications, viz. the spread of the 'Western' values is perceived by other civilisations as expansion and threat provoking conflicts.

On the one hand, the course of events in the last decade of the 20th century seems to confirm S. Huntington's forecast regarding the impact of the cultural differences as most of the conflicts throughout the first decade after the end of the Cold War had ethno-religious foundations. On the other hand, the question arises as to how this background is correlated with the nature of the conflict, where the ethno-religious factor may be an explanatory, but not essential, component. Significantly in terms of the defining of the nature of the conflict, a question arises if the key participants' motives (declared or real) play in performing the actions. Was Russia indeed concerned with interfering in the crisis in Yugoslavia because of the fate of Orthodox Serbs? What are the motives of Russia's current aggression against Ukraine, which, according to S. Huntington, belongs to the same Orthodox civilisation? Is it a concern for the Russian-speaking population of Donbass? Does Moscow, above all, takes care of its international status, attempting to slow

down the process of transformation into the second-rate state, whose voice is decreasing? S. Huntington argues that the decisive test for the analytical quality of paradigms is predictions' accuracy, which is built on this basis. S. Huntington criticises John Mearsheimer's prediction about the possibility of the war between Russia and Ukraine pointing the low probability of such a scenario from the perspective of the civilisation approach (Huntington 1996:37).

S. Huntington's statement that the ideological factors would be replaced by cultural, ignores the fact of the historical heterogeneity of differences: diversity of peoples' standard of living, state's behaviour on the international arena is determined not only by cultural and religious underpinnings, but also the development level. Generally, scholars use the notion of *civilisation* in two meanings. S. Huntington emphasizes culture regarded as relative historical constant, i.e. the constituent part of identity, which during the historical development of peoples hardly change. Alvin Toffler, on the contrary, focuses on specific stages of development of human societies in his study of civilisations (*waves* in A. Toffler's terminology), in other words, he emphasises the historical variable. It should not be forgotten that the notion of civilisation (or the civilised) arose as the characteristic for a state of society opposite to savagery and barbarism (the non-civilised). The historical *constant* (culture) and *variable* (the state of being civilised) are in a permanent interaction. One feature of the development and progress of society, viz. the weakening of the role of the unique ethno-religious foundations of culture, that provide dividing lines on humanity, and strengthening the universal civilisation (in the sense of being civilized) features.

In this respect, the recognition of civilisation (in the sense of culture) as the universal form of the human community, that outside of the historical framework and civilisation paradigm as the only possible conceptualisation of the human development seems a rather debatable approach (Huntington 1996:41). An unbiased historical analysis shows that cultural factors in most cases yielded to the influence of the political and state ones, even if consider early state entities and the proportion between culture and civilisation. The confrontation of Ancient Greeks with the Persian invasion is often presented as the first clash between the West and the East, the source of the modern division into the West

and the East. A question then appears as to approach a far lengthier strife between Greek city-states. It seems that their historical consequences are no less significant than those of the Greek-Persian wars.

The recognition of social progress and its division into historical stages necessarily poses the problem of the universality and uniqueness of the historical path of peoples. From the analytical perspective, much depends on understanding not only of the past but also the present, including contemporary international relations. Denying the universality of the historical experience of the West in favour of its uniqueness is an important justification for the overwhelming importance of conflicts on a cultural basis. Excessive emphasis on the cultural features of human society somewhat shadows down the significance of such a circumstance as the affiliation of representatives of different cultures to a community under the umbrella of humankind. The type of human being, like any other, possesses certain generic qualities. According to Erich Fromm, 'in general terms, the nature of any life is to maintain and establish its existence' (Fromm 1992: 26). The human being maintains and establishes its existence by virtue of its generic qualities, i.e. reasonability, sociality and ability to work. Undoubtedly, the cultures (not only the West) are unique, but the way in which people preserve and establish their existence (individual and collective) is likely to be universal and generic. Therefore, a change in the ratio of universality and uniqueness in favour of the former could be considered another feature of progress.

