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Liberty before Liberalism in Russia

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The article analyses the concept of “liberty” in the context of some forms of Russian political, social and ethical thought, which were characteristic of the intellectual (or, in broader terms, cultural) tradition of Russian Enlightenment (early 1770-ies – late 1820ies)¹. The concept of “liberty” (“svoboda” or in late 18th - early 19th centuries Russian language – “vol’nost’”) belongs to the range of categories (alongside “society”, “civil society”, “political society”, “nation”, “state”, et al.) that laid the foundation for the new Russian political language of the late 18th - early 19th centuries, as well as for the mentality of the new layer of educated Russian “public”, which was establishing itself at that time. Here, on the example of the “liberty” concept, I will try to show that in intellectual terms this concept is closely related to the European intellectual (and cultural) tradition of *civic republicanism*, integrating as it does its main points: interest to the Greek and Roman Antiquity with the emphasis on liberty as an opposition to slavery, the issue of civic virtues (morality), the question of civic participation in (self-)governing of community and forms of civil self-organization, the themes of recognition of the Other, ideas of the “sublime”, of the glory and of life on the stage of History, etc.

And, although the process of developing social and political tradition of civic republicanism, which was given a start in the 1770ies, was forcefully interrupted in Russia during the reign of Nicolas I, the intellectual and cultural components of this tradition were in due time to become a sort of existential horizon for the future Russian cultural development. This tradition – alongside with Pushkin’s “Golden Age” of Russian culture – is still implicitly present in current Russian identity, and the interaction with the latter can become one of the resource for establishing a new kind of civic culture in post-Soviet Russia.

Civic Republicanism as an intellectual tradition in Europe and Russia

¹ Enlightenment here is considered in terms of the contemporary social and political theory approach which appeals to the Kantian tradition of interpreting Enlightenment as an emancipatory project. See: Immanuel Kant. An Answer to the Question: “What is Enlightenment?” (1784). See also: Foucault 1994; Habermas 1962; Chartier 2001; Chartier 2000: 13–60. On Russian Enlightenment in this perspective see: Kaploun 2008a.

According to some contemporary political, moral and social theoreticians, civic republicanism today can be considered as an alternative way to regulate relations between people and things. It is an alternative to the major social and political ideologies born in the 19th century, as well as to the corresponding research paradigms in social sciences. Therefore, republicanism as an outlook differs both from liberalism (in the narrow, “economical” sense of the word), from socialism, and from conservatism (or communitarianism), although it can reveal some common motifs with these three traditions. These traditions formed later and borrowed – each in its own way – a number of elements from the republican tradition.

In general, the republican intellectual tradition is mostly oriented to history and classics; the authors of Modernity who belong to it, starting with Machiavelli, largely consider themselves as heirs to political thought and practices of European Antiquity, Greece and Rome. This is one of the characteristic features of the tradition². The tradition itself starts crystallizing in the early Renaissance epoch, being widely practiced by the self-governing city-states of the time, and flourishes to the full in Europe and America of the 18th century³. The republican idea acquires new life in the works of social and political theoreticians of the 20th century⁴.

Civic republicanism was rediscovered as an integral theoretical tradition in the second half of the 20th century due to the works of several political historians, including J.G.A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner. Pocock traces the consistent development of the tradition from the classical model of Athens of the Golden Age and until the American Revolution – via Machiavelli and Harrington⁵. He stresses the interrelation of several fundamental principles, which form the basis of the republican tradition: republican freedom, active civic participation in deciding the fate of community, and civic virtues. He also emphasizes how fragile and vulnerable the republican form of politics is, which, in broader terms, also concerns the republican form of human coexistence, where of major importance is the problem of morals and their corruption. Skinner focuses on the Roman republican model. It is this model that turns out most relevant for humanists of the Renaissance and for Machiavelli, and later – for the English political thought of the 17th century, which Skinner sees as the period when the English branch of the modern republicanism was in full bloom⁶.

Skinner also formulates the concept of “Neo-Roman” liberty⁷. In particular, he believes that this term characterizes the English 17th-century authors better than the term “republican”, because many of them think that realization of the civic liberty principle does not necessarily require a

² See, for ex.: Honahan 2002: 4-5.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See short review in: Honahan 2002: 111-146.

⁵ See: Pocock 1975.

⁶ See: Skinner 1998.

⁷ See chapter «The neo-roman theory of free states», in: Skinner 1998: 1-58.

political regime that rejects any type of monarchy. In their opinion, realization of republican liberty is not only possible in a republic in the strict sense of the word, but also under certain forms of constitutional monarchy, that is, under a regime, where the ruler, alongside with other citizen, is restricted by Law, and cannot stand above the others, treating them at his/her own will. Civic republicanism oriented to antique models plays a major role in the culture of European Enlightenment, and in French political and moral 18-century thought, in particular⁸. As with the 17th-century English authors, here, too, we can see both radically republican and “Neo-Roman” interpretation of civic liberty concept. With the public figures of the French revolution, the appeal to the republican antiquity takes more radical forms⁹.

Russian political, moral, intellectual and – in broader terms – cultural history, has its own tradition of civic republicanism, which is an integral part of that in Europe. This Russian version of the European republicanism was born and developed in parallel with the Russian Enlightenment. It starts crystallizing in the epoch of Catherine II and continues into the rule of Alexander I. Civic republicanism largely becomes the moral and political culture of the Russian educated public and “public intellectuals” of two generations (in the wide sense of the word) – the “fathers” and “sons” generations, which formed in the Catherine’s and Alexander’s epochs, respectively. It is during this period, that of the Russian Enlightenment, when the “public intellectuals” for the first time in the cultural history of Russia started to recognize themselves as a special social stratum with a particular social function and historical mission¹⁰.