Europeans, due to certain historical circumstances, first of all those relating to values and cultural features, earlier than anyone else, established, developed, interpreted and legitimised the triad of individualism-market-democracy, which provided them with a dynamic historical progress and superiority over the East. Coincidentally, this 'Western breakthrough' was manifested along with the emergence of the industrial society. Within the present essay, this topic cannot be expanded in accordance with the principle of development. The higher level of development, the more civilised (in the stage sense) society implies a greater development of the generic qualities of a human being, i.e. the balance between the highest level of reasonability and rationality of individual's life and

establishing society, freedom and justice of social organisation, productivity of labour and humane approach towards utilising its outcomes.

A question arises of to what extent the peculiar 'universalisation' of the triad individualism-market-democracy is justified. To what extent are its elements interconnected? Do they affect the dynamics of the historical development of society? Classical and unsurpassed analysis of the link between values and capitalism was carried out by Max Weber in his seminal work 'Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism'. M. Weber supports the point of the universality of Western culture. 'It is in the West, and only here, where cultural phenomena have gradually emerged – at least as we tend to believe – in the direction that has eventually acquired *universal* meaning' (Weber 1990: 44; italics original). M. Weber emphasises rationality as the main feature of the Western civilization, which distinguishes it from others, first of all Eastern. Even having Max Weber's prospective supporting the core argument, the paper would benefit from reviewing other few cases given by the history of different peoples and epochs. These cases evidence the mutual conditionality of each of the triad's components; moreover, they demonstrate the meaning of the triad for modernisation and successful development as a whole.

The defeat of the Invincible Armada in 1588 symbolised the beginning of the decline of Spain, the recent contender for the European hegemony. Having experienced five revolutions throughout the nineteenth century, this country did not manage to solve the task of modernisation. The failed attempt by the Republican revolutionaries in 1931, who were following the neighbouring France as the role model, was also unsuccessful. Having manifested a certain degree of liberal orthodoxy, having ignored the realities of the Spanish society, many mistakes were committed on this path, the offensive against the Catholic Church being most obvious of those. A deprivation of the peasants from their religion would not be effective without providing them land. Hence, the liberal version of modernisation was discredited. Paradoxically enough, at first glance, the foundations of modernisation were laid by the conservative-traditionalist regime of the Generalissimus F. Franco. While modernising Spain, introducing a market economy and individualism, the Francoists were inevitably undermining the foundations of authoritarianism. As it was

subsequently confirmed in cases of Latin America and emerging industrial countries in East Asia, modernisation can begin in conditions of authoritarianism, but its ultimate outcome is the victory of democracy.

In due course, by efforts of Soviet historians, the agrarian issue in Russia was seen in terms of preserving landlords' land possession. Negative implications for the progress of agriculture stemming from the peasant community were clearly underestimated. The peasants embodied two components that were incompatible with economic prosperity, i.e. the extreme collectivism and a lack of freedom. Not coincidentally, Pyotr Stolypin's reforms were carried out against the peasant community. While criticising the project of land nationalisation, he warned that 'it is impossible for lazy to be equal to hard-working, it is impossible for stupid people to be equal to the able-bodied person. The good master, the inventive master by the power of things will be deprived of the opportunity to apply his knowledge to the land' (Stolypin 1991: 89). In the opinion of the then head of the Russian government, the collectivists to the left and the ultra-conservatives to the right could not understand that 'community exploitation, oppression of family property is a bitter slavery for 90 million people [...] this path has already been tested, and the solid experience of custody over a considerable share of our population underwent a complete failure' (Stolypin 1991: 179). Unfortunately, the failure did not seem accomplished to all, as the destructive consequences of collective households' experience was necessary to understand the scale of mistakes committed.