In this paper, I will discuss only one of the aspects of this tradition: the problem of civic liberty. This problem is closely linked with the agenda of the European republican tradition. I will try to outline the specific interpretation of the civic liberty concept characteristic mainly for the “fathers” generation – the educated Russian public that took shape during Catherine’s epoch. I will here dwell on two examples only – the concept of liberty as formulated by M.N. Muraviev and N.M. Karamsin.

But first, let us examine the way in which the republican liberty concept differs from such in the liberal political theory.

Liberty concept in the liberal and republican political theories

⁸ See, for instance, Vidal-Naquet P. *La démocratie grecque vue d'ailleurs*. Paris, Flammarion, 1996. Vidal-Naquet P., «Tradition de la démocratie grecque», in: M. Finley, *Démocratie antique et démocratie moderne*. Paris, Payot, 1994.

⁹ See: Hartog F., «Liberté des Ancients, liberté des Modernes. La Révolution française et l’Antiquité», in *Les Grecs, les Romains et nous. L’Antiquité est-elle moderne?*, sous la dir. de R.-P. Droit, Paris, Le Monde Editions, 1991.

¹⁰ See more on the intellectual and cultural tradition in early Russian republicanism in: Kaploun 2007; Kaploun 2008b; Kaploun 2011.

Since the publication of the classical work by Isaiah Berlin, it is common to consider the modern liberal political theory in terms of “negative” and “positive” freedom¹¹. Put simply, “negative” freedom is the right to personal privacy, where society and state have no access. Liberal political thought insists that the main and inalienable right that the state and community have to provide for its citizen is exactly the right to “negative” freedom, that is the freedom from any external compulsion or interference with privacy, even if concerned with just a tiny fragment of his/her personal life. All other rights and freedoms (including the political rights to elect and be elected, to freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, to political and non-political participation in public life, etc.) must be subordinated to the right to “negative” freedom, that is, the right to the inviolability of privacy.

The present-day republican tradition of political thought, while recognizing the priority of “negative” freedom, uses a different descriptive language, which makes it possible to perceive personal freedom and civic liberty beyond the “negative/positive” opposition framework.

The authors of Modernity belonging to the classical republican or Neo-Roman tradition, who appeal to the antique moralists and historians, do not interpret personal and civic liberty in terms of non-interference with personal life and separation of personal life from public; they interpret it as an opposition to slavery. Current political theoreticians of republicanism are borrowing this idea from them. According to this tradition, “to be free” means “not to be a slave”. By definition, a slave is somebody who does not belong to him-/herself, but to another, being in this latter person’s jurisdiction and fully depending on their self-will or mercy. The criterion here is not that the slave is subject to external suppression and violence, and not that an outsider can restrict the slave’s activities and controls his/her personal life; the owner can leave the slave alone, without in any way delimiting the latter’s personal life. The criterion is that the slave persists in the power of his lord, not his own, and even if the lord is not imposing any constraints on the slave, the very possibility of such constraints being imposed remains unremovable by definition. The lord (or state) can grant certain rights to the slave (or subjects), but these right can at any moment be restricted or cancelled, or the slave (or subject) would be reminded that the limits and nature of their rights are legitimately determined and approved over their heads. Liberty means, then, not being in the jurisdiction of other, not being dependent on their self-will, and also on the mercy of this other.

Liberty as the right to privacy and liberty as non-slavery are two distinct, though close, approaches to liberty concept. They largely match in terms of their consequences, that is, in terms of the recipes for building the desired social and political institutions, but in some respects

¹¹ See: Isaiah Berlin “Two Concepts of Liberty” (1958), in: Berlin 2002: 166-217.

they diverge. In particular, the interpretation of liberty as opposed to slavery emphasizes the importance of political (and non-political) civic participation in community life, because the extent of this participation determines the opportunity of self-government for the “political body”. Besides, such participation is believed to be existentially self-important as an opportunity for self-realization through civic action.

As shown by Skinner, for the 17th-century English Neo-Roman authors the main authorities in the matter of liberty and slavery are Roman historians, including Tacitus, Titus Livius and Sallust (hence the term “Neo-Roman”, suggested by Skinner), as well as Machiavelli, who borrowed the description of liberty from antiquity and introduced it into Modernity. The *History of Rome* by Titus Livius was, according to Skinner, “the most important conductor of this view of *civitas libera* into Europe in early Modernity”¹². The main principle of liberty, which the Neo-Roman authors borrowed from Livy, includes two components: the free state is a state where, firstly, all citizen are equally subordinated to the power of Law (and are thus not subject as slaves to the will of some internal ruler), and which, secondly, is not in the power of another nation or state (the citizen are not in the condition of “collective slavery”). As for the personal liberty, in the strict sense of the word, it is only possible in a free state. The Neo-Roman authors also borrow from antiquity the idea that only free states are best suited for achieving grandeur and glory.