Currently in Ukraine as well as some other post-Soviet countries, the Chinese experience of reforms, including the mode of interaction between modernisation and authoritarianism, causes considerable interest. If society is approached as a system where its subsystems are interconnected, e.g. in the economy, leads to changes in others, e.g. in politics, the fate of the Chinese model can hardly be viewed with optimism. While reflecting this point, the answer the question should be given, viz. 'Why did Stalin deny the New Economic Policy (NEP)?'. The establishing of a certain economic structure inside society (the market in a non-democratic mono-party system in the cases of the Soviet NEP and the Chinese reforms) leads to the formation of a corresponding way of life, including



its value dimension as well as ideological and political. As already argued, the market-individualist way of life cannot coexist on a long-term basis with totalitarianism. Elements of public life, generated by the NEP under the Soviet regime, threatened the existence of a communist dictatorship, which became the reason for the curtailment of the New Economic Policy. The history of the mankind has no experience of long coexistence heterogeneous components within a single social system. It is hard to find any convincing argument for making China or any other country an exception of this rule. However, there are many cases to prove the opposite.

Japan has been pursuing its specific modernisation path for a long time. Those particularly proud of the Japanese peculiar forms of management and paternalistic corporate ethics opposed them to the 'soulless' American system. 'Soulless' Americans were flourishing throughout the 1990s, while sentimental-traditionalist Japanese were trapped between recession and depression most of the 1980s and 1990s. Curious in this regard is the information provided by the 'Financial Times', which contains information on the implementation by the Japanese government a package of measures aimed at combating unemployment and corporate restructuring (Financial Times 1999: 3). The main purpose of reforming Japanese corporations was determined by the promotion of the spread of the Anglo-Saxon corporate practices in the country. Generally, Japan presents an interesting case for an analysis in terms of culture-civilisations. A question arises of what the dominant factor in its current development is – the traditional unique cultural foundations that have been laid out historically or the latest universal features identified by modernisation?

Furthermore, in the above-mentioned S. Huntington's work, the author cites the scenario of collision between China and the United States because of Vietnam (Huntington 1996: 314). In this situation, Japan drifts away from its U.S. ally through the neutrality stage towards backing China. Meanwhile, Russia's stance is changing in the opposite direction. This scenario raises a number of issues. What could be the reason for such a large-scale anti-Americanism in which Tokyo would close its eyes to the prospect of China's hegemony? Japan, undoubtedly, is very much familiar with the concept of hegemony

judging from its own historical experience. Why is the explanation of the Japanese drift based on cultural factors, but the motivation of Russia's behaviour fits well the concept of the balance of power? Are not the projections regarding China's prospects as a global power centre (in the context of internal structural distortions and systemic inconsistencies) too optimistic? It should be admitted that not only S. Huntington mistakenly recognizes China as one of the potential world powers.

The cases mentioned above show that at least at a certain stage of development of society, individualism, market and democracy are interconnected by the obligatory conditions of modernisation. The further progress of non-western societies will largely depend on their ability to root themselves in the already-inherent Western triad. The process of modernisation is often mistakenly equated with Westernisation, thereby exaggerating the uniqueness of the Western model, ignoring its universal features. Assimilation will certainly not imply, at least in the near future, an unification. It is about a common core that defines the basic parameters of historical development. The Western model of society, if not universal, proved, at least historically, the existence of universal conditions for successful modernisation.

The impact of the cultural differences on international relations will remain significant, but it is unlikely to be able to match the power with the role of ideological differences during the Cold War. At the same time, the backwardness of non-Western societies is no less important than cultural attributes, a factor of modern international relations. It is precisely the lack of being civilised that helps to transform belonging to different ethnic and cultural-religious communities into a source of conflict between and within states. Accordingly, the tension in international relations would emerge on the verge of developed and underdeveloped worlds, as well as within the latter, not on the verge of civilisations, however. Not aiming at idealising the advanced countries, it should be noted that at least in the 20th century developed democracies did not use force in their relations with each other. At the same time, within the Islamic civilisation of conflicts there is no more than its representatives experience with 'aliens'.