For them, one of the most important authorities in these matters is Sallust – in particular, *The Conspiracy of Catiline*, as well as Machiavelli referring to Sallust¹³. Inter alia, Sallust warns that excessive ambitions of politicians, which manifests itself both in the aspiration of the state to occupy new territories and increasing their power within the state, is dangerous and can cause the death of the Republic. From Tacitus, the ideas were borrowed concerning the harmfulness of concentrating political life at court, which is fatal both for the state politics and civic virtue¹⁴. Life at court, where everyone depends on the mercy of the ruler, requires from the subjects servility, meanness, skilful flattery, ingratiating and demonstration of feigned affection; here, one cannot tell the truth, and there is no chance for somebody who is straightforward and honest, who is not willing to sacrifice their human dignity. The ideas of liberty and slavery, glory and civic virtue/valor are all closely interwoven in the works of these ancient authors.

Thus, English Neo-Roman authors consider two ways by which collective slavery can arise. The first one occurs when the political body is for some reason subject to the will of another state, while the second one implies that the internal state organization is such as to enable those who control it to practice lawlessness towards its citizen. The rule of an absolute monarch is

¹² Skinner 1998: 47.

¹³ Ibid., p. 58-62.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 79-83

considered by them as tyranny, because the monarch does not act according to the laws and limitations approved by the citizen (either directly or via their representatives), but rather at his/her own will. The right of the monarch to practice self-will turns the subjects into slaves.

This analysis is also largely applicable to the views on liberty expressed by Russian late 18th – early 19th century public oriented to republicanism and Neo-Roman outlook. For this part of the educated Russian society of the period, the antique historians – Titus Livius, Sallust, Tacitus, Plutarch – are also the main authorities on interpreting the liberty concept. In Russia these views connected with the cult of republican antiquity, also coincide with the movement towards Enlightenment. Further, I will discuss the views on personal and civil freedom which were held by the two most famous “public intellectuals” belonging to the epoch in question, whose example, in my opinion, most vividly reflects the “spirit of the times”.

M.N.Muraviev

Mikhail Nikitich Muraviev (1757-1807) was a writer, a well-known statesman in Catherine’s (and early Alexandrian) epoch, a connoisseur and lover of antiquity and an enthusiast, who admired the republican virtues of the Greeks and Romans. In 1785 Catherine appointed him to teach Russian language and literature, history and moral philosophy to the Grand Dukes Alexander and Konstantin Pavlovich (i.e., to the future Emperor and his brother). After his former pupil was enthroned, Muraviev was in 1802 appointed Deputy Minister for Public Education and member of the Head Administration for Specialized Schools. He also had a most important position of a secretary, who was to receive petitions addressed to the young Emperor. In 1803, Muraviev becomes an administrator of Moscow University. He initiates and until his very death in 1807 consistently implements profound reforms at the University; moreover, he monitors the reform of the whole educational system in the country, in conformity with the principles of Enlightenment. At the same time, he focuses on studying antique cultural heritage, considering it the basis of contemporary educationalism. In particular, while implementing the reform, he establishes several chairs at the Moscow University, which are to engage in the study of antiquity; he invites foreign professors to work there, compiles a program for translating antique historians and attracts the best Russian professors and translators to complete this task.

This activity is in full conformity with the logic of “the wonderful beginning of the Alexandrian days”¹⁵.

The respect to the Classical Antiquity and, in particular, to antique historians that reigned in Muraviev’s home are reflected in the well-known episode with his son, Nikita, the future founder and co-leader of the Secret Decembrists’ Societies. In the episode described by their contemporary V.A. Olenina, Nikita is six years old. He is taken to a children’s ball at Derzhavin’s home. The ball is in full swing, but Nikita is not dancing. When his mother asks him what the matter is, Nikita answers with a question: “Mum, Aristid and Katon did not dance, did they?” (the were speaking French). And only when he hears: ”They probably did, at your age”, does Nikita join the other children¹⁶.

This example with Nikita Muraviev is very significant. Aristid and Katon are two characters from Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, one of them Greek, an illustrious politician and citizen of Athens, another a Roman, a stoic philosopher and illustrious republican. Their life stories are related in one chapter and are compared in the end. With Nikita, Plutarch is at this period a desk book, and these characters are “ideal types”, who personify the principles of civic virtue and republican service.

While describing this episode, Yu.Lotman remarks that *Plutarch for Children*, an adapted Russian version of *Parallel Lives*, was published as early as 1771 and immediately became a necessary part of children’s reading in the educated circles of nobility¹⁷. However, this date is obviously imprecise. Plutarch, as many other authors, is at this time read in French and other European languages, or even in the original¹⁸. The nine-year-old Pushkin reads the *Parallel Lives* in French (same with the Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*)¹⁹, whereas Plutarch’s motifs can be felt even in Pushkin’s earliest poetry²⁰.

Notably, there was a special type of reading practice at that time in the enlightened nobility circles: people read books not just for entertainment, not even “for the sake of education” – they read “for action”²¹. This Renaissance-like attitude to books also determines the way children

¹⁵ This Pushkin’s line from the poem “Letter to the Censor” (1822) marked the beginning of Alexander’s reign, characterized by slackening censorship, orientation to liberal reforms and general hope of replacing absolute monarchy with constitutional rule.

¹⁶ See, for example, comments to this scene by E. Pavlyuchenko in: Mouraviev 2000: 4..

¹⁷ See: Lotman 1994: 62.

¹⁸ Latin authors were mostly read in the original. Thus, I.M. Muraviev-Apostol (1767-1851), one more famous writer and “public intellectual” of the epoch, who admired antiquity and fathered future Decembrists, in 1814 was writing that as a child he copied in Latin extracts from “Catilina’s Conspiracy” by Sallust (Muraviev-Apostol 2002: 55-56).

¹⁹ See.: Pushkin 1974: 45.

²⁰ See, for instance.: Pushkin 1999: 575.

²¹ This type of reading and attitude to antique texts reminds of the one which, according to Antony Grafton, is typical for the ‘humanistic’ reader of the late Renaissance – including Machiavelli (see: Anthony Grafton, « Le lecteur humaniste », in: Cavallo & Chartier 2001: 207-248. For this kind of readers “the dialogue with antique text

were reading. Thus, for this epoch, Plutarch and a number of other ancient authors serve as a source of cultural models, which teach normative behavior to children from enlightened noble families, both at home and in public life.

Below is an extract from a short didactic work by M.N. Muraviev, which was written in Catherine's times and entitled *History's Teaching*. This work, as many other fictional and historical sketches by Muraviev, must have been written as a course book for teaching the Grand Dukes:

«...History makes us contemporaries of the most distant past. <...> The drawbacks of great people become for us a vivid admonition. Their virtues, sincere devotion to their fatherland, rejection of personal interests, strict justice, by starting up a fire of competition in our hearts, elevate us towards *the community of such magnificent models* [italicized by the author – V.K.].

...*The Study of History belongs to the most important studies for the Public Person* [italicized by the author – V.K.]. It must necessarily occupy its place there, and if it does not deserve to be a role model, then it should be a rejection model. From it, he can choose at his will a worthy example, which his soul feels closer affinity to and wants to be like. In the same way as the attitude of people who we mix with every day secretly communicates to us their morals and customs, History, telling us about the attitudes of great people, who were an honor for their ages, elevates our souls to imitating their deeds. Thus, Alexander the Great always had the *Iliad* with him, whose reading inspired him with new courage. Enlightened and famous Romans shared their time between serving the Republic and studies ...²²

In this extract, the most important motif of “life in History” as a principle obligatory for every “Public Man”, is combined with the attitude to antique cultural methods as role models, which was traditional for the republican style of thought discussed. Within this mentality, the works of Greek and Roman historians become the source of cultural role models, which provided the basis for children to study (sociologically speaking) normative behavior and normative attitude to themselves.

Considering the teachers who educated the future Emperor, we can say that Alexander I received somewhat “republican” education, oriented to antique models. Remember that his chief educator appointed by Catherine II in 1784, was Rousseau's follower and admirer of Roman republican virtues, a Swiss citizen Frederic de Laharpe. Here is an extract from a note by Frederic de Laharpe devoted to the education of the Grand Dukes, which was presented to Catherine II. It is after receiving this note that the Empress appointed de Laharpe the Head Tutor for the Grand Dukes Alexander and Konstantin:

had similar object of action, tangible results in the present... this type of reading, pragmatic rather than esthetical, deserves a special place in any analysis of the use of books in the Renaissance culture” (Ibid, p. 221).

²² Muraviev 1819: 3-12.

“Every citizen who wants to make himself useful to his Fatherland by his participation in public affairs is obliged to study history. This obligation is all the more important for the future ruler. One should never forget that Alexander of Macedonia, endowed with perfect genius and brilliant qualities, devastated Asia and committed so many atrocities only out of the wish to imitate Homer’s heroes, just like Julius Caesar, in imitation of Alexander, committed crimes and destroyed the freedom of his Fatherland”²³.

The note contains motifs which are traditional for the style of thought considered here: antique cultural models as models, History (and, first of all, history of Greece and Rome) as a source of experience for the “public person”, the value of republican liberty, which is “destroyed” in Rome by Julius Caesar, opening the way to the “century of Augustus” and further – to the Rome of emperors that once and for all lost the past republican virtues.

Notably, in terms of the logic of class interests, it seems strange that Catherine should decide to appoint Frederic de Laharpe and Muraviev as Alexander’s teachers. Just think – appointing republicans (or, at least, supporters of Neo-Roman liberty), who never even bothered to conceal their beliefs, as teachers of the future Emperor! However, the Empress’s choice will not seem so strange, if we remember that Catherine in that period called herself “a republican soul” in various texts and letters²⁴. Inter alia, at that time Catherine tends to emphasize that the reforms that she is trying to implement are aimed at nurturing the civic virtues in her subjects and their gradual transition into the state of civil liberty²⁵.

Of course, actions speak louder than words. However, what interests us is not the problem of inconsistency between Catherine’s words and deeds, but the “republican” style of thought and the “republican” way of social development declared by her. This direction will be also followed in the early 19th century, when Alexander, after his inauguration, declares in his Manifesto that he is going to rule in Catherine’s spirit, “according to the laws and heart of Our diseased, most revered grandmother, the sovereign Empress Catherine the Great”. And the reforms in the beginning of Alexander’s reign will be planned in this very vein – in the direction of institutional changes aimed at conducting the citizen to civil liberty.

In the latter part of Catherine’s reign, a special cultural phenomenon is observed that we can refer to as “republicanism in soul”; we come across this expression in the texts of the authors who can be called “Neo-Roman”. “Republicanism in soul” was probably best manifested in the views expressed by N.M. Karamsin, which I will discuss later in this paper.

²³ Cited from: Faybisovitsh 2005: 16.

²⁴ See: Griffiths 1975: 323.

²⁵ See, for ex., Kamensky A.B. «Reformative Program by Catherine II and its Ideological Foundation», in Kamensky 1999: 330-371.