Thus, the West's leadership has historically been the outcome of a long-lasting process and the interaction of many factors. Secondly, it is based on a successful model of social development, the core of which is a triad of individualism, the market economy and liberal democracy. Thirdly, there is a proven correlation between the civilisation (religious-cultural, historical constant) and societal (the model of success, the historical variable of development) components of the West. Nevertheless, it is not rigid, the evidence being different historical dynamics of Catholic and Protestant countries and a rather effective application by Japan of the Western success model. In other words, two visions of the West – both as the cultural community and the community of the highly developed countries – are interconnected but not identical. In the context of the resilient issues of the contemporary world politics, the West is a community of developed democratic countries characterised by a multifaceted institutionalisation, including the form of security complexes (the North Atlantic Treaty, the US security agreements with Japan, South Korea and Australia). Hence, the issue of the West's leadership should be considered not in the sense of diversity of civilisations, but in the sense of different stages of being civilised.

### **3. The fundamental issue of our time: values vs interests**

"Do we have confidence in our values to defend them at any cost? Do we have enough respect for our citizens to protect our borders? Do we have the desire and drudge to preserve our civilization in front of those who would overwhelm it and destroy it?" These questions were put forward by Donald Trump on 6 July 2017 referring to Poles but bearing in mind the West as a whole. This is how the democratic countries defined the goal of NATO's establishment in April 1949: 'to protect the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law' (The North Atlantic Treaty).

These very values united the West in the face of the Soviet threat. At the same time, undemocratic enemies of the West repeatedly used the core values of the democratic community against itself. During the Vietnam War, the communists effectively applied instruments of freedom of speech within the United States for splitting American society.

The Kremlin uses the democratic principles for implementing its propaganda influence through 'Russia Today'. The challenge of the establishing of effective migration policy by the United States and the European Union is largely due to the imbalance between values and interests, between the principles of human security and national security. The fight against terrorism is being constantly confronted with the dilemma of preserving security and observing human rights.

The lack of harmony between values and interests turned into an extremely dangerous source of destabilization in both Western societies and international relations. Now main threats to liberal democracy stems from the inside; these are populism and nationalism. (It should be taken into account the somewhat different nature of these phenomena in the countries of the 'old' and 'new' democracies.) The modern wave of populism and nationalism has its origins in the complex process of the transformation of capitalism and liberal democracy under the conditions of development of information society. The social model that has developed in a modern setting does not meet the needs of the post-modern one, hence it has to be reviewed and adapted.

Through the criticism of the migration policies of their governments, European nationalists reject liberal values in the name of national interests. In this case, national interests are understood in their original modern sense, as the interests of a particular ethno-cultural community, and not the community of citizens. At the same time, condemning the present European nationalism, one should not forget that migrants are perceived not only as representatives of another culture, but also as those who cannot or do not strive to adhere to the standards of civilisation adopted in society. In other words, migrants are perceived as a threat to not only cultural but also civilisation identity, a well-established lifestyle. The failure of the policy of multiculturalism (especially in its German version) was primarily due to the false identification of the possibility of the coexistence of representatives of different cultures and different stages of civilisation in one society.

On the international arena, imbalance of values and interests in the behaviour of the West is primarily manifested through the contradiction between the two models of foreign policy: *Realpolitik* and idealistic politics. The former is based on the protection of

national interests and the balance of power, while the latter is based on a system of values and ideals. The history of international relations has no examples of absolute realism or idealism. The common belief that at least until the Second World War the European foreign policy tradition was mostly realistic, while American was idealistic, does not mean that European realists were not guided by values, while American idealists ignored their interests. In fact, modern politics is based both on values and ideals, but one of them is system-forming. The West's policy during the Cold War was idealistic, its current policy is uncertain and therefore cynical. None of the key factors, values or interests does not act as system-forming; rather, they are used situationally and declaratively. When Angela Merkel is supporting Britain due to the role of Russian intelligence services in the poisoning of the Skrypals and endorses the construction of the North Stream 2 at the same time, it reminds more of the cynicism than realism or pragmatism.