Retuning now to the liberty concept and views on liberty held by M.N. Muraviev, I want to give an example of his short prosaic essay called *Freedom* (Vol'nost'). Like many others, this work must have been written for educational purposes and was used at the lessons with the Grand Dukes. Muraviev's sketch is something liked a brief genealogy of civic liberty:

“Man's sacred rights including *safety* and *property rights* are embodied in one word - *freedom*. No land contributed more to this civic feeling than *Greece*. There, being noble just meant being free. But with time, pernicious ambitions of the leaders, the troubled mob and luxury ousted freedom from *Greek* hearts. The *Romans* took over. Victory accompanied their arms. The hinderers of *Greece* trembled in their turn. The *Macedonian phalanx* fell under the pressure of the *legions*. The gracious victor, *Consul Titus Flamininus*, prescribes laws to *Philippe* and lifts the yoke off *Greece*. Most of its population at that point are celebrating the *Isthmian games*. The *Consul* hurries into their midst. He orders the herald to announce *freedom* to the whole of *Greece* on behalf of the Roman people; *each Greek community regains the right to live according to their own laws; no external power should restrict their natural freedom*. The surprised *Greeks* doubt for a moment that what they hear is true and ask to repeat the announcement. Afterwards, when convinced in their happiness, there is no limit to their admiration and gratitude. Everywhere there are tears of joy and exclamations. The air is shaken by screams; the flying birds fall amidst the congregation. All are embracing and greeting each other. They deem it great luck to touch the hand of their savior. The excessiveness of gratitude burdens their hearts.

But happiness so much desired was not to last. The ambitious *Romans* were only persistent in their intent to conquer the universe. In spreading the limits of their dominance, they lost their own freedom. The *Marius* and *Sulla* families, as well as the lucky *Caesar*, subverted the Republic. While receding from freedom, the name of *Rome* was also degrading, until, completely disgraced by corrupted morals, meanness and greed, it was completely lost in the flood of *barbaric* peoples. The shadows of ignorance and slavery accumulated over the human race in their impenetrable thickness and for a long time hid the disgraced freedom, enlightenment and glory”²⁶.

In this extract the understanding of freedom as the personal right to safety and ownership, which was developed by the thinkers of Modernity, starting with Hobbes and Locke, is remarkably intertwined with the interpretation of freedom as opposed to slavery. Personal freedom and communal freedom are inseparable. *Greece* and *Rome* are declared the birthplace of liberty. Both ways of losing freedom are mentioned. The *Greeks* lose their freedom when they start depending on the external power of another nation (*Macedonia*) – the *Romans* give their freedom back to them by granting them the right to live according to their own laws. Later it is the *Romans* who lose their freedom when the usurpers seize power in the country, establish lawless despotic regime and bring about the decay of the Republic, replacing it with tyrannical power of emperors. The further the *Romans* recede from the Republic, the deeper the moral degradation and the closer the total loss of civic virtues, until *Rome* is destroyed by barbaric raids. Ignorance

²⁶ Muraviev 1819: 213-215.

and slavery are two sides of the same medal; humanity acquires freedom, enlightenment and glory once again only after centuries of darkness²⁷.

Thus, freedom is an innate part of people's state of society and is inseparably linked with enlightenment. At the same time, it stands in the same row with the idea of civic virtues (morals) and glory. Muraviev calls Greek city-states "societies"; in many works in the same context, he speaks of "civil societies", as opposed to barbaric nations remaining in their "natural state"²⁸. He consistently traces the concept of two states, civil and natural ones, which was common for the political thought of Enlightenment, back to the Greek and Roman history. Muraviev's works are in general marked with the superposition of the language and concepts of political and moral philosophy of Enlightenment over the cultural models and examples of republican Antiquity. In this respect, Muraviev is probably the most striking, but not an exclusive example. On the contrary, such thinking is characteristic of the educated Russian public of the epoch.

Notably, in his understanding of civil liberty as an opposition to slavery Muraviev, similar to other Neo-Roman writers, mostly follows antique historians - he even borrows individual images from them. In particular, the picturesque scene of the Greek cities "being granted their freedom" described in the extract above closely follows the description by Titus Livius (*History of Rome*, XXXIII, 32.4 - 33.2) and Plutarch (*Parallel Lives*, «Titus», 10-11).

N.M.Karamsin

N.M. Karamsin (1766-1826), one of the most respected "public intellectuals" of the period in question, a writer, journalist and historian, had never been a state official, although from 1803 he occupied the position of the Emperor's historiographer under Alexander I. Whereas we can refer to Muraviev's views as classical moderate republicanism (which formally did not contradict the official state ideology prevalent during Catherine's reign), Karamsin's attitudes were traditionally considered by Russian historiographers as ultra-monarchist conservatism. Karamsin's political views were, indeed, more conservative not only compared to those of "democratic radicals", such as A.N. Radischev, but, obviously, also compared to classical republicanism as expressed by M.N. Muraviev. Nevertheless, all these authors, however different their political and ideological positions, belong to one intellectual culture, where social world is perceived on the basis of "contrat social", which serves as a background to moral and

²⁷ Here, it is only natural to remember the famous saying by Saint-Juste from his speech against Danton in the revolutionary Convent: "The world has been a void since the Romans were gone, the memory of them fills it and predicts more liberty".

²⁸ On the synonymous use of the terms "society" and "civil society", characteristic of late 18th - early 19th centuries Russian social-political language, due to the style of thought within the concept of «contrat social» see: Kaploun 2011.

political thought and almost equals common sense²⁹. At the same time – and this is not as strange as it may seem at first glance – with Karamsin, we also come across all the main motifs that are characteristic of the republican intellectual and cultural tradition (in its Neo-Roman version). Here are some examples from Karamsin's works in which, I think, the same style of thought and "Neo-Roman" concept of freedom are evident.

In a letter to P.A.Vyasemsky (of 21 August 1818), Karamsin writes:

"...I cannot prevent others from thinking otherwise. One clever man said: "I do not like young people who do not love freedom". If his words are no nonsense, then you should love me, and I should love you. Our progeny will see what is better or what was better for Russia. To me, an old man, it gives more pleasure to go to a comedy than to the National Assembly Hall or Deputies' Chamber, although at heart I am a republican and will be such till the end".

At first glance, this confession looks ironical. Is it possible to combine the status of a "private person" (which Karamsin for many years openly preferred to the career in public politics) and monarchic views (which caused severe criticism on the part of radical young people of Alexander's time, including the future Decembrists), with commitment to civil liberty and "republicanism at heart"?

The answer, obviously, involves two aspects.

Firstly, Karamsin's position is not that of a "private person" in the current sense. Karamsin interprets his activity of a "private person", a man-of-letters (writer, journalist, historian) in the Kantian meaning of the word, as civic and public activity. In current terms, Karamsin is almost an ideal embodiment of the emerging figure of a public intellectual, which is quite new for the Russian culture of the time. In his case, the public intellectual as a "private person" is opposed to the "Emperor's subject", not to the "public figure" or a "public politician". Therefore, a "private person" implies a citizen who is active with his word and thought in the public space, who is not bound by the responsibilities of imperial civil service, that is, servility before the tsar, and is only based on his/her own critical judgment.

Secondly, Karamsin's monarchic views do not deny the principle of civil liberty, but conform very well to the "Neo-Roman" liberty model as described by Skinner. Such views are characteristic of the most part of the Russian educated circles of the older generation (the "fathers'" generation) which took shape in Catherine's times. Let us look at it in more detail.

It is well known that in his youth Karamsin sympathized with the French Revolution and admired Robespierre. However, his political views and understanding of the political regime suitable for Russia at the time, which Karamsin entertained at the turn of the century, had been

²⁹ See: Kaploun 2011.

transforming during the 1790-ies under the influence of two historical events. One was the Reign of Terror and disturbance in France, which, for Karamsin, discredited the political idea of the republic, whose implementation now seems impossible to him due to the low moral. Secondly, it was the reign of Paul I in Russia, which became for Karamsin an example of autocratic, “tyrannical” despotism. “What the Jacobins did for the Republic, Paul did for Autocracy: he made everyone hate its abuse”, he wrote in his *Note on the Old and New Russia* (1811)³⁰.

The ambiguity of Karamsin’s political views³¹ can be illustrated with the example of the *Historical Word of Praise to Catherine II*, which he published in 1802, soon after Paul’s death and the beginning of Alexander’s reign. The *Word of Praise* is a kind of prosaic analogue to the 18th-century ode and is an artistic, idealized portrait of the Empress and her rule, accomplished in the form of a historical essay. For Karamsin, it was a way to reveal to the public his ideas concerning the course taken by the new reign. The brochure was sent to Alexander and was favorably accepted by him. Here, Karamsin is trying to suggest a form of monarchy which could ensure preservation of civil liberty for citizen and development of civic virtue. Here is a comment by Yu.Lotman:

“The *Historical Word of Praise* is controversial – it is a work of a transitional period. Karamsin is protecting autocracy as the only form suitable for a spacious empire and the contemporary moral situation. This does not prevent him from emphasizing that ideally, for a society based on civic virtue, a republic is referable. However, “a Republic without virtue and heroic love to the Fatherland is an inanimate corpse”. This was a formula of “republicanism at heart”, which Karamsin was later to use repeatedly and which could not convince his revolutionary contemporaries. But the tone of the essay is amazing. It does not begin with the address to the “dear readers”, it starts as if it is to be read in front of a populous meeting of patriots: “Compatriots!” This is probably the first time when a Russian writer had addressed his readers in such a way. Only a man who had imbibed the eloquence of the National Assembly could protect autocracy in this way. <...>

His version of autocracy itself looked unusual. <...> The freedom and safety of an individual, private person was the wall before which the power of any autocrat should have ceased <...> To prove his point, Karamsin refers to the first manifesto of Catherine II and her Instruction – both documents, as he must have known, were secretly disavowed by the government itself”³².

The monarch, according to Karamsin, must be subordinated to the laws and restricted by the responsibilities to other citizen no less than his subjects. Based on the concept of *Contrat social*, which is a natural background for the style of social thinking largely characteristic of educated

³⁰ Karamsin 2002: 395.

³¹ I think here we can make a parallel with what Skinner says about “the ambiguous republicanism” of many 17th-century English Neo-Roman authors, who admitted the possibility of freedom and self-government of the “political body” under certain forms of monarchy (see Skinner 1998: ???).

³² Lotman 1997: 268.