Clear enough, the harmonisation of interests and values in politics is not simple. It is especially difficult to implement it in the heterogeneous world politics, characterised by the actors of different social (cultural and civilisation) nature, led by the wide range of values and interests when undeveloped countries have access to technological capabilities of the developed countries, including technology of weapons of mass destruction. Nevertheless, the first step towards the conceptual harmonisation of values and interests and overcoming the state of confusion may be awareness of the West of the need to protect and preserve its own existence. Saving the West, a task that combines values and interests, can become a systemic element for a policy of democratic states, a principle of solving domestic problems and, finally, a means to overcome confusion and helplessness.

#### **4. Conclusions. The world without the West?**

The existence of the West is valuable not only for itself but is a necessary condition for a stable world order. The UN and the OSCE as the main security instruments of the international community have clearly demonstrated their inability to adapt to the new circumstances of international relations, first of all new threats to international security.

It seems that these organisations finally lost the battle to the key anti-systemic factor of modern world politics, i.e. heterogeneity.

Only the West, combining the features of high level of development and a relatively high level of homogeneity, can serve as the basic element of the new order. However, now the West and its two institutional embodiments, NATO and the EU, are lacking the conceptual vision of a new world order, an effective strategy of confronting new challenges and threats to international security. Confusion demonstrated by a regular basis and its unwillingness to take over leadership and responsibility encourages two major destructive players: China and Russia.

The West's adequate response to specific challenges is possible only within the framework of a holistic collective strategic vision, which, in turn, requires a systematic understanding of the nature of international relations after the Cold War and not the endless 'plastic surgery' of obsolete concepts by adding the word 'new' - 'the new Cold War', 'a new containment strategy', etc. At the same time, the dubious value of 'the conceptual plastic surgery' should not disprove the value of the methodological experience. The evidence for the accuracy of the point is the fate of the already mentioned containment strategy. It seems that under current circumstances potential usefulness of George Kennan's legacy in modern circumstances is not so much about the essence of the strategy (especially in the political interpretation of American administrations), but about the methodology of its formulation. The correct application of the conditionality of the actors' behaviour upon its historical origin as well as the nature of its society and government may now not only enhance understanding of Russia's behaviour, but also the development of an effective strategy of the West.

The main rivals and critics of the West, the contenders for the role of global centres of power - China and Russia - are essentially destructive apologists to the world of turmoil. Not accepting the liberal world order, contributing to its destruction, they are unable to offer an alternative, unless one considers as such a chimera of a multi-polar world order. The main cause for this inability is the non-viability of China's and Russia's functioning social models. The idea and principles of the liberal world order are derived from

the basic values and principles of the organisation of the Western society simply because hardly any values and principles of organisation of the Russian or Chinese society can the world order be based upon.

What remains is the anarchical model of order with the organising principle of the balance of power. At one point, it emerged in circumstances of domination of the European great powers, nation-states with a similar social nature and models of foreign policy (*Realpolitik* modifications), in other words, in terms of the homogeneity of policy motives and models as well as heterogeneity of interests. In the contemporary conditions of heterogeneity in world politics, the balance of power is not capable of streamlining international relations, nevertheless it could be a source of conflict-prone environment.

The world without the West (as the organising system power) is a world of chaos and disarray, even more dangerous than the world of balance of powers, which led to the two world wars. The current crisis of the liberal order is not a crisis of its values and principles but a crisis of their implementation model. Only the West consolidated around the redefined values of liberal democracy, the self-confident West, which recognises the origin and nature of its leadership, has a constructive potential for establishing a new world order.

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