Russian nobility at the time, Karamsin claims that the monarch and other citizen are joined by an initial contract, whose breach drives the society back from the state of society to the state of nature. A sovereign who does not rule according to the laws, but according to his own will, thus breaks the initial contract and cannot be considered legitimate. It is for this reason that Karamsin considers Paul's reign as tyrannical, and not legitimate:

"...He wanted to be Ivan IV, but the Russians had already had Catherine II," - Karamsin writes in his *Note on Old and New Russia*, - "They knew that the sovereign must fulfill his sacred responsibilities no less than his subjects, and their breach destroys the ancient testament of power with subordination and precipitates the nation from the state of society into the chaos of natural law. Catherine's son <...> began his reign with universal terror, without following any regulations except his whims; he did not consider us subjects, but slaves..."³³.

In this argument, it is notable that the political philosophy of Enlightenment, which later became the intellectual basis for traditional political liberalism (the concept of *Contrat social*), is superimposed over the "Neo-Roman" understanding of freedom as opposed to slavery. With Muraviev, we have already seen this feature, typical for the style of thinking in question. A monarch who violates the law and his responsibilities towards his subjects, rules despotically and thus turns his subjects into slaves. At the same time, he breaks the initial contract and thus grants the citizen a formal right to revolt. Moreover, when tyranny is too strong, the state of slavery cannot eventually be tolerated without losing civic virtue and weakening moral; so in certain situations the civil community is not obliged to tolerate tyranny, or even does not have the right to do so, if the citizen want to preserve their civic virtue. For Karamsin, the most competent authors in this respect are the Roman historians, and, first of all, Tacitus and his history of Rome after the fall of the Republic.

Tacitus is great; but is Rome, described by Tacitus
Worth his description?
In this Rome, which used to be famous for its heroes,
I do not see anything but murderers.
We must pity it:
It got what it deserved when sorrow struck it,
And tolerated what no one ever could but for one's meanness!

Karamsin wrote this poem called *Tacitus* in the middle of Paul's reign, in 1798-99, and he draws an obvious parallel between the imperial Rome and the tyranny of the current epoch, which could not be tolerated "but for one's meanness" ...

³³ Karamsin 2002: 395-396.

Moreover, for Karamsin, the antique historians (Thukydides, Plutarch, Titus Livius, Tacitus, Sallust) are in general a universal model of the historiographer. Being a pioneer, the creator of the first fundamental history of Russia, Karamsin emphasizes in the introduction to his “History of the Russian State” (1816):

“So far, the ancient have been a model for us. Nobody has surpassed Livius in the beauty of narrative, or Tacitus in power: this is the main thing!”³⁴. Indeed, Tacitus has a unique importance for him as a historiographer: “Every century, every nation endows an artful writer with special colours. “Do not imitate Tacitus, but write as he would have written in your place”, - this is the rule for a genius”³⁵. By calling Tacitus “a thoughtful painter” Karamsin emphasizes that it is due to the artfulness which Tacitus uses to describe the customs of the imperial court in Rome that we...”look with abhorrence at the monster of tyranny devouring the remains of republican virtue in the capital of the world”³⁶.

By the way, such “use” of ancient historians (Tacitus in particular) is not only natural for Karamsin, but also for a wide circle of the “reading public” of the period. For instance, Tacitus as a specific “cultural model” is understood in the same way both by the “fathers’ generation” of Catherine’s epoch and by the “sons’ generation” of Alexandrian period. Meanwhile, the readers of Karamsin’s *History* think in the same terms as the author. Thus, after the ninth volume was published in 1821, which was devoted to the horrors of the reign of Ivan the Great, the young radicals, who had been criticizing the previous volumes, began calling Karamsin “our Tacitus”³⁷. Concerning our subject here, of much interest is Karamsin’s remarkable argumentation in the *Opinion of the Russian Citizen* (1819), where he is trying to persuade Alexander to give up his plan to separate Poland from Russia and grant it national independence; this idea, according to Karamsin, is accounted for by human weakness, not civic wisdom of a statesman.

“...While loving lawful civil liberty, are You really going to liken Russia to inanimate speechless property? Are You going to randomly parcel it out and give the parts away to anyone at Your will? <...> I hear the Russians and know them: we would not only lose the beautiful regions, but our love for the tsar; we would cool down towards our fatherland, if we saw it a plaything in the hands of autocratic rule; we would become weaker not only due to the decrease in size, but also decrease in spirit; we would be humiliated both in front of ourselves and the others. The palace would not become deserted, of course; You would still have the ministers and generals; but these would not serve the fatherland, but their own needs only, like mercenaries, like virtual slaves... And You, Your Majesty, abhor slavery and want to grant us freedom!

³⁴ Karamsin 2002: 374

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Karamsin 2002 : 372.

³⁷ This formula belongs to one of the leaders of the Decembrists’ movement K. Rylejev. On the public reaction to the 9th volume of the *History of the Russian State* see.: Lotman 1997: 290-291.

<...> Your Majesty! God gave You such glory and such a State, that You <...> cannot but consolidate peace in Europe and welfare in Russia; the former – through sincere and generous mediation, the latter – by good laws and still better government. You have already gained the title *Great* ; now You have to gain the title of our *Father!*³⁸.

The argumentation looks very daring, if not to say bold, considering it is addressed to the absolute monarch; to gain the title of the “Father of the Russians” means to give the nation good laws and rule well in accordance with them – instead of ruling willfully and turning the country into a “plaything in the hands of autocratic rule“, and citizen - into “mercenaries” and “virtual slaves”. It is significant that the monarchist Karamsin is based in his argument on the republican, Neo-Roman concept of liberty and uses the corresponding language: liberty is invariably understood as an opposition to slavery, that is – dependence on someone’s self-will. Karamsin is not only one of the most well-educated people of his century, but also a most experienced courtier – he appeals to this style of thought because he obviously believes it to be common for wide public circles, including the Emperor.

At the same time, the very manner of speech here demonstrates Karamsin’s well-known principle, which he had for a long time been trying to maintain in his relations with Alexander I – that of a straightforward and sincere citizen, a disinterested adviser to his sovereign, who, in his turn, is seen and loved, first and foremost, as an individual and citizen (“While loving lawful civil liberty, You ... abhor slavery and want to give us liberty...”). This principle manifestly rules out flattery and servility, but implies disinterested civil service and, hence, a corresponding style in addressing the sovereign, which would seem ironical in terms of the absolutist system of values – that is, addressing him as a citizen would address another citizen, as a “republican at heart” would address another “republican at heart”.

The *Opinion of a Russian Citizen* has a *New Addition*, which was written soon after Alexander’s death, in December 1825, during a tragic turn in modern Russian history. Here, we can read the well-known lines:

“I was wrong: Alexander’s goodwill towards me had not changed, and during the six years (from 1819 to 1825) we had several important discussions on various important matters. I was always open-hearted, he was always patient, gentle and ineffably candid. <...> I did not keep silent about <...> the military settlements, the odd choice of some important state officials, about the Ministry of Education or Ignorance <...> finally, about the necessity to have solid laws, both civil and state ones. In my last conversation with Him, on August 28, from 8 to 11 ½ o’clock in the evening, I told him like a prophet would: “You Majesty, Your time is up, You cannot put anything off, and You have so much to do yet to make the end of Your reign worthy of its wonderful beginning” [cited from the French original – *V.K.*]. He expressed his consent with a movement of his head and a smile, adding verbally that he would

³⁸ Karamsin 2002: 437-438.

do everything by all means; he would provide for the basic Russian laws. <...> I loved him tenderly and sincerely, I was sometimes upset by the monarch, but loved him as an individual...”³⁹.

Karamsin wants to see in Alexander the same “republican at heart” as himself – loving the “lawful civil liberty”. Alexander – the man, Alexander – the citizen, as seen by Karamsin, strives to give “the fundamental laws” to his subjects, but Alexander–the monarch cannot take the decisive step and is putting it off.... Notably, this text also holds a parallel with the abovementioned Pushkin’s definition of liberal reforms in the first period of Alexander’s reign, “the wonderful beginning of Alexander’s days”(from the *Letter to Censor*, 1822) and Karamsin’s description (“to make the end of Your reign worthy of its wonderful beginning”).

Conclusion

This paper is not aimed at giving a detailed analysis of the political views of Muraviev and Karamsin. My task was to show that their concept of liberty agrees very well with the republican and Neo-Roman ones – however ironical it may seem in both cases: in the case of the future Emperor’s teacher, appointed by Catherine herself, who was later to become a high-rank official and reformer in the government of Alexander I, and in the case of a court historiographer, monarchist and political conservative, who was striving to become the sovereign’s personal advisor. I have intentionally taken two characters as an example, who cannot be politically referred to as “left radicals” of their time. I tried to prove that intellectually they belong to the culture which was common for a wide circle of Russian educated nobility – the culture of civic republicanism, born in Catherine’s epoch and developed into Alexander’s. In sociological terms, I was not interested in the unique features of the outlook or biography of Muraviev or Karamsin, but, on the contrary – in what was widespread, common and stereotypical in the style of thought characteristic of their public circle, that of the educated “fathers’ generation” of Catherine’s epoch.

Most of the members of the “sons’ generation” also belong to this culture – those, in particular, whom historians will much later call the Decembrists, and who will be singled out as a separate social-political movement. This conclusion is inevitable if we consider the Decembrists’ movement not in the teleological historical perspective, not as a germ of the preconceived future – “the first stage of the revolutionary movement in Russia”, “the first stage of liberal modernization”, etc.- but in the context of their own time, which is separated from the later epoch by a radical cultural gap. The “fathers’ generation” and the “sons’ generation” may differ

³⁹ Ibid: 440.

in their understanding of which political regime is best for Russia in a particular period (which may also be true for representatives of the same generations), even the “ideologies” may be different, but their “civic culture” is the same.

Thus, I think that we can speak of the political and moral culture of the Russian educated public of the 1770ies – 1830ies (or, at least, of its largest part) as an integral civic culture, which is a natural part of the European tradition of civic republicanism. In Russia, this culture seems common for many political conservatives of the period, such as Karamsin, and for many more radical authors, such as Radischev or, later, representatives of the radical Decembrists’ branch, as well as for many “moderate liberals” of Alexander’s time. In particular, typical for all these very different members of a single cultural tradition of civic republicanism is the common concept of liberty as opposed to slavery (with an allusion to republican models of Classical Antiquity), which can take both radically republican and “Neo-Roman” forms.

This tradition as a whole becomes diffused during the reign of Nicolas I, after the defeat of the Decembrists’ movement and strengthening of the political reaction. At the same time, its individual elements get integrated with other social movements (liberal, conservative, socialist). However, largely due to the fact that this tradition is in fact inseparable from the “Golden Age” of Russian culture, its main motifs are still explicitly or implicitly present in modern Russian culture (handed down by Russian school and university education); they continue to influence modern Russian cultural identity.

